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Calls Grow for Transparency After South Carolina Restaurant Raid

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A recent federal operation at a popular Mexican restaurant in Oconee County, South Carolina, has sparked outrage and urgent calls for answers from immigrant rights advocates and community members. On June 18, agents with the Department of Homeland Security carried out a search warrant at the Puerto Nuevo restaurant. Officials stated the operation aimed to investigate suspected human trafficking and potential labor violations, although details remain limited.

According to Homeland Security Investigations, agents rescued two minors believed to be victims of human trafficking and arrested eight individuals on immigration-related charges. Later, officials clarified that only one of the detained individuals was formally charged specifically with illegal reentry after deportation. The rest are still awaiting possible charges.

However, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of South Carolina and local advocates say the operation has left more questions than answers. In a public letter, they criticized authorities for labeling the action a human trafficking investigation despite no trafficking-related charges being filed. Instead, most of the people arrested were reportedly turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and sent to a detention facility in Georgia.

Community leaders say the raid has created fear among Oconee County's Hispanic residents, many of whom no longer feel safe going to work or even leaving their homes. "This operation didn't just target a restaurant," said Dulce López, an immigrant rights strategist with the ACLU. "It targeted a whole community."

The group is calling for several actions in response. They want a full public account of the operation, including exactly how many people were detained and why. They also want immediate access to legal assistance and support services for anyone identified as a victim. In addition, the ACLU is demanding that Oconee County end its agreement under Section 287(g), a federal program allowing local law enforcement to help enforce immigration laws.

The Oconee County Sheriff's Office said its role was limited to providing security around the restaurant and that its 287(g) agreement has not been implemented yet because staff are still waiting for training. Officials emphasized that the program does not allow deputies to check immigration status during routine stops.

Still, advocates say the raid has damaged trust. They are urging local leaders to apologize publicly and rethink policies they believe criminalize immigrant communities instead of protecting them.

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