

*** NEWS RELEASE ***

4 GREENFIELD MEN ADMIT TO SYSTEM OF EXTORTIONS AMONGST THE TRIQUI COMMUNITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Monterey County District Attorney Dean D. Flippo announced today that Francisco Sanchez-Merino, Constantino Espinosa and Francisco Santillan Lopez, residents of Greenfield, pled guilty to felony extortion by force or fear of 3 other members of the Triqui community in and around Monterey County over an 11 month period. Andres Cruz Garcia, also a Greenfield resident, pled to accessory to extortion as a misdemeanor, for concealing extortion with knowledge that members of the Triqui community were extorted.

The Triqui people are an indigenous people with their own unique language, customs and traditions found in the Oaxacan region of southern Mexico. Thousands of members of this ethnic group have immigrated to Monterey County, established families and work in Greenfield.

Both the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations and the Monterey County District Attorney's Office became aware in 2015 of a system of extortions under the guise of "fines" imposed by a "Council" of Triqui men in our community. The Council, centered in Greenfield, required members of the Triqui community to pay to get married and divorced, pay fines for having sex with unmarried females, and threatened community members to prevent them from reporting crimes to the police. The Council also required suitors to purchase from fathers permission to marry their daughters.

The Council funneled money confiscated from members of the Greenfield Triqui community to Mexico for the benefit of a political and paramilitary organization called "The Movement for Unification and the Triqui Struggle" or "MULT". MULT controlled all political institutions in the Oaxaca region, including the police, since the state of Oaxaca is virtually autonomous from the Mexican federal government. In

Mexico, if Oaxacans fail to pay fines ordered by MULT, their property is subject to seizure and offenders' families have been jailed, mutilated or killed.

An investigation by the District Attorney's Office that spanned over a year uncovered victims and their families that been extorted in this fashion. The investigation demonstrated that the MULT military leader in Mexico, Pablo Guzman, made calls to Greenfield victims demanding money at a meeting set up by Sanchez-Merino, Espinoza, and Santillan Lopez. The defendants demanded sums ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Victims were forced to borrow money and spend savings from field labor to avoid more severe consequences to themselves and their families. Many victims were initially reluctant to come forward because of fear of retribution as well as a belief that MULT was influencing local law enforcement agencies.

Between September 14 and 16, 2015, the District Attorney's Office conducted a sting operation in which a victim was extorted by Guzman, Sanchez-Merino, Espinosa and Satillan Lopez, who demanded \$15,000. Upon the service of a search warrant the next day, the DA's office seized approximately \$50,000 in cash.

At the preliminary hearing, 3 victims testified they were extorted. During the course of the preliminary hearing, which spanned 7 months, MULT threatened their family members in Mexico because of their testimony. One victim had his mother and brother removed from their home and questioned by Pablo Guzman about their potential relationship to the victim. Another victim, who testified in June, had his mother, brothers and sisters, taken before Pablo Guzman. They were told to call the victim and urge him not to testify. Members of that family subsequently fled Oaxaca to seek asylum. The aunt of another victim was taken before Pablo Guzman within the last week, beaten and then forced to pay a fine. That victim was due to re-take the stand yesterday when the defendants decided to plead guilty. The case was finally concluded at 4:30 p.m. yesterday. The District Attorney's Office expected to prove these MULT threats in Mexico at trial, but did not produce that ongoing evidence at the preliminary hearing.

Three of the defendants, Sanchez-Merino, Espinosa and Santillan Lopez pled to extortion by means of force or fear. This involves obtaining property from another, including money, by threatening violence upon them or family members. They will be placed on felony probation so that they may be searched and closely monitored to deter future extortions and threats. These defendants have served a full year in custody. They gave up all credit for time served. If found in violation of probation for any reason, they face an additional 4 years in jail without credit for any time served. They must pay back the victims for the money that was extorted from them, totaling roughly \$77,500.

Andres Cruz Garcia, who had knowledge of the extortions and directed the victims not to report them, admitted he was an accessory to the extortions conducted in Greenfield and the surrounding community. He will be on misdemeanor probation for 3 years subject to search and monitoring to deter future crimes. Garcia agreed to give up all but 89 days of the ten months he has spent in custody. This means if he is found in violation of probation for any reason, he may be sentenced to an additional 285 days in custody. Cruz Garcia also agreed to pay restitution to one of the extortion victims who lost \$19,000.

The case was investigated by Monterey County District Attorney Investigators Guillermo Mixer and Peter Austen.

Judge Mark E. Hood will sentence Sanchez-Merino, Espinosa and Santillan Lopez to 3 years on felony probation on October 14, 2016. Yesterday, Cruz Garcia was sentenced to 89 days in jail after forfeiting all other credit for time served and was placed on 3 years of probation.

The Triqui community is urged to come forward about any continued “fining,” threats to themselves or family members, physical violence, crimes against women, or extortion by anyone. Please contact Guillermo Mixer of the Monterey County District Attorney’s Office at 831-647-7725 or Greenfield Police Department at 831-674-5111. Victim information can be kept confidential and translators can be provided to facilitate help.