

Ukrainians in U.S. Court in Human-Trafficking Case

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PHILADELPHIA — In a human-trafficking case whose trial started Monday, U.S. prosecutors accuse a group of Ukrainians of luring desperate young people to the United States and forcing them to clean retail and office buildings, including Target and Wal-Mart stores.

Though they had promised \$500 a month and free room and board, the Botsvynyuk brothers allegedly paid little or nothing to crews laboring 16 hours a day, and threatened to harm them or their families if they fought the demands, authorities said.

"The victims in this case entered this country with dreams of great opportunity only to find themselves living a nightmare," U.S. Attorney Zane Memeger said in announcing the charges. "No one trying to immigrate to this country should have to endure such mistreatment."

Only Omelyan "Milo" Botsvynyuk, 52, and his brother Stepan, 36, are on trial. Brother Mykhaylo Botsvynyuk and Yaroslav Churuk are fighting extradition from Canada.

The Botsvynyuk brothers are accused of luring about 30 victims from Ukraine from 2000

to 2007, smuggling them to Philadelphia through Mexico.

The brothers housed the victims in deplorable conditions and insisted they work for years until they pay off smuggling debts of \$10,000 to \$50,000, prosecutors said. Some escaped despite the threats.

Authorities also accuse Omelyan Botsvynyuk of raping one of the victims and threatening to force the young daughter of another victim into prostitution back home.

An overseas tip sparked the investigation in 2005, but authorities said it took time to overcome language and trust barriers as they worked with the victims. The victims, some of whom will testify, include young Ukrainian men eager for work after finishing military service and a woman who was told that her young daughter would be forced into prostitution in Ukraine if she fled, the FBI said.

But asylum may become a hot trial issue.

"Several of the witnesses have cooperated with the government partly in the hopes that they will eventually receive T-Visas, special visas created for victims of trafficking," the government conceded in its pretrial memo.

Investigators do not accuse the stores of wrongdoing, noting that they usually hire cleaning crews through subcontractors.

More often in the United States, human-trafficking cases involve sex workers. The Justice Department reports that 82 percent of the cases investigated from 2008 to 2010 involved sex trafficking, half of which involved victims under 18. Only about 10 percent involved the labor trafficking at the heart of the Botsvynyuk case.

Federal investigators opened 2,515 suspected trafficking cases during the three-year period, the report said. But authorities actively pursue only a fraction of them, perhaps 60 a year, officials have said.

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