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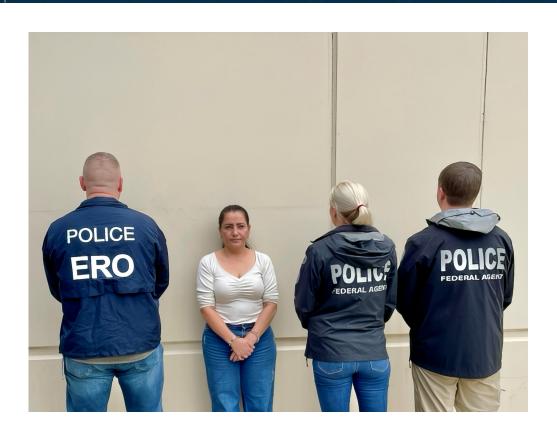
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Diplomatic Security Service "Operation Heartless" Dismantles Colombian Human Smuggling Network to the United States

DSS ARTICLES

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The Diplomatic Security Service and ICE Enforcement & Removal Operations arrested Johana Cuervo Castrillon in Houston, TX, for overstaying her visa in the United States and for conspiring with a Colombian-based human smuggling ring on April 29, 2025. (U.S. Department of State photo)

On April 29, 2025, special agents with the Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Houston Field Office, with support from ICE Enforcement & Removal Operations, arrested Johana Cuervo Castrillon for overstaying her visa in the United States and conspiring with a Colombian-based human smuggling ring to exploit the U.S. travel system. Cuervo is the seventh and final suspect arrested in Operation Heartless, a multi-year international investigation led by DSS and coordinated with our Colombian National Police and Department of Homeland Security partners.

DSS special agents and criminal investigators at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota opened Operation Heartless in January 2024 with an investigation into Alvaro Andres Trivino Hernandez, who was suspected of coaching Colombian applicants for visa interviews and filling out their nonimmigrant visa applications online from his law offices in in Bogota and Medellin. DSS investigators noticed that a suspiciously high number of visa applicants used legitimate State of Florida death certificates to fraudulently claim they needed to attend funerals for deceased relatives in the United States. Funeral claims enable applicants to expedite visa interview appointments and be considered for travel to the United States.



DSS investigators followed the trail of the Florida death certificates and learned that Trivino conspired with Cuervo. The investigation uncovered that Trivino and Cuervo obtained legitimate State of Florida death certificates and provided them to visa applicants to submit to Embassy Bogota consular adjudicators to support false visa justification claims. Cuervo worked for a

Colombian-based human smuggling ring that amassed \$1.2 million with this scheme.

The DSS investigation uncovered a criminal group that helped more than 1,500 applicants fraudulently apply for visas to travel to the United States. The scheme ended when DSS and the Colombian National Police arrested the ringleader and five accomplices on October 18, 2024, but Cuervo remained at large in Houston, Texas. The DSS investigator in Bogota reached out to the DSS Houston field office to help track her down.

On April 29, 2025, the DSS Houston Field Office and the Department of Homeland Security located Cuervo and arrested her in Houston. She admitted to conspiring with Trivino to help Colombians illegitimately apply for visas to travel to the United States. She is wanted in Colombia on charges of human smuggling and will be deported under Title 8 authority to face justice.

"Operation Heartless ended a criminal enterprise that exploited the U.S. travel system and threatened the integrity of our borders," said DSS Office of Investigations Acting Deputy Assistant Director Joe Jung. "DSS is making America safer thanks to excellent criminal investigative work and invaluable support from our embassy colleagues and Colombian partners."

With its global footprint, DSS is uniquely situated to leverage partnerships and coordinate with U.S., international, and foreign law enforcement to conduct transnational criminal investigations.



TAGS <u>Bureau of Diplomatic Security</u> <u>Colombia</u> <u>Smuggling</u>



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