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United States Seeks Venezuelan Convicted of Visa Fraud

Evangelist preacher fled United States after conviction

By Eric Green
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- A Venezuelan evangelist preacher convicted in November 2004 of visa fraud and of harboring illegal aliens is wanted by U.S. law enforcement authorities.

In a January 21 statement, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency said that the preacher, Jose Vicente Mendez-Tenias of Venezuela, fled to his native country to avoid a lengthy prison sentence. Mendez faces a possible 65 years in prison for the seven-count conviction, ICE said, adding that the evangelist, showing "little faith" that he could avoid the long jail sentence, hopped an American Airlines flight from Washington to Mexico City and then took a connecting flight to Venezuela.

Mendez also had been ordered to pay a \$25,000 fine and was to serve three years of supervised release, said ICE.

By fleeing, the 49-year-old Venezuelan -- who had been released on pre-trial conditions -- became an international fugitive wanted on an obstruction of justice warrant, ICE said.

The agency said Mendez apparently convinced the Venezuelan consulate to issue him emergency travel documents by claiming his son was gravely ill in Venezuela and by promising to return to the Washington area for sentencing January 19 in U.S. federal court.

ICE, an investigative arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said Mendez, who established the "Global Evangelism Task Force" based in Dumfries, Virginia, traveled around the United States to preach before congregations and targeted Spanish-speaking audiences. These activities brought him into contact with illegal aliens. The agency said that after preaching before these audiences, he would offer to help his victims obtain legal immigration status in the United States, charging them each \$2,110 to complete U.S. religious-worker petitions.

In order to make it appear that the illegal immigrants were religious workers, Mendez would provide fake supporting documents such as education degrees and certificates from

seminaries across the United States, false employment histories and forged phony signatures on the documents.

"Not a single one" of the visa applications Mendez filed on behalf of his victims was valid, said ICE.

Mendez sought out "illegal aliens in churches and used their status to exploit them," said ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Allan Doody. "He took their money and left them with nothing but false hope."

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