



Department of Justice

United States Attorney Robert E. O'Neill
Middle District of Florida

Tampa

Orlando

Jacksonville

Fort Myers

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ELEVEN MEMBERS OF FIREARM TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATION INDICTED

Tampa, Florida- United States Attorney Robert E. O'Neill and ATF Special Agent in Charge Virginia O'Brien, announced today the unsealing of an indictment against eleven members of a criminal organization involved in the illegal acquisition of firearms in Florida for the purpose of illegally shipping them to drug organizations in Puerto Rico. The investigation known as "Operation Tropical Firepower" is the culmination of over 2 years of Federal, State and Local efforts designed to destroy the criminal organization's activities. The 36 count Superseding Indictment charges the defendants with conspiring to: make false statements in connection with the acquisition of firearms from licensed dealers in Florida; to sell and transfer the firearms to convicted felons; to possess firearms which have had the serial number removed, obliterated, and altered; to transfer firearms knowing that the same will be used to commit crimes of violence and drug trafficking; and, to illegally transport and ship firearms in interstate commerce. The Superseding Indictment also charges that the organization operated from in or about 2004 through 2007.

Some defendants face maximum penalties in excess of 25 years if convicted on all counts. They also face \$250,000 in fines for each count of conviction. The defendants, are:

MELVIN OMAR VELEZ-SANTOS
a/k/a Omar

Age: 29

ELLIOTT TORRES-CASANOVA

Age: 27

ELIUD BENITEZ -AYALA	Age: 38
MYRNA MELENDEZ	Age: 55
DWIGHT GABRIEL ZAVALA	Age: 29
HILTON ADORNO-ROSARIO	Age: 28
CHRISTOPHER ANTHONY BIRRIEL-TORRES a/k/a Walter Torres	Age: 21
JONATHAN ROBLES-CRUZ	Age: 23
PABLO JOSE CAVALLO a/k/a Gustavo Andres Soriano-Melendez	Age: 27
MARILYN QUINONES-BURGOS	Age: 29
ANGEL COLON	Age: 45

According to the Superseding Indictment, the individuals associated with the organization would travel from Puerto Rico to Orlando, Tampa, Miami and Fort Myers for the purpose of illegally obtaining firearms from over 15 Federal Firearms Licensee's and at Gun Shows. They would then traffic the firearms back to known drug organizations in Puerto Rico. In return, the co-conspirators would receive money and illegal drugs as payment for the firearms.

The Superseding Indictment alleges that the co-conspirators used fraudulently obtained Florida identifications and made false statements to federal firearms dealers in relation to the acquisition of the firearms.

The indictments filed thus far in relation to the case reflect that the group purchased well over 200 firearms in furtherance of the conspiracy. As the investigation progresses it is expected that many more illegal firearm transactions will be detected. The weapons

of choice were AK-47 type assault rifles, semi-automatic handguns and AR-15 type firearms. Many of the firearms have been recovered from criminal investigations in Puerto Rico, while other firearms were recovered in Orlando, Tampa and Winter Haven prior to their shipment to Puerto Rico.

A total of 15 individuals have been indicted thus far as a result of "Operation Tropical Firepower ." On September 13, 2007, the following defendants were previously charged in a 29 count indictment in Tampa as a result of this investigation: Joel Quintana-Ortiz, David Colon-Rohena, Magda Colon-Rohena, and William Lopez-Pereira. Joel Quintana-Ortiz was also indicted in a separate 9 count indictment in relation to his drug trafficking activities in the Middle District of Florida.

The case was investigated by the ATF Orlando, Tampa, Miami, and Puerto Rico Offices as well as the US Postal Service and the Puerto Rico Police Department. The case will be prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Eduardo E. Toro-Font.

United States Attorney Robert E. O'Neill stated: "I commend the thorough investigation conducted by the agents in this case. Let this case serve as a warning to persons involved in the illegal trafficking of firearms in the Middle District of Florida, that we will strike hard against them and they will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law ."

ATF Special Agent in Charge Virginia O'Brien stated; "Today's arrests of multiple firearms traffickers in Florida and Puerto Rico is the culmination of two and a half years of dedication and hard work by the men and women of ATF, the U.S. Postal Service and the Puerto Rico Police Department. Preventing firearms trafficking is a top priority for ATF and we will continue to work closely with our law enforcement partners to prosecute anyone who provides firearms to violent criminals."

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent until, and unless, proven guilty.