

Ex-border agent gets nearly 6 years

by Kelly Thornton and Karen Kuche

A former border inspector who accepted more than \$70,000 in bribes for allowing illegal immigrants into the country was sentenced to 57 months in prison Monday on bribery and smuggling charges.

Richard Elizalda, 56, of Chula Vista, Calif., pleaded guilty to bribery and smuggling charges in September 2006. He admitted accepting between \$70,000 to \$120,000 in cash and automobiles and said he allowed hundreds of illegal immigrants into the country between 2004 and June 2006, when he was arrested.

Before pronouncing the sentence, U.S. District Judge Larry Burns told Elizalda, "You're one of the gatekeepers for the security of the United States and you totally abdicated that. It was a terrible, terrible thing."

Elizalda apologized to the judge, and to the people of the United States.

"I'm sorry. I know I did something wrong," he said, his voice breaking down. "I apologize for what I did and I'm ready to pay my sentence."

Elizalda worked with two women who smuggled immigrants and drugs into the country through the San Ysidro border crossing.

Prosecutors said he had a personal relationship with one of the women.

According to prosecutors, Elizalda used his cell phone to send text messages to indicate to smugglers what traffic lane he would be working. Border inspectors typically aren't told of their assignments until the last minute.

One of the women Elizalda worked with paid him hundreds of dollars per immigrant he helped her smuggle. Authorities said the other woman, Raquel Arin, spilt the proceeds from her smuggling operation with him.

Elizalda and Arin agreed to turn over to the government \$15,000 worth of jewelry, \$56,000 in cash and two vehicles.

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