



Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Texas

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 4, 2008
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MATHIS WOMAN ARRESTED FOR KATRINA FRAUD

(CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas) – Diana Escamilla Cerda, 44, of Mathis, Texas, has been arrested by agents of the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) and the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS-OIG) following her federal indictment on charges of submitting false claims for hurricane assistance to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), United States Attorney Don DeGabrielle announced today. Cerda was arrested at her home Tuesday, June 3, 2008, and taken before U.S. Magistrate Judge Brian Owsley who set bond at \$20,000.

In response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, FEMA provided individuals whose residences were lost or damaged by the storms with an expedited payment of \$2,000 to assist with immediate food, shelter and clothing needs. To qualify for this emergency assistance, the damaged home in the disaster area must be where the applicant usually lives and where the applicant was residing at the time of the disaster.

Cerda is accused of fraudulently requesting FEMA disaster assistance funds for fictitious addresses and for addresses she did not own or occupy. The indictment also accuses her of receiving fraudulently obtained United States Treasury Checks through the U.S. Mail. If convicted of the false claims charge, Cerda faces a maximum of five years imprisonment. The mail fraud charge carries a maximum punishment of 20 years in prison. Additionally, each count also carries a maximum fine of \$250,000.

The investigation was conducted by USPIS and DHS-OIG. Assistant United States Attorney Robert D. Thorpe Jr. is prosecuting the case.

The United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas is a member of the Department of Justice's Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, created by the Attorney General of the United States to deter, detect and prosecute unscrupulous individuals who try to take advantage of the Hurricane Katrina and Rita disasters. Headed by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher, the Task Force is comprised of federal, state and local law enforcement investigating agencies and the United States Attorney's Offices in the Gulf Coast region and nationwide.

Anyone suspecting criminal activity involving disaster assistance programs can make an anonymous report by calling the toll-free Hurricane Relief Fraud Hotline, 1-866-720-5721, 24 hours a day, seven days a week until further notice. Information can also be e-mailed to the inspector general at dhsoighotline@dhs.gov or sent by surface mail, with as many details as possible, to: Department of Homeland Security; Attn: Office of Inspector General, Hotline; Washington, DC. 20528.

An indictment is a formal accusation of criminal conduct, not evidence. A defendant is

presumed innocent unless and until convicted through due process of law.

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