

Department of Justice

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Western District of New York

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JANUARY 04, 2012
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CANADIAN MAN CONVICTED IN CASE INVOLVING LARGEST SEIZURE OF COCAINE IN DISTRICT HISTORY

BUFFALO, N.Y.--U.S. Attorney William J. Hochul, Jr. announced today that Michael Bagri, 51, a citizen of Canada, pleaded guilty in a case involving the discovery and seizures of over one- quarter of a ton of cocaine. The seizures, which occurred over several months, are believed to be the larges in the District's history. The precise charge of conviction consists of conspiracy to export five kilograms or more of cocaine from the United States into Canada, carries a mandatory minimum penalty of 10 years in prison, a maximum of life, and a possible fine of \$10,000,000.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Timothy C. Lynch, who is handling the case, stated that on September 8, 2010, Bagri's co-defendant, Ravinder Arora, convicted of the same charge in September 2011, attempted to cross the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge from the United States into Canada. An outbound inspection of Arora's tractor-trailer revealed a hidden compartment underneath the floor. Inside, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Officers and Special Agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, found approximately 97 kilograms (over 200 pounds) of cocaine.

The investigation revealed that Bagri packed the 97 kilograms of cocaine into the hidden compartment at a warehouse located in California, with the trailer and the cocaine ultimately transported across the United States to Canada, via the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge. In early May 2011, the defendant traveled from Buffalo, New York to California, where he loaded another tractor-trailer with approximately 26 kilograms (over fifty pounds) of cocaine. This cocaine was then transported across the United States before being seized by federal agents outside of Geneva, New York.

At today's plea hearing, the defendant admitted to packing cocaine in tractor-trailers

on nine additional occasions. The total amount of cocaine involved in these smuggling trips exceeded 1,600 kilograms (over three and one-half tons).

“This investigation and successful prosecution has put a stop to the flow of an enormous amount of illegal narcotics between two countries,” said U.S. Attorney Hochul. “The wholesale value of the illegal drugs recovered is nearly \$4,000,000, with the street level value potentially triple that amount.”

“Furthermore, today’s conviction is the result of a collaborative effort between multiple law enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada,” said U.S. Attorney Hochul. “With the proven success of this case, I have no doubt that additional, successful joint law enforcement operations involving our two countries will be forthcoming in the future.”

"Today's guilty plea demonstrates that close collaboration of law enforcement partners – both in the United States and Canada – can have a significant impact on stemming the flow of illegal narcotics," said James C. Spero, special agent in charge ICE HSI in Buffalo. "Criminal drug smuggling operations threaten the security of the nation and endanger our communities. Homeland Security Investigations will continue to identify, disrupt and dismantle these criminal organizations who engage in cross-border crime."

The United States Attorney’s Office is pursuing extradition from Canada of a third alleged conspirator. This defendant is in custody in Canada, and is presumed innocent until such time as convicted in a court of law.

The plea is the result of an investigation by Special Agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge James C. Spero, Officers from the United States Customs and Border Protection, under the direction of James T. Engleman, Director of Field Operations, the Peel Regional Police Department, under the direction of Chief H.M. Metcalf, the Canada Border Services Agency, under the direction of Rick Comerford, Regional Director General, Southern Ontario Region and the Toronto Police, under the direction of Chief William Blair.

Sentencing is scheduled for April 24, 2012, at 9:00 a.m. before Chief Judge William M. Skretny.