

NEWS

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Linden Man Facing Murder Charges in Hudson County
Sentenced to 176 Months in Federal Prison for Ecstasy Distribution

(More)

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CAMDEN – A Linden man who is also facing murder charges in Hudson County was sentenced today to 176 months in federal prison for his role in an ecstasy distribution conspiracy, Acting U.S. Attorney Ralph J. Marra, Jr., announced.

In imposing sentence, U.S. District Judge Robert B. Kugler found Zia Berisha, 35, to be a career offender, and cited Berisha's prior state convictions for aggravated assault and drug distribution.

Berisha has been detained since his arrest on Nov. 7, 2007. On Jan. 9, 2009, Berisha pleaded guilty before Judge Kugler to a one-count Information that charged him with conspiracy to distribute 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as ecstasy.

At the plea hearing, Berisha admitted that on May 8, 2006, he bought 4,000 ecstasy pills from individuals in Brooklyn, N.Y. for \$14,000. He also admitted that on June 20, 2006, he sold approximately 1,300 ecstasy pills to an individual in Linden for approximately \$5,000. That individual was actually a cooperating witness working with the FBI.

FBI agents had been investigating Berisha's drug-dealing activity for several months when he was arrested in Elizabeth on Nov. 7, 2007. Berisha was pulled over by Elizabeth police officers for a traffic violation, and officers found drugs, cash and several expensive watches in Berisha's car. Berisha also had outstanding arrest warrants for probation violations at that time.

Later that same day, Michael Marro, 39, was found beaten and shot to death in his Jersey City apartment. The Hudson County Prosecutor's Office soon charged Berisha with Marro's murder after it was determined that one of the watches found in Berisha's car belonged to Marro, and that Berisha and Marro had exchanged text messages the night of the murder. Another individual, Agim Gjonbalahj, 34, of Brooklyn, was arrested on Oct. 29, 2008, and has also been charged in Marro's murder. The murder trial in state Superior Court is expected to take place in late 2009 or early 2010.

In determining the actual sentence, Judge Kugler consulted the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence. Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Marra credited Special Agents of the FBI, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Weysan Dun, for the investigation of Berisha. The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jonathan W. Romankow.

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Defense Counsel for Berisha: Anthony Iacullo, Esq., Nutley