

Suspected smuggler in I-8 crash charged | He allegedly guided immigrants to van

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Federal officials say they've identified one of the suspected smugglers involved in the massive crash Monday night that claimed six lives when a van, packed with illegal immigrants, was being driven the wrong way on Interstate 8.

Dozens of people were injured.

Alfredo Alvarez Coronado, a 25-year-old Mexican field worker, was charged yesterday in federal court with bringing illegal immigrants into the United States. If convicted, he faces at least three years in prison.

According to the criminal complaint, Alvarez told Border Patrol agents he was working for an organization that paid him \$300 per group of immigrants and that he'd been doing the work for more than a month.

He told a defense attorney that his regular job as a field worker paid about 100 pesos, or about \$10, a day. He said that on the night of the crash, he was working with two other smugglers.

Alvarez is accused of guiding the immigrants on a two-hour trek across the border on foot. Their journey began in an area in Mexico called El Hongo, a known smuggling corridor near the San Diego County community of Jacumba. After they reached the United States, they were loaded into a van, according to the criminal complaint.

The van, after sideswiping two cars on Interstate 8, crashed into a sport utility vehicle driven by 50-year-old Larry S. Baca, a New Mexico resident. Baca died at the scene. Five people in the van, four Mexicans and one Brazilian, also died.

Authorities began investigating Alvarez after a Border Patrol agent at the accident scene said he might have seen Alvarez before. Alvarez was taken to Scripps Mercy Hospital for treatment of minor injuries, then transferred to a detention center.

Federal officers showed photographs of six people, including Alvarez, to five of the immigrants from the van. Two of them identified Alvarez as one of the guides who had helped them cross into the United States.

The five immigrants, who are being held as material witnesses in the case, told officials they each paid between \$1,300 and \$1,500 to be smuggled across the border.

Authorities initially reported that as many as 33 immigrants were packed into the van. However, Alvarez told authorities he helped only 23 people cross into the United States.

Prosecutors said they plan to ask the judge next week to detain Alvarez, who is from the state of Sinaloa, without bond because he could flee the country. Michael Crowley, Alvarez's attorney, didn't return phone calls yesterday.

U.S. Magistrate Louisa Porter asked court officials to tell Crowley that she was concerned about Alvarez's ability to understand the proceedings because of his injuries. He had cuts on his face and head, and he limped into a court because of a leg injury.

"I am concerned about whether he's 100 percent competent," Porter said. "He seems a little off."

Federal officials also are investigating a report that another vehicle might have been traveling the wrong way on the interstate just before the collision. Smugglers sometimes use several vehicles when a large group of immigrants are involved, either as a way of distracting authorities or as guide vehicles.

Raleigh Leonard, a spokesman for the Border Patrol in San Diego, said he could not comment on whether any smuggling group had been identified as hiring the guides.

Sherri Walker Hobson, an assistant U.S. attorney, said well-organized networks are usually responsible for moving large groups of immigrants like the one loaded into the van. So far, no other guide has been identified in this case. The driver, whom authorities have not named, is believed to be among those who died.

U.S. authorities say smuggling operations have changed over the last 10 years from mom-and-pop businesses to more organized and better-financed ones.

Yesterday the Medical Examiner's Office identified the Mexicans who died in the crash as Maria Penita Ramirez, 33; Pedro Jimenez Briones, 61; Jorge Antonio Salas Garcia, 22, and Lus Francisco Hernandez Lopez, 17. The name of the Brazilian could not be released yesterday because his family hadn't been notified.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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