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******* PRESS RELEASE *******

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District Attorney Thomas W. Sneddon, Jr., announced today that on November 28th the Belgium Police arrested, without incident, Raquel Diego Lopez Hamilton, age 27, for several counts of Child Abduction and Unlawful Flight to Avoid Prosecution (UFAP). The arrest came as the culmination of a six-year investigation by District Attorney Senior Investigator Laura Cleaves. The arrest was made based on a local arrest warrant issued on September 5, 2001, by Santa Barbara Superior Court Judge William Gordon and a federal warrant issued in November 2002.

The District Attorney's investigation originated on December 8, 1996, when the victim father, Charles Hamilton, reported that his ex-wife had abducted their 1-year-old daughter, Dakota Hamilton, and fled to Barcelona, Spain. Raquel Diego Hamilton is a Spanish National who had been residing in the United States when she and Charles Hamilton married in 1994. They subsequently moved to the Santa Barbara area, where their daughter was born. When the marriage dissolved in mid-1996, Charles Hamilton expressed concern that his ex-wife would abduct the child. Although Raquel Hamilton at first appeared to comply with the custody orders issued in Santa Barbara Superior Court, Charles' worst fears were realized when she failed to return the child over a weekend visitation. Investigation revealed that Raquel had left her job and living situation without notice, and a trace of airline records revealed that Raquel and Dakota had departed LAX for Barcelona. Investigator Cleaves contacted Raquel in Spain and while she initially claimed to be only visiting for the holidays, she failed to return the child to California.

Application was made for the return of the child under the international Hague Treaty. Following a lengthy hearing process, Spain refused to acknowledge California's jurisdiction in the matter and refused to order the return of the child. An appeal of the Spanish court's decision was also unsuccessful. Although criminal charges were subsequently filed and an arrest warrant was issued, Spain (along with many other countries) will not extradite its own nationals.

Following several heart-breaking years in which the victim father could only occasionally speak to his growing daughter by phone, he learned that Raquel was planning a business trip to Brussels, Belgium. Although only the barest of information was available, the District Attorney's Office immediately began working with the FBI and the Office of International Affairs. A federal UFAP warrant was issued and a request for a Provisional Arrest Warrant was made to the Belgium Police. Raquel Diego Hamilton was arrested as she prepared to board a flight from Brussels back to Spain. The child however, was not in her custody, having been left with grandparents in Spain. Raquel remains in custody as an international extradition request is being prepared.