

# RANSOM

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liminary hearing and detention hearing. Both face up to life in prison, if convicted of the charges.

FBI Special Agent Peter Buckley testified he had been assigned to be with Ramiro Aguas, who took phone calls from the kidnappers.

Buckley said he heard Antonio Aguas say he had been hit on the side of his face with a handgun. In another call, the kidnappers threatened to cut Antonio Aguas into little pieces if the ransom was not paid, the FBI agent said.

The events began Sept. 10 and concluded Sept. 15 with the rescue of Antonio Aguas and arrest of Lopez and Merritt, according to Buckley.

Aguas said he'd been kidnapped outside his business and taken to a cornfield somewhere in Champaign County. There was a struggle during which a gun was fired, Aguas told investigators, according to Buckley.

At the press conference Monday, FBI Special Agent in Charge Weyman Dun complimented Antonio Aguas for his "coolness, composure and bravery" during his ordeal.

Dun said FBI, Champaign police and nine other federal, state and local agencies worked nonstop to investigate the kidnapping.

"This is a classic case of the power of combined law enforcement and intelligence resources," Dun said.

He said the investigators worked "feverishly" to apprehend the kidnappers and rescue Antonio Aguas.

Dun said there was no known connection between Antonio Aguas and Lopez and Merritt.

Champaign Police Chief R.T. Finney said his department first learned of the disappearance of Antonio Aguas late on Sept. 10 or early Sept. 11.

Officers and detectives worked 24 hours a day following all leads, no matter where they led, he said.

Rodger Heaton, U.S. attorney for the Central District of Illinois, said, "This happens in many countries. There are people who are kidnapped and subjected to violence."

The violence of this kind of case is a top priority for federal authorities, he said. But kidnappings for ransom are rare in the U.S., he said.

According to an affidavit filed with the criminal complaint, Antonio Aguas called his wife on the evening of Sept. 10, telling her that he would be gone for two weeks and asking her to pick up his car.

The next day at noon, Champaign police were notified by La

Bamba employees that Antonio Aguas was missing, according to the affidavit. His car was found outside the La Bamba at 1905 Glenn Park Drive, C.

About 3:30 p.m. Sept. 11, Ramiro Aguas received a call that his brother had been kidnapped, the affidavit said. At the time, Ramiro Aguas was visiting family in Mexico and was told by the caller to return to the U.S.

He was ordered not to say anything if he wanted to see his brother alive.

On Sept. 12, Ramiro Aguas got another phone call, demanding \$250,000, according to the affidavit. The next day, he got a call telling him to take the money to Bloomington.

There were several calls that day, including one at 8:17 p.m. that was determined by investigators to have been made from a pay phone at a gas station in Peru, Ill. The caller said the \$250,000 was only the tip of the iceberg and that Antonio was not in Illinois.

According to the affidavit, there was a series of calls from Sept. 13 on, in which Ramiro was ordered to a gas station in Fort Wayne, Ind., where he was to drop off the ransom money. That station was placed under surveillance before the brother's arrival.

About 8:25 a.m. Friday, Ramiro dropped the ransom money at the gas station and left the area. Surveillance watched Adrian Lopez retrieve the money and get back into a tow truck he had been in, according to the affidavit.

Lopez was followed and seen going to a convenience store, where he got a bag into which he placed the ransom money.

The tow truck finally went to an automotive store, where the driver of the truck and Lopez both left the truck.

Shortly thereafter, Lopez was arrested sitting on a bench next to the tow truck driver outside the store. Lopez had the bag of ransom money, according to the affidavit.

Lopez was arrested about 9:30 a.m. Sept. 15, according to Dun.

Meanwhile, other investigators learned that Antonio Aguas might be at a motel in Portland, Ind., near Fort Wayne. The owner of that motel told investigators one room had been receiving a large number of phone calls.

The owner gave a description of one occupant that matched that of Antonio Aguas, according to the affidavit.

Shortly after Lopez was arrested, agents knocked on the door of the motel room and were answered by Merritt. Immediately upon entering the room, the agents saw Antonio Aguas sitting in the room unrestrained. Merritt was then arrested, according to the affidavit.