



Department of Justice

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias
Northern District of Georgia

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CONTACT: Patrick Crosby

(404)581-6016

FAX (404)581-6160

ROME BUSINESSMAN PLEADS GUILTY TO DRUG TRAFFICKING & MONEY LAUNDERING CHARGES IN MIDDLE OF HIS JURY TRIAL

Rome, GA - MARIO ARMAS, a/k/a "Mario Doninelli," 46, of Rome, Georgia, pleaded guilty today in federal court to a charge of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute marijuana and two counts of money laundering. ARMAS' jury trial had been underway for one week.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of today's plea, "The evidence presented at the trial over the past week convinced Armas that it was time to own up to his criminal conduct by pleading guilty. His guilty plea, along with prior guilty pleas by two co-defendants, resulted from a multi-agency investigation into a major marijuana trafficking and money laundering operation in Northwest Georgia, in which Armas acted as the principal financier and laundered over \$1 million in proceeds from drug sales. Notwithstanding his prior assertions of innocence, it is now undisputed that this once-prominent local citizen was in fact for many years a drug-dealing crook."

According to United States Attorney Nahmias and the information presented in court: ARMAS, a local businessman who owns multiple companies and properties in the Rome area, conspired with others between January 2003 and November 2004 to distribute at least 1,000 kilograms of marijuana in the Rome area and to launder the illegal proceeds. During the drug and money laundering conspiracy, ARMAS also engaged in other crimes, including kidnaping, burglary and armed robbery. ARMAS was the principal financier for this operation, while co-defendants KEVIN REDSTROM and LONNIE MERREN, who have already entered guilty pleas, were money couriers for ARMAS. ARMAS' plea follows a week of trial that included testimony by government witnesses and the playing of recorded telephone calls and meetings between ARMAS and co-conspirators who were then cooperating with the government. In court, one government witness characterized ARMAS as the "Godfather of Rome."

ARMAS, along with co-defendants LONNIE MERREN, 53, of Alabama, and KEVIN REDSTROM, 41, of Texas, were indicted by a federal grand jury on October 5, 2006. That same day, federal search warrants were executed at ARMAS' business office and residence in relation to the drug trafficking and money laundering scheme. The investigation was

initiated based upon information provided through the Floyd County District Attorney's Office from a co-conspirator who was arrested on related burglary charges.

The investigation is ongoing and ARMAS' plea agreement requires him to cooperate fully and truthfully with the government.

Sentencing for ARMAS has been set for December 20, 2007 at 10:00 AM before United States District Court Judge Robert L. Vining Jr. Under the terms of ARMAS' plea agreement, he has agreed to a sentence of 15 years in federal prison. There is no parole in the federal system. He will also forfeit \$1,144,000 to the United States.

REDSTROM is currently scheduled to be sentenced on December 6, 2007, and MERREN is scheduled for sentencing on November 15, 2007. Each faces a sentence of up to 10 years in prison.

This case is being investigated by Special Agents of the FBI, the DEA, and IRS-Criminal Investigation, with valuable assistance from the Rome-Floyd Metro Drug Task Force.

Assistant United States Attorneys Lisa W. Tarvin, Kurt R. Erskine and Evan Weitz are prosecuting the case.

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.