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ANDREW BECKER | UPDATE: AMERICA'S WAR WITHIN | NOVEMBER 20, 2009

## Southwest border corruption cases continue to rise

Corruption-related investigations of federal immigration and border agents in the Southwest has increased for the third year in a row, according to records obtained by the Center for Investigative Reporting through a Freedom of Information Act request.

More than 80 investigations were opened last year by the Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General in the four Southwest border states against employees of Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agencies that police the border and immigration.

The Inspector General, which is the lead Homeland Security agency to investigate criminal corruption cases, had more than 170 open cases, some dating to 2003, at the end of last fiscal year. That figure does not include cases being investigated by the FBI or the internal affairs offices of CBP or ICE.

CBP has significantly increased its ranks in recent years, while also hiring more internal affairs agents to combat the [threat of corruption](#).

The latest case of an allegedly corrupt customs inspector was announced yesterday by federal officials in El Paso. Martha Alicia Garnica, 43, was arrested and indicted on charges of conspiracy to smuggle undocumented aliens, two counts of bribery and one count of importation of a controlled substance, according to a press release.

CBP spokesman Roger Maier said in an email statement that Garnica was hired as customs inspector in February 1997 and became a CBP officer when DHS formed in 2003. Since March 2008 he had been a technician assigned to the El Paso border crossing.

"Corruption is an issue CBP takes extremely seriously," Maier said. "Corruption by employees tarnishes our badge and our reputation, brings dishonor to our service and most importantly jeopardizes our border security."

An El Paso police spokesman said an officer by the same name worked for the department from 1990 to 1997, but could not confirm it was the same person.

November has been a busy time for corruption cases. Two CBP officers have been sentenced, two more will be sentenced later this month, and another this week pleaded guilty to charges .

In South Texas, Raul Montano, 34, [pleaded guilty](#) Monday to bribery, cocaine trafficking and illegal immigrant smuggling charges. The former CBP officer will be sentenced in February.

Earlier this month, Sergio Lopez Hernandez, a 41-year-old former CBP officer, was [sentenced](#) in Federal District Court to more than 11 years in prison for human smuggling, bribery and cocaine possession. The former officer, who worked in Brownsville, Texas, admitted to taking more than \$15,000 in bribes when he pleaded guilty in April.

In San Diego, John Paul Yanez-Camacho, a former CBP officer at the Otay Mesa border crossing, was sentenced to three years probation after pleading guilty to a misdemeanor charge of unauthorized access to a government computer.

From January 2005 through November 2006 Yanez-Camacho accessed a government database containing confidential information more than 250 times to check on the status of himself, family members, and drug traffickers who he knew from a previous job he held at Tequila Frogs restaurant in Juarez, Mexico, according to court documents. Yanez-Camacho was hired in 2003 by the federal government.

Jesus Velasco Esparza, a former CBP officer at the Calexico, Calif., border crossing, will be sentenced for corruption-related [charges](#) next week.

Update:

Velasco Esparza's sentencing has been postponed until next year.

Also, CBP Officer Henry Gauani, 41, of Yuma, Ariz., and his wife were [sentenced](#) Nov. 23 to a little more than three years in prison on bribery and drug trafficking charges. They were arrested in January and pleaded guilty in June.

Raquel Esquivel, a Border Patrol agent in Texas who was [convicted](#) in April by a

The Investigators

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federal jury of drug-trafficking charges, will be sentenced today.

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All told, the Inspector General opened in fiscal year 2009 more than 400 investigations in the four Southwest border states, ranging from misconduct to criminal corruption cases. That number represents the most investigations in any year since the advent of the department in 2003. Overall, the Inspector General has 725 open investigations.

Other recent cases:

- [Yamiikar Fierros](#), a former Border Patrol agent in Arizona, was arrested Oct. 30 and indicted on charges of accepting bribes.
- Former CBP Officer [Rudy Trace Soliz III](#), 43, of Brownsville, was arrested Oct. 29 and charged with human smuggling
- [Elliott R. Hernandez](#), 44, of Houston, a Citizenship and Immigration Services officer was arrested Oct. 22 on charges of bribery, fraud in connection with a computer and receiving something of value in exchange for performing an official act to which he is not entitled.
- Former CBP Officer [Jose Carmelo Magana](#), 46, of Yuma, Arizona, pleaded guilty on Oct. 21 of charges of bribery and human smuggling. He will be sentenced in January.
- Retired CBP Officer [Tony Alan Barker](#), 58, of Sahuarita, Ariz., was detained Oct. 7 on child pornography charges. Barker, a retired Customs and Border Protection officer of 35 years out of Georgia, was indicted in September 2009 by a federal grand jury in Tucson for Attempted Distribution of Child Pornography and Possession of Child Pornography.
- Former CBP Officer [Javier Cavazos](#), 50, of Los Fresnos, Texas, was arrested on Sept. 29 and charged with bribery in connection with human smuggling.

**Tags:** [corruption](#), [Customs and Border Protection](#), [Department of Homeland Security](#), [Southwest border](#)

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