

DRUG RING RAN AIRLINE, U.S. SAYS 12 CHARGED IN DEALING OF 7 1/2 TONS OF COCAINE: [3 STAR Edition]

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Abstract

The ring used a Pennsylvania charter air service, Air America Inc., to fly the cocaine from four Colombian airfields into Florida, Pennsylvania and New York for sale in the New York City area, said acting U.S. Attorney James West. On Thursday, federal agents unearthed \$4.2 million in \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills hidden in sections of plastic pipe buried on the Pocono Mountains property of lawyer John Robertson, one of the 12 defendants and an Air America general manager, said West.

Full Text

Twelve people were charged Friday with running a large drug ring to smuggle 7 1/2 tons of cocaine into the United States since 1980, netting at least \$25 million in profits.

Attorney General Edwin Meese said a two-year investigation resulted in the breakup of a ring responsible for the "largest documented amount of cocaine smuggled into this country by a single trafficking organization."

The ring used a Pennsylvania charter air service, Air America Inc., to fly the cocaine from four Colombian airfields into Florida, Pennsylvania and New York for sale in the New York City area, said acting U.S. Attorney James West. On Thursday, federal agents unearthed \$4.2 million in \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills hidden in sections of plastic pipe buried on the Pocono Mountains property of lawyer John Robertson, one of the 12 defendants and an Air America general manager, said West.

"This represents one pilot's profit," West said.

West declined to say if authorities are searching for any other money. However, he said \$15 million in planes and other assets controlled by those allegedly involved in the scheme have been seized.

No cocaine was seized because authorities were investigating a conspiracy, West said. An attempt by drug-enforcement agents to arrange a 3,000-kilo shipment was not successful.

The smuggling flights allegedly originated at Air America headquarters at the Scranton-Wilkes-Barre Airport, where duffel bags of money were loaded onto planes.

The first six flights listed in the indictment flew to Colombia and returned to Lake Wales, Fla., where the cocaine was unloaded, West said.

Sixteen more flights returned directly to Pennsylvania for unloading at the Bloomsburg Airport, the Northumberland County Airport or an air strip in Deer Lake, West said. Some flights continued to Elmira and Binghamton, N.Y., West said.

The smugglers installed radio equipment in Colombia and created communications centers in Pennsylvania to monitor flights, the grand jury said. The planes were outfitted to fly the 3,000-mile trip to Colombia without refueling, West said.

Pilots were paid \$3,000 to \$4,000 per kilo per flight, with one load netting \$1.8 million in such commissions, West said.

Among those indicted Friday were suspected Colombian organizers Arturo "Pablo" Correa-Arroyave and his brother, Rigoberto "Bobby" Correa-Arroyave.

Arturo Correa-Arroyave was kidnapped about the time the sealed indictment was issued in Harrisburg July 29, West said. Although a \$50 million ransom was paid, he was found dead in Colombia with his ears and tongue severed and his eyes gouged out, West said. Authorities believe a rival drug faction killed Correa-Arroyave in a murder unrelated to the investigation, West said.

Robertson, of Palos Verdes, Calif., and another defendant, Thomas Keen Edenfield Jr., of Albuquerque, N.M., allegedly helped provide planes and worked as pilots.

The other defendants are Anthony Deck, of Albuquerque; Christopher Peter Sharsky, of Uvalde, Texas; and six Colombians who are listed by their nicknames of Danny, Peter, Beatrice, Claro, Eddie and Hernando.

All the defendants were charged with conspiracy to import and possess with intent to distribute cocaine. The charge carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$125,000 fine.

Another man who provided airplanes and pilots, Frederick John Luytjes, the Air America owner, was named as an unindicted co-conspirator. He has signed an agreement to plead guilty to drug trafficking charges.

Under U.S. Justice Department policy, Luytjes, 38, could obtain such a deal with the government only by agreeing to tell all he knows about the operation. Two other unindicted co-conspirators, Cornelius Ashley Bird Jr. and James Cooper, also acted as pilots, the government said.

The largest amount of cocaine previously cited in a federal drug case was five tons in a 1984 indictment in Atlanta.

West said he believed increased drug enforcement in Florida forced the smuggling ring to frequently fly to Pennsylvania and New York.

Officials said it would be hard to gauge the impact of the ring's breakup on the availability of cocaine in the United States.

"When you are talking \$4.2 million, certainly you are talking a little bit as it relates to the \$100 billion-plus drug business in the U.S.," said John Wilder, the agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Agency office in Philadelphia.

Illustration

PHOTO: Authorities stand with some of the \$4.2 million and pipes in which cash was found. Associated Press

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Details

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