

DRUG RING LINKED TO TERROR - METRO DETROIT MONEY WENT TO MIDEAST, U.S. SAYS

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Author: FREE PRESS STAFF AND NEWS REPORTS. Staff writer RODNEY THRASH contributed to this report.

Four metro Detroit men indicted on **drug** trafficking charges in January were part of a nationwide smuggling **ring** that was funneling money **to** Middle Eastern terrorist groups, including Hizballah, federal authorities say.

The U.S. **Drug** Enforcement Administration said the four men and others with ties **to** Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon and other Mideast countries smuggled pseudoephedrine, a chemical used **to** make the illegal **drug** methamphetamine, from Canada **to** locations in the Midwest -- primarily Detroit and Chicago.

The chemical was sold **to** Mexican-run methamphetamine operations in the western United States, the DEA said. Some of the proceeds of the **drug** sales then were diverted **to** Middle East accounts that authorities said they have **linked to** terrorist groups. Representatives from the U.S. attorney's office in Detroit could not be reached for comment Sunday. FBI Special Agent Chuck Whistler said Sunday evening the Detroit office was unaware of the latest developments.

There is no evidence that any of the money was connected **to** the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, officials said. But some of the accounts are **linked to** the Iranian-backed group Hizballah, which has claimed responsibility for attacks in Israel and elsewhere.

"There is increasing intelligence information from the investigation that, for the first time, alleged **drug** sales in the United States are going in part **to** support terrorist organizations in the Middle East," DEA Administrator Asa Hutchinson said Friday.

DEA officials said U.S. authorities don't yet know how much **drug** money was funneled **to** the terrorist groups, but said the pseudoephedrine sales amounted **to** millions of dollars. Pseudoephedrine, which is used in some popular cold and allergy medications, is an essential ingredient in methamphetamine, a powerful and popular **drug** also known as ice or crystal meth.

For months, Hutchinson has been warning that illegal **drug** money provides a compelling opportunity for **terror** groups **to** siphon financial support from the United States. But the DEA investigation has uncovered the first evidence of a direct flow of money.

"A significant portion of some of the sales are sent **to** the Middle East **to** benefit terrorist organizations," Hutchinson said.

The **drug ring** was broken up Jan. 10 as part of a massive DEA investigation called Operation Mountain Express, which has smashed several major methamphetamine operations in the past two years. Arrests were made in Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Phoenix and several California cities.

In Detroit, a six-count federal indictment charged four men with conspiracy **to** possess and conspiracy **to** import a chemical for use **to** manufacture illegal **drugs**. They are: Mohamad Mahmoud Jafar, 45, and Haidar Auon, 38, both of Dearborn Heights, and Assaad Hamdan, 38, and Mohamad Kassir, 33, both of Dearborn. Jafar, Auon and Kassir were arrested the night of the DEA raid; Hamdan was still at large. As of Sunday evening, Hamdan was still a fugitive, said David Jacobson, a special agent with the DEA. Jafar is in custody, under supervision of the Detroit division of the U.S. Marshal's Service. Auon and Kassir are free on bond pending trial. A trial date has not been set for either man.

On the same night as the DEA raid, U.S. Customs agents arrested three other men in a hotel in Taylor. Kamal Mohamed Nagi, Saleh Mohsen Elmathil and Norbert Kurzawa, whose hometowns weren't released at the time, were charged with trafficking in pseudoephedrine. The outcome of those cases also could not be determined Sunday night.

DEA officials said the raids and subsequent investigation have resulted in criminal charges against 136 people and the seizure of nearly 36 tons of pseudoephedrine, 179 pounds of methamphetamine, \$4.5 million in cash, eight real estate properties and 160 cars used by the **drug** gangs.

It wasn't until after the **drug** arrests, the DEA said, that evidence of the **terror** ties emerged. Authorities said it is possible some defendants charged with **drug** violations could face additional charges.

The Bush administration has been stepping up efforts **to** stem the flow of U.S. money and goods **to** foreign **terror** groups under a law that prohibits providing material support and resources **to** known terrorist organizations. Last Wednesday, six men who lived in the United States were indicted on charges they conspired **to** provide such support **to** Al Qaeda or related terrorist causes.

Three of the men charged are from the Detroit area. They are: Farouk Ali-Haimoud, 22; Ahmed Hannan, 34, and Karim Koubriti, 24. All were arrested six days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks when federal agents raided their flat in southwest Detroit. In June 2001, Ali-Haimoud, Hannan and Koubriti met with an unidentified man in their Dearborn apartment on Riverside **to** try **to** recruit the man **to** participate in the jihad, or holy war, against the United States, the government alleges. Hannan and Koubriti have been in custody for nearly a year. Ali-Haimoud was released, but was arrested again in March and is now in custody.

Federal agents believe they have uncovered a broad effort by U.S. residents, many of them legal immigrants or visitors, **to** use stolen credit cards, illegal cigarette sales, diverted charitable funds and cash smuggled in airline luggage **to** enrich anti-American and anti-Israeli **terror** groups, officials said.

"The money mechanisms being used **to** aid terrorism are limited only by your imagination," said one senior law enforcement official involved in the effort. "There is a significant amount of money moved out of the United States attributed **to** fraud that goes **to** terrorism."

The official spoke only on condition of anonymity because much of the details remain sealed in a grand jury investigation. The official said the early evidence suggests that groups like Hizballah and Hamas, the Palestinian group that has claimed responsibility for countless attacks in Israel, benefit far more from U.S.-based funds than Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.

Staff writer RODNEY THRASH contributed **to** this report.

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