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## RINGS

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# The Clowns Who Gave Away a Italian Human-Trafficking Ring

They came in as circus performers amid the country's refugee chaos. Sicilian cops caught on to their smugglers' trick.

ROME — In what gives new meaning to the concept of running away to join the circus, Italian authorities arrested 41 people Tuesday for smuggling clowns and other circus performers into the country.

The only problem: Most of those who were smuggled in had never set foot inside a circus tent.

The arrests were part of a sting operation called Golden Circus that untangled a complex [human-trafficking](#) network that included 18 circus owners and Vito Gambino, who, along with his wife Provvienza Visconti, were government workers in Sicily's regional department of labor, which allowed them to almost single-handedly manage work permits. They signed false permits tied to a little-known clause in [Italy's immigration policy](#) that allows for the recruitment of foreign dancers, performers, and clowns for the circus industry.

During the last year, more than 500 mostly Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi migrants paid as much as \$15,500 a piece for what amounted to legal working documents for the circus industry in Italy. The circus owners never actually hired the migrants, but instead were given [lucrative kickbacks](#) ranging from \$3,500 to \$5,500 per performer for pretending to employ them. The government workers and traffickers took the rest of the profits, which are estimated to have topped \$7.5 million.

Gambino and his wife are also accused of running a talent-recruitment firm for the circus industry for the purpose of better managing their trafficking business. They used their own children as conduits for receiving payments via PayPal and the PostePay systems, according to court documents outlining countless telephone intercepts during which Gambino gave his children's particulars for the purpose of transferring money. The others who were arrested helped recruit the migrants and facilitate their arrival into the country.

Rodolfo Rupert, head of the Palermo police unit that led the Golden Circus operation, said the trafficking ring had been created because of the horde of legitimate refugees coming to the country—a crisis that has made it increasingly difficult for some groups who have always entered Italy illegally with relative ease. “They counted on the fact that the government officials and circus owners were equally corrupt,” he said. “They only worked in the circuses on paper.”

Many of the circus owners who were arrested have subsequently come under investigation for other illegal practices, including substandard working conditions and animal cruelty along with crimes that were discovered when the clown-trafficking ring was uncovered. Among the circus companies that were implicated in the scam are the popular Orfei circus, the Città di Roma circus, Vienna Roller, Wigliams Brother and Splash Aquatic Tour circuses.

Italy's interior minister, Angelo Alfano, expressed his disappointment with the blatant corruption of a sector meant to entertain children. "It is disappointing to keep discovering fault lines in society, in the public administration, that favor nefarious operations," he said.

None of the circuses implicated in the trafficking ring have been shuttered. The show, it seems, must go on.