



Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

12/20/07

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ROME BUSINESSMAN, CO-CONSPIRATOR SENTENCED FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING & MONEY LAUNDERING

Rome, GA - MARIO ARMAS, a/k/a "Mario Doninelli," 45, of Rome, Georgia, was sentenced today on charges of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute marijuana and money laundering relating to a violent drug operation in Northwest Georgia.

United States Attorney David E. Nahmias said of today's sentencings, "The evidence in this case exposed Armas as a greedy businessman willing to brazenly break the law to make more money. Armas infused more than \$1 million into an enterprise responsible for transporting large amounts of marijuana into North Georgia for distribution. But he was caught, and now he will play a significant price for his crimes."

Rodney G. Benson, Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Field Division, said, "Armas and his co-defendants were guided by greed, deceiving the community of Rome by posing as businessmen while in reality they were drug dealers and money launderers. As a result of his crimes, Armas will spend significant time in federal prison. This outcome would not have been possible had it not been for the coordinated efforts of law enforcement in Northwest Georgia."

Rodney Clarke, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the IRS-Criminal Division said, "IRS Criminal Investigation worked closely with our law enforcement partners in this case to uncover Armas' role in the drug and money laundering conspiracy, which included the use of his business. We applaud today's sentencings for the crimes committed by Armas and his co-conspirators. We continue our commitment with our law enforcement partners to financially disrupt criminal organizations that commit offenses against our society."

ARMAS was sentenced to 15 years in prison pursuant to a binding plea agreement. ARMAS was also ordered to serve 5 years of supervised release. ARMAS was ordered to forfeit \$1,144,000, which will be satisfied through the sale of properties named in the indictment and seized by the United States. ARMAS pleaded guilty to the charges on October 9, 2007, one week into his federal jury trial.

Co-conspirator LONNIE MERREN, 53, of Aliceville, Alabama, was sentenced to 4 years, 7 months in federal prison, to be followed by 5 years of supervised release. MERREN pleaded guilty to drug and money laundering charges on September 18, 2007.

Sentencing for another co-conspirator, KEVIN REDSTROM, 42, of Hamilton, Texas, was continued to January 2008. The exact date will be set by the court.

According to Nahmias and the information presented at court: ARMAS, a Rome businessman, conspired with MERREN and REDSTROM between January 2003 and November 2004 to distribute at least 1,000 kilograms of marijuana in North Georgia. ARMAS' drug dealing was linked to other crimes including kidnaping and burglary. The defendants were also charged with money laundering in relation to the drug conspiracy.

At trial, the evidence showed that ARMAS' criminal empire began to crumble in September 2004, when a convicted marijuana smuggler and co-conspirator was arrested on a state warrant taken out by ARMAS for Theft by Conversion of \$1,114,000 in cash. The warrant alleged that ARMAS had loaned the co-conspirator \$1,114,000 in cash and the debt was never repaid. In reality, ARMAS invested \$1,114,000 in a marijuana transaction which went bad. Rather than purchasing marijuana with it, the co-conspirator had to use the cash to pay ransom for co-conspirators who had been kidnaped during the transaction. Thereafter, ARMAS became obsessed with recouping the lost money; this obsession caused ARMAS to threaten, harass and intimidate the co-conspirator and anyone who had connections to him, such as MERREN and REDSTROM.

The government's case at trial was proven through ARMAS' own words recorded by law enforcement sources during hours of undercover meetings. The testimony of cooperating co-conspirators was used to corroborate ARMAS' admissions.

MERREN, who was the next scheduled witness at the time of ARMAS' guilty plea, was a conduit between ARMAS and the other co-conspirators. MERREN assisted the government in its case against ARMAS, and as a result, he received a sentence less severe than he otherwise would have faced. Like MERREN, REDSTROM was a conduit between ARMAS and other co-conspirators in the scheme.

The defendants were indicted by a federal grand jury on October 5, 2006, on charges of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute marijuana, and money laundering. That same day, search warrants were executed at multiple business and residence locations related to ARMAS and the drug scheme.

This case was investigated by Special Agents of the FBI, the DEA, and IRS-Criminal Investigation, with valuable assistance from the Floyd County District Attorney's Office and Rome and Floyd County law enforcement agencies.

Assistant United States Attorneys Lisa W. Tarvin, Kurt R. Erskine and Evan Weitz prosecuted 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.