

Guilty plea in 'birth tourism'

LI man charged Turkish women to come to U.S.

BY KELDY ORTIZ
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An East Patchogue man pleaded guilty Friday for his role in what federal prosecutors call a "birth tourism" operation in which pregnant Turkish nationals paid up to \$10,000 to give birth in Suffolk County so their children can have U.S. citizenship.

Ibrahim Aksakal, 49, faces up to 20 years in prison after pleading guilty in federal court in Central Islip before U.S. District Judge Joanna Seybert to conspiring to commit health

care and wire fraud, said Jacquelyn M. Kasulis, acting U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

The "birth tourism" operation took place in the county between 2017 and 2020, federal prosecutors said.

"With today's plea, Aksakal admits to an outrageous scheme in which he caused the Medicaid program to disburse more than \$1 million in benefits for pregnant Turkish nationals who, masquerading as tourists, entered the United States under false pretenses to obtain birthright citizenship for their newborns," Kasulis said Friday in a statement.

Prosecutors said Aksakal and five co-conspirators, mostly Long Island residents with Turkish backgrounds, advertised and recruited women on

two Turkish-language Facebook pages. Their titles in English roughly translate to "Giving Birth in America" and "My baby should be born in America," federal prosecutors said.

Officials said language on the page included "[W]e . . . will provide future mothers and fathers this opportunity, with minimal costs . . ."

Aksakal and his co-conspirators instructed the women to conceal their pregnancies, federal prosecutors said. While the women were in the United States, they lived in so-called "birth houses" in West Babylon, Center Moriches, Dix Hills, East Northport, East Patchogue and Smithtown, which Aksakal maintained, officials said.

At the time officials announced the arrest in December, then-Suffolk County Police

Commissioner Geraldine Hart said police received a tip from an unidentified Smithtown clerk after seeing five pregnant women in the same home over a short period. Officials at the time said 117 women gave birth to 119 children.

The Suffolk County District Attorney's Office along with agents from Homeland Security Investigations joined in the case along with federal prosecutors.

"This was an extremely complex, international investigation that led law enforcement to the core of this scheme right here in our backyard," said Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini in a statement.

As part of Aksakal's guilty plea, he consented to the forfeiture of \$397,500, federal prosecutors said.

Newsday

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CORRECTIONS

Yankees pitcher Gerrit Cole would be pitching in Sunday's game on three days' rest and in a wild-card game on Tuesday on five days' rest. The amount of rest was incorrect in a story in Thursday's edition.

THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1861 During the Civil War, the United States Navy authorized construction of the first ironclad ship, the USS Monitor.

1957 The Space Age began as the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, into an elliptical low Earth orbit.

1990 For the first time in nearly six decades, German lawmakers met in the Reichstag for the first meeting of reunified Germany's parliament.

1991 26 nations, including the United States, signed the Madrid Protocol, which imposed a 50-year ban on oil exploration and mining in Antarctica.

2001 A Russian airliner flying from Israel to Siberia was accidentally downed by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile over the Black Sea, killing all 78 people aboard.

2002 In a federal court in Boston, a laughing Richard Reid pleaded guilty to trying to blow up a trans-Atlantic flight with explosives in his shoes (the British citizen was later sentenced to life in prison).

Oh my gourd!

Tiffany Kian, 8, wraps her arms around a pumpkin at the Waterdrinker Family Farm in Manorville Sunday. But rain and clouds are expected to start the week.



JOHN ROCA

Driver charged after woman is killed in crash

BY VERA CHINESE
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A Brentwood man is facing a charge of driving while impaired by drugs following a crash that killed a woman and injured eight others Saturday night, Suffolk police said.

Christian Lopez, 27, was driving a 2014 Acura TL eastbound on Second Avenue just west of Hilltop Drive in Brentwood about 9:40 p.m. when his car hit the back of a 2004 Toyota Camry also traveling east, according to police. The impact

pushed the Toyota into the westbound lane where a westbound 2021 Jeep Wrangler hit its passenger side.

Soraida Polanco, 57, of Brentwood, a front seat passenger in the Toyota, was taken to South Shore University Hospital in Bay Shore where she died. Rodolfo Polanco, 59, of Brentwood, the Toyota driver and Polanco's husband, was taken to the same hospital with serious injuries.

A backseat passenger was taken to Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip

with non-life-threatening injuries.

Blanca Garcia, 71, of Brentwood, a backseat passenger in the Jeep, was transported to South Shore University Hospital with serious injuries. The driver and other passengers in the Jeep, including two children, were transported to Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center with non-life-threatening injuries.

Lopez was treated for minor injuries and released, police said.

The Brentwood Legion Am-

balance and Brentwood Fire Department responded to the crash along with others.

He was held overnight at the Third Precinct, and at his arraignment Sunday night in First District Court, Judge Alonzo G. Jacobs ordered Lopez held in lieu of \$10,000 cash bail or \$40,000 bond, according to court records. His attorney, Carrie Solages, did not return a call for comment.

Detectives ask anyone with information on the crash to call the Major Case Unit at 631-852-6553.