

MAN IS ACQUITTED ON DRUG CHARGE NEPHEW ALLEGEDLY RAN MAJOR NETWORK

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After rewatching hours of videotaped testimony, an Oakland County Circuit Court jury Thursday acquitted Louis Akrawi of drug conspiracy charges related to a network authorities have called Michigan's largest with direct ties to the Colombian Medellin cartel.

Authorities alleged Akrawi was a kingpin in the organization, which reportedly was once run by his nephew, **Harry Kalasho**. U.S. Drug Enforcement authorities estimated at the time of Akrawi's indictment in July that the organization distributed more than \$260 million in cocaine each year in southeastern Michigan.

On Tuesday, the same jury found Hatim Zakar, 28, of Southfield guilty of cocaine delivery and conspiracy. He faces a mandatory life sentence.

Akrawi, 42, was returned to jail after the verdict was heard when Assistant Prosecutor Larry Bunting told Judge Richard Kuhn that Akrawi's immigration bond of \$5,000 had been increased to \$50,000. Akrawi, an Iraq native, is facing deportation hearings because of two misdemeanor charges stemming from bar fights in 1979, said his attorney, James Howarth.

Howarth said he would ensure that Akrawi is reunited with his wife, Vanessa, and four children if he had to use his own home as security to make the bond.

Akrawi's family cheered and his nephew, Tommy Kalasho, clapped his hands when the verdict was read. But Vanessa Akrawi cried and ran from the courtroom when sheriff's deputies handcuffed Akrawi.

"Don't cry," Akrawi called out. "Don't worry. Go home. Get a bondsman. I'll be home in a half hour."

Howarth called the verdict "the sweetest one of a lifetime."

"This is one of the greatest proofs I've ever seen of the fact that a little man, who's not even a citizen of the United States of America, and on the eve of maybe a terrible war with Iraq, that this one little man can stand up by himself, by himself, not me, and say, 'I didn't do it,' and a jury of good people come in and say, 'You're right. You didn't,' " Howarth said.

"I've never been more happy to be an American than today."

The slaying of reputed gang leader **Harry Kalasho** in February 1989 set off a drug turf war resulting in killings, bombings and other violence, according to drug officials.

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