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## Ford settles in 15-passenger van rollover

By Lynn Brezosky / Associated Press

LAREDO, Texas -- **Ford Motor Co.** has settled a lawsuit over a van-rollover crash that killed three young missionaries in Mexico in 2002.

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The case was the first involving Ford Motor Co.'s 15-passenger E-350 Econoline van to a reach trial in six years.

The confidential settlement was negotiated late Friday, after two days of testimony.

An attorney for the plaintiffs, Jeffrey G. Wigington, said his clients were pleased with the settlement and planned to use a "significant portion" of it to establish a fund for retrofitting vans owned by churches, sports teams, and other nonprofit groups to add two additional wheels.

Wigington said evidence including Ford's own research showed that the vans would be less likely to roll over if they had six wheels instead of the standard four. He told the jury that Ford had created a "van rollover epidemic."

Calls to two Ford spokesmen for comment Saturday were not immediately returned.

Bethany Bosarge, 16, of Peachtree, Ga.; Malori Smith, 17, of Highlands Ranch, Colo.; and Jonnathan Lomeli, 23, of Laredo, died in the June 2002 crash. The members of Victorious Christian Harvesters Church were returning from a mission to Mexico City when they wrecked on a highway near Monterrey, Mexico.

During opening statements Thursday, Ford defense lawyers blamed the accident on a tire losing its tread, which they said caused the wheel to dig into roadside dirt and send the van tumbling into a 7-foot ravine.

Michelin North America, which also was named in the suit, settled with the plaintiffs on Feb. 21. The settlement amount was not disclosed.

Wigington told the jury he would prove that the van rolled over because of several design defects, not the tire. He said Ford erred by putting too many seats in the cargo van without changing the design and failing to put it through sufficient testing.

During the trial, jurors heard the mother of Bethany Bosarge describe flying to Mexico to find their daughter brain-dead and on a respirator.

Mark Smith, father of Malori Smith, told The Associated Press that he would work to make similar large vans safer.

"It didn't end for us," he said. "It's the first step, a new beginning, a new journey ... Our goal is to make a significant dent in this problem."

A half-million of the long vans are estimated to be on the nation's roads. From 1990 to 2000, 268 15-passenger vans were involved in rollovers, resulting in 424 deaths and hundreds of serious injuries.

The last case involving the E-350 Econoline van to go to trial was in

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1999, when a Kentucky jury awarded \$20 million to plaintiffs who sued over a 1995 wreck that killed three.

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