

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 19, 2008

Pennsylvania Man Charged with Conspiring with Airport Baggage
Handlers to Steal Mail, Create Counterfeit Treasury Checks

(More)

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NEWARK – A Pennsylvania man formerly of New Jersey was arraigned today in connection with a conspiracy to steal United States treasury checks sent via the U.S. Postal Service and intercepted by baggage handlers at Newark Liberty International Airport, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

Merlinhg Alcantara, 32, of Bethlehem, Pa., appeared before U.S. District Judge Jose L. Linares this morning on a previously sealed Indictment. During the course of most of the alleged conduct, Alcantara lived in Kearny, N.J. and was a legal permanent resident of the U.S. from the Dominican Republic. Alcantara was previously charged by criminal Complaint and appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge Esther Salas on Nov. 15, 2007. At the November initial appearance, bail was set at \$250,000, and he has been free pending disposition of federal charges.

Alcantara is charged in the Indictment with one count of conspiracy to steal mail and pass or sell counterfeit United States obligations, which carries a maximum statutory penalty of five years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine, and 12 counts of passing or selling, or attempting to pass or sell, counterfeit United States obligations, which each carry a maximum statutory penalty of twenty years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine.

According to the Indictment, Alcantara worked with a number of other individuals to acquire mail containing U.S. Treasury checks by paying baggage handlers working at Newark Liberty International Airport to steal the mail as it was being transported in the luggage compartment of commercial airlines. To avoid detection, on days in which airport security was conducting inspections, the baggage handlers communicated with each other to advise of the inspections. Baggage handlers hid stolen mail in their clothing and backpacks as they were unloading luggage. They would subsequently remove it from the airport undetected.

“Baggage handlers and security personnel at the nation’s airports are an integral part of our national security apparatus,” said Christie. “That makes this sort of conduct particularly egregious and deserving of our commitment to investigate and prosecute those involved to the fullest.”

The Indictment further alleges that Alcantara would receive the stolen mail from the baggage handlers. After the Treasury checks were acquired, counterfeit treasury checks were created, copying five specific characteristics of authentic Treasury checks. Other members of the conspiracy were then given the counterfeit Treasury checks to be negotiated at banks.

According to the Indictment, more than \$1 million in counterfeit Treasury checks were negotiated. Assistant U.S. Attorney Erez Liebermann today told Judge Linares that the

amount of negotiated Treasury checks was actually approximately \$2 million, not counting hundreds of other stolen Treasury and personal checks.

As part of the ongoing investigation, Alex Torres and Kenneth Robinson, both of Elizabeth and both baggage handlers working at Newark Airport, have pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges in the federal court in Newark. Elaine Acevedo, of the Dominican Republic, who served the role of cashing counterfeit United States Treasury checks, has pleaded guilty in federal court in Orlando, Fla. Juan Castillo has been charged by complaint and remains at large.

Christie credited Special Agents of the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, under the direction of Martin Kenney; Special Agents of the U.S. Secret Service, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Cynthia Wofford, in Morristown; and Inspectors with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, under the direction of Inspector in Charge David L. Collins, with the investigation that led to the Indictment unsealed today.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Erez Liebermann of the U.S. Attorney's Office Commercial Crime unit in Newark.

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Defense Counsel: Marc Calello, Esq., Nutley