

PROBE OF IMMIGRATION LAWYER BALLOONS INTO MASSIVE VISA FRAUD CASE

By CATHERINE WILSON, Associated Press
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MIAMI -- An investigation into 100 suspicious visa applications has ballooned into one of the nation's largest immigration fraud inquiries, covering as many as 3,500 people cleared to enter the country as religious ministers or multinational executives.

Immigration officials outlined their discoveries Thursday at the sentencing of immigration lawyer Javier Lopera. He was ordered to spend eight years and four months in federal prison and faces deportation afterward.

Through Lopera's visa mill, prosecutor Ben Daniel said virtually an entire Brazilian slum was authorized to enter the United States legally. Investigators found as many as 450 cleaners posing as ministers, and only one legitimate request has been approved in 500 applications subjected to extensive review after charges were filed.

"It wasn't about all money. It was about arrogance of getting something through the system," said investigator Ronnie Thomas, who has devoted two years to Lopera's scams. "He had his money coming in, but he loved the challenge."

The probe uncovered 3,500 people listed by Lopera on 7,000 suspicious applications dating back to 1996. One man's name came up five times. The investigation and a review of the suspect cases will cost an estimated \$1.8 million.

"We have not encountered any type of fraud of this magnitude at the service center before," testified Veronica Traylor, an acting assistant director of the Dallas center of the U.S. Bureau of Citizen and Immigration Services. "This has overwhelmed us to be looking at this number of cases."

The fraud has added a year of work for 20 people at the Dallas center and 1 1/2 years to the work of Miami investigators, Traylor said.

"There's been an enormous diversion of resources at a time when that bureau can least afford to waste its assets," said U.S. District Judge Paul Huck.

Lopera, 36, is a Bolivian national and Brazilian citizen who has practiced law in Miami and Pompano Beach for 10 years. He was convicted in May of 19 counts of fraud and conspiracy for visa applications listing mostly unskilled laborers as executives of multinational corporations.

On the stand Wednesday, Thomas disclosed an ongoing investigation of 420 to 450 applications by the Assembly of God in Boston seeking visas for foreign ministers to work in the United States.

A Boston church official initially told Thomas that all of the requests were legitimate, but tax records showed the people identified themselves as self-employed cleaners. A minister has admitted issuing false ordination certificates, Thomas said.

A call for comment to the headquarters of the Assembly of God in Springfield, Mo., was not immediately returned.

Seven of Lopera's employees benefited personally from the scam, and three workers spent three days destroy incriminating documents, Daniel said.

After Thomas flagged one request and asked Lopera to prove a company existed, he said Lopera sent him 75 fraudulent documents instead of withdrawing the petition.

"He committed fraud in every petition he sent in," except for petitions seeking visas for legal U.S. residents, Thomas said.

Lopera charged clients \$4,000 to \$5,000 each, which would have brought in \$14 million to \$17.5 million.

Speaking to the judge, he called his prosecution "a major personal crisis."

"I feel very, very sorry for everything I have done, but I feel worse about everyone who has been affected by this case," he said.

Zoila Pimentel, Lopera's wife and law partner, berated the immigration agency for mailing letters to the firm's visa applicants at years-old addresses and telling them to produce documents within 30 days if they wanted their cases reconsidered.

She claimed the follow-up work by the immigration agency was causing "greater harm to the immigrant community than what Mr. Lopera has done to them."

Defense attorney Bruce Udolf said prosecutors rejected an offer by Lopera to cooperate and help sort through the fraud, and he argued against a prosecution request for a longer sentence than federal guidelines allow.

"I understand that in the apocalyptic times in which we live, the proper focus of the government is on immigration," Udolf said. "It doesn't mean we should lose all sense of perspective."

In other major immigration fraud cases, New York lawyer Robert Porges was sentenced this month to eight years in prison after he was accused of handling as many as 7,000 fraudulent asylum cases.

Virginia lawyer Samuel Kooritzky was sentenced in March to 10 years in prison for crimes involving 2,700 applications submitted in 18 months.

