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U.S. Pursues a Possible Case of Forced Labor at a Florida Farm

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

EAST PALATKA, Fla., June 10 (AP) - A farm labor contractor and his assistants are being accused by the federal government of looking for homeless men, mostly blacks. If the men were addicted to crack or other drugs, even better.

The homeless men, apparently lured with promises of work, room and board, were taken to a camp in this part of northeast Florida where potatoes and cabbage are grown.

At the end of each day, the workers were offered crack, alcohol and cigarettes on "credit," and the expenses were deducted from their wages, authorities say. But soon the debts grew larger than their wages, and the workers were told they would have to pay them off.

According to the federal Department of Labor, that was how dozens of workers were held captive at the camp owned and operated by the labor contractor, Ronald R. Evans.

"Evans and his enforcers allegedly employ force or threat of force to keep the workers in a condition of involuntary servitude," according to a Labor Department document distributed to federal and local agents who raided the camp this month.

The case is unusual because the accusations of indentured servitude involve American citizens. These types of cases generally involve illegal immigrants who are coerced to work with the threat that they will be turned over to the authorities.

Mr. Evans, 47, did not return phone calls, and one of his lawyers, Robert Fields, said it was too early to comment on the accusations. "He has cooperated," Mr. Fields said.

Mr. Evans has not been charged with any crimes involving indentured servitude. Instead, he was charged last week with making false statements to a Labor Department investigator and allowing unauthorized drivers to transport farmworkers. Three other associates were arrested on similar charges.

"Certainly we will look at many, many avenues and potential charges," said Steve Cole, a spokesman for the United States attorney's office in Tampa.

Mr. Evans was released on \$50,000 bond and ordered to have no contact with the camp, a parcel of land off a dirt road enclosed by a fence topped with barbed wire. A sign warns trespassers they will be prosecuted.

A worker who would not give his name said the accusations of indentured servitude or drug use at the camp were false. During the raid, agents found a small amount of what is believed to be crack.

But several farmworkers from the camp have been cooperating with federal agents in their investigation of indentured servitude.

Mr. Evans has a history of labor violations. He has been investigated five times by the Labor Department and once by the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation since 1988, according to records obtained under a Freedom of Information Act request.

In 1988, Mr. Evans was fined \$1,350 for transporting workers in vehicles without proper insurance and failing to register another employee as a farm labor contractor.

In 1992, the Labor Department ordered Mr. Evans to pay \$4,060 for failing to ensure safe housing, failing to pay wages when due and failing to keep employer records at a camp in North Carolina.

Federal authorities were first notified about the most recent case by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a farmworkers' advocacy group in southwest Florida. The coalition was contacted by workers at the camp, said Laura Germino, a leader of the group, which has aided authorities in the prosecution of five previous cases of farmworker slavery in Florida in recent years.