



Department of Justice

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias
Northern District of Georgia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

05/06/08

<http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan/>

CONTACT: Patrick Crosby

(404)581-6016

FAX (404)581-6160

“OPERATION RAINMAKER” RESULTS IN NEARLY THREE DOZEN CONVICTIONS OF MONEY LAUNDERERS & DRUG TRAFFICKERS

Large Scale “Black Market Peso Exchange” Dismantled

Atlanta, GA--HERIBERTO TORRES-ROMERO, 57, of Bogota, Colombia, was sentenced today by United States District Judge Charles A. Pannell, Jr., for his role in a conspiracy to launder the proceeds of drug trafficking. His sentencing caps a four-year investigation, code-named “Operation Rainmaker,” into the use of the “black market peso exchange” (“BMPE”) to launder large amounts of proceeds from the sale of illegal drugs sent to the United States by Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of Operation Rainmaker, “To attack the distribution of illegal drugs, we go after not only the drugs, but also the dirty money that the sale of this poison generates. That is not easy, particularly with the black market peso exchange and its underground tentacles that help move huge amounts of drug money to the kingpins of the major international trafficking organizations. Operation Rainmaker faced and conquered this very difficult task, and the large numbers of arrests and convictions demonstrate its success.”

Kenneth A. Smith, Special Agent in Charge of ICE's Office of Investigations in Atlanta said, “Operation Rainmaker was successful because it infiltrated the organization at all stages - from the low level members delivering large suitcases of bulk currency in the streets of the United States, to the high level Colombian nationals laundering the drug proceeds in the comfort of their overseas offices. The sentencing of Heriberto Torres-Romero is the culmination of cooperation between multiple law enforcement agencies both domestically and internationally working together to disrupt and dismantle an entire criminal enterprise.”

The BMPE is a means by which U.S. dollars and other currencies are exchanged for Colombian pesos without incurring Colombian taxes imposed on such transactions and without leaving a paper trail. Dollars are generally not accepted as currency in Colombia; therefore, narcotics traffickers who generate large amounts of U.S. currency through drug sales in the U.S. must convert those dollars to pesos to be able to spend their ill-gotten gains

in Colombia.

TORRES-ROMERO, who was extradited to the United States from Colombia, was sentenced to 11 years, 8 months in prison. Following service of his sentence, TORRES-ROMERO will be deported to Colombia.

In addition to TORRES-ROMERO, 23 defendants entered guilty pleas to the Atlanta charges, and one more defendant is scheduled to plead guilty to the Atlanta charges later this month in the Southern District of New York. Five defendants remain fugitives. Other defendants who pleaded guilty and were sentenced in Operation Rainmaker include:

- CARLOS FABIO CORREA MEJIA, 45, of Armenia, Quindio, Colombia
- CESAR GOMEZ, 30, of Armenia, Quindio, Colombia
- ROLFI ESPITIA TOCUA, 33, of Bogota, Colombia
- CARLOS ALEXANDER TOCUA, 33, of Bogota, Colombia
- MARIA ISABEL BARBOSA PENALOZA, 33, of Bogota, Colombia
- JUAN CARLOS GARCIA PEREZ, 44, of Bogota, Colombia
- JAIRO MIER-CARDENAS, 38, of Bogota, Colombia
- HELBER RUEDA, 32, of New York, New York
- JORGE NAVARRO ZULUAGA, 35, of New York, New York
- FERNEY RAMIREZ AKA REYNALDO ROJAS-GOMEZ, 42, of New York, New York
- ALFREDO MORENO-RIVERA, 46, of New York, New York
- RAFAEL TEJEDA, 46, of New York, New York
- HERIBERTO LANZOT, 42, of New York, New York
- OSWALDO MAYA, 37, of Miami, Florida
- WILSON A. CANDELARIO-DURAN, 47, of Bayamon, Puerto Rico
- RAMON FLORES, 61, of Brockton, Massachusetts
- FREDDY RIVERA, 41, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- JOSE R. CURRAS MORALES, 57, of Arecibo, Puerto Rico
- MOISES ALBERTO TEJEDA, 43, of New York, New York
- ANDRES RODRIGUEZ, 33, of New York, New York
- GRACILIANA MONROY, 49, of New York, New York
- MANUEL BAEZ, 52, of New York, New York
- JOSE MEJIA-DISLA, 39, of New York, New York

Many of these defendants face deportation following completion of their sentences. EDGAR BAEZ, 36, of New York, New York, is scheduled to plead guilty to the Atlanta charge of participating in a money laundering conspiracy on May 15, 2008, in federal court in New York.

The defendants who pleaded guilty were convicted of money laundering charges. JUAN CARLOS GARCIA PEREZ and MARIA ISABEL BARBOSA-PENALOSA were also each convicted of a drug offense. The sentences ranged from 27 months to over 24 years

in prison.

According to Nahmias and information presented in court: In the Operation Rainmaker investigation, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, posing as money launderers, laundered drug proceeds to learn about participants in the conspiracy. ICE conducted 33 pickups of drug proceeds in metro Atlanta, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, Puerto Rico and the first ever money pickup in the Republic of Mexico. Investigative efforts by ICE and the Internal Revenue Service, related to the pickups, resulted in the seizure of approximately \$9,000,000, 2 kilograms of heroin, 26 kilograms of cocaine and numerous state and local arrests while the investigation was ongoing. A federal grand jury sitting in Atlanta returned six indictments in the investigation, charging 32 individuals with money laundering and controlled substances violations. In addition to TORRES-ROMERO, seven individuals were extradited from Colombia, South America, to face these charges, and each was convicted.

The metro Atlanta money pickups occurred in 2005. On February 16, 2005, undercover ICE agents met two individuals, OSCAR REYES and ENGELBERTO REYES-SOTO, at a store parking lot in Gwinnett County, Georgia, where REYES and REYES-SOTO took the undercover agents' car to a nearby residence and placed \$948,526 in drug proceeds in the car to be laundered, and returned the car to the agents. On April 6, 2005, in the same parking lot, OSCAR REYES and RAFAEL PERALES met with undercover agents, took their car to a nearby residence, and placed \$999,970 in drug proceeds in the car to be laundered before returning the car to the undercover agents.

The drug money from the two Atlanta pickups was laundered through the black market peso exchange, which resulted in the indictment of HERIBERTO TORRES-ROMERO, CARLOS FABIO CORREA-MEJIA, CESAR GOMEZ, OSCAR REYES, ENGELBERTO REYES-SOTO and RAFAEL PERALES. On April 28, 2006, following up on information developed from these Atlanta pickups, agents seized approximately \$803,000 and ledgers detailing the receipt, distribution and collection of payments for multi-tons of cocaine.

JEU HERRERA-CONTRERAS and JAIME AYON-FRANCO were arrested in connection with the April 28, 2006 seizures, and charged with money laundering and drug offenses. They went to trial in April 2007. HERRERA-CONTRERAS was convicted by the jury of drug and money laundering charges and was sentenced to 24 years, 4 months in prison. JAIME AYON FRANCO was found not guilty by the jury on the drug and money laundering offenses, but entered a guilty plea to an immigration charge and was deported to Mexico.

This case was investigated by Special Agents and Task Force Agents of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Special Agents of the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation, with assistance from the Colombian National Police Financial

Investigations Unit, the Panamanian National Police and the Office of the Procuraduria General de la Republica of Mexico.

Assistant United States Attorneys Sandra Strippoli and Evan Weitz prosecuted these cases.

For further information please contact David E. Nahmias (pronounced NAH-me-us), United States Attorney, or Charysse L. Alexander, Executive Assistant United States Attorney, through Patrick Crosby, Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Attorney's Office, at (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the HomePage for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia is www.usdoj.gov/usao/gan.