



The United States Attorney's Office

## Central District of California

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July 28, 2009

### FORMER ARMENIAN DIPLOMAT, BEVERLY HILLS ATTORNEY ARE AMONG FIVE CHARGED IN SCHEME TO ALLOW ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS TO STAY IN UNITED STATES

#### Defendants Allegedly Sold Documents to Help Felons Avoid Deportation

LOS ANGELES - The former Armenian Consul in Los Angeles and a Beverly Hills immigration attorney are among five people arrested last night and this morning on federal criminal charges that allege they obtained and sold to illegal aliens documents called "letters of refusal," which allowed those illegal aliens to avoid deportation.

Issued by embassies and consulates, a letter of refusal states that a country will not issue a travel document for a particular individual, essentially blocking that person's deportation to that nation. According to the criminal charges that led to this week's arrests, the five defendants sold official letters of refusal from the Armenian consulate for as much as \$35,000. Those letters prevented the removal of the Armenian nationals to Armenia. The investigation revealed that many of those who purchased the letters were Armenian nationals facing deportation after being convicted in the United States of felony offenses.

The defendants, who are named in four separate criminal complaints, are accused of obstructing proceedings before a department or agency, namely U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). All five were taken into custody by ICE during the last 24 hours and are expected to make their initial appearances this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles. Those charged are:

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Norair Ghalumian, 52, of Burbank, Calif., the Armenian Consul in Los Angeles from 1999 through 2003, who was arrested this morning;

Hakop Hovanesyan, 54, of Glendale, Calif., a former employee at the Armenian Consulate in Los Angeles and current operator of Regency Travel in Glendale, who was arrested last night;

Margarita Mkrtchyan, 41, of Glendale, Calif., an immigration attorney for Inman and Associates law firm in Beverly Hills, Calif., who was arrested last night;

Oganes Nardos, 36, of Valencia, Calif., a substance abuse counselor, who was arrested this morning; and

Elvis Madatyan, 47, of Glendale, Calif, who was arrested this morning.

The charge of obstructing ICE proceedings carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

In conjunction with the arrests, ICE agents executed search warrants at Mkrtchyan's law office, Hovanesyan's travel agency and at Nardos' residence. During those searches, agents seized further evidence related to the case, including additional refusal letters and official stationery from the Armenian consulate.

"The charges in this case allege that deportable aliens, some with serious felony convictions, were able to remain in the United States," said United States Attorney Thomas P. O'Brien. "These defendants endangered the safety and security of United States residents."

The investigation revealed that the five defendants, working essentially independently, obtained clients via word of mouth in the Armenian community. According to the criminal complaints, the defendants used contacts in the Armenian government to procure official refusal letters on behalf of their clients. The letters of refusal were sent to ICE officials, thus preventing the aliens' deportation.

"The charges raised in this case are extremely serious and very troubling," said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge for the ICE Office of Investigations in Los Angeles. "The defendants allegedly exploited their community ties and knowledge of the immigration system to help dangerous criminals, among others, avoid deportation. ICE will move aggressively to target those who commit immigration fraud as well as those who attempt to benefit. We will not allow unscrupulous opportunists to profit from schemes that undermine public safety and compromise our nation's immigration system."

A criminal complaint contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in court.

The two-year investigation by ICE that led to this week's arrests is ongoing. Authorities are reviewing evidence in the case and seeking to identify aliens who may have fraudulently obtained letters of refusal from the defendants.

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