

DETROIT'S COCAINE PIPELINE TO DEATH RECORDS DOCUMENT RISE, FALL OF DRUG KING

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, November 19, 1989

Author: JOE SWICKARD Free Press Staff Writer

Harry Kalasho lived the American Dream by selling the American nightmare.

Kalasho parlayed brash youthful vigor and good looks, charm and ruthless business savvy into a successful organization -- a money mill staffed by loyal associates reaping bales of cash from the sale of cocaine.

In less than two years, court records show, Kalasho and his tight circle of friends and relatives forged a bond with the Colombian Medellin cocaine cartel and built one of Detroit's largest wholesale cocaine operations, pumping hundreds of kilos of the drug a month into the area and shipping out suitcases crammed with money.

But ambition had its price, and for a while Kalasho made others pay. Two men died when they challenged him for the market.

Kalasho's turn to pay came in February. At age 24, he was fatally wounded in a spray of bullets that ripped through the windows and door of his 1988 Acura.

Those gunshots still echo from Michigan to Florida, through federal drug conspiracy indictments, state murder charges and a series of Detroit bombings that authorities believe are warning signals from the new leaders of Kalasho's organization.

Breaking up that ring remains a top priority of a special task force of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies.

William Coonce, special-agent-in-charge in the Detroit office of the Drug Enforcement Administration said: "The primary mission of the DEA is to target drug cartels that import large quantities of cocaine into this country. The Kalasho organization, which is alleged to be closely associated with one these groups, continues to be the subject of intense law enforcement attention in Detroit."

U.S. Attorney Stephen Markman said the task force was created "because of emerging indications that there are organized groups in the community that are seemingly prone to violence and who are involved in the drug trade. These groups are exhibiting some of the characteristics of organized crime -- with the potential for growth and the infiltration of legitimate businesses.

"There is enough drug activity and violence that the situation merits substantial law enforcement attention. . . . There are growing instances of violence and intimidation."

Blood vengeance

The evolution of the Kalasho organization, as spelled out in affidavits, testimony, confessions, indictments and interviews, is a saga of blood vengeance and the brutal cocaine business.

Kalasho and his group were small-scale dealers in the mid- 1980s, trading in ounces, and eager to move into the major leagues in 1987. It began with a call to Tampa.

In the spring of that year, according to court records, Joseph Frontiera and Anthony Montello, two admitted Tampa cocaine brokers, were contacted by Ead (Eddie) Ballo, a close colleague of Kalasho. He was looking for steady multi-kilo shipments of cocaine.

A meeting was arranged and Kalasho and his chief lieutenants -- Ballo, Najah (Nick) Konja, Issam Hermiz and Basil Mezy -- flew to Tampa in May.

It would be the start of a prolonged, delicate dance among the Detroiters, the brokers in Tampa and the agents of the Medellin cartel. Months of false starts and meetings in the crowded anonymous atmosphere of hotels, shopping malls and restaurants from Michigan to Florida and New York were necessary to open and maintain the pipeline.

In the meantime, law enforcement officials learned that the Kalasho organization had other connections in Tampa when a federal agent stumbled across a drug and money-laundering ring in October 1987.

Tremors begin

At a cocktail party, conversation happened to turn to problems in moving large bundles of cash, and a U.S. Customs agent cocked his ear. One guest said he knew a group of men in Detroit with just such a problem, and the agent offered his assistance.

That unguarded cocktail chatter was the epicenter of tremors that would eventually shake Kalasho's crew to its roots. The leadership -- in a scramble for domination that became a fight for survival and revenge -- would fall in a roar of contract murders, shootings and bombings.

As agents monitored the deals in a case that became known as Operation C Chase, the first shipment of Detroit cash -- \$600,000 in two suitcases -- arrived. In the next four months, money shipments totaled \$8 million.

In November 1987, federal agents watched as Mezy and Basam Jarges met with Jaime Giraldo, a Colombian national. Giraldo, with his brother Norberto, were distributing Medellin cocaine through New York.

Late in January 1988, federal agents spotted Kalasho, arriving at Oakland Mall in Troy for a meeting with Jarges, Mezy and the GiralDOS -- key figures in the C Chase connection.

By February 1988, Harry's first cousin, Ragheed (Ray) Akrawi was attracting federal attention.

Tampa meeting

Agents testified in Detroit that Akrawi enjoyed special status in Kalasho's inner circle. Akrawi, agents said, oversaw "Ray's Boys," a group of about 20 underlings operating along 7 Mile Road between Woodward and John R, supplying cocaine to mid-level dealers who stocked Detroit crack houses.

In February, Akrawi -- who claimed on his tax returns to be a \$2,400-per-year party store clerk -- took delivery on a \$75,000 Mercedes. He had the car painted "money green," according to testimony.

Akrawi, according to court documents, took cocaine shipments in 25- to 50-kilo lots and made \$400,000 cash payments to drug suppliers.

As spring arrived, the Tampa connection showed renewed life as Hector Alvarez -- a Colombian national with an import-export business in suburban Miami -- called Tampa cocaine broker Montello to see if the Detroiters were still interested. Montello passed word to Kalasho lieutenant Konja and a meeting was scheduled for early May, according to court records.

Again, Kalasho, accompanied by Konja, Mezy and Hermiz, flew to Tampa. Registered at the Embassy Suites hotel near the airport, Kalasho hosted initial discussions with Montello in the hotel restaurant.

Two days later, Alvarez joined the Tampa conclave. Over a meal in a restaurant, he said the shipments could start.

With at least two major sources arranged, Kalasho's organization seemed solid, and from his mother's home in a rustic West Bloomfield Township subdivision, Kalasho would venture into his turf near Woodward and 7 Mile Road.

But there were wisps of trouble on the horizon. Federal agents were about to strike at one of his sources, and rivals were stirring.

Guilty pleas

On June 12, 1988, federal agents pounced on a semitrailer truck at I-75 and West Road and grabbed 100 kilos of cocaine hidden in banana boxes. The first phase of Operation C-Chase was over.

The Giraldo brothers, the Medellin agents, were charged with cocaine offenses. Two Kalasho lieutenants, Jarges and Mezy, pleaded guilty to money-laundering charges.

Konja, while not charged in Operation C Chase, later told an undercover agent that the 100 kilos were destined for the Kalasho group.

With one connection shut down, Kalasho and Konja returned to Tampa in August. Despite the

assurances, importer-exporter Alvarez hadn't come through and the pipeline was dry.

With Montello playing host, he, Kalasho and Konja drove to the Kissin' Cuzzins pancake house 21 miles away in Palm Harbor. The restaurant was a cozy setting to talk cocaine.

It took another month, but in September 1988, Alvarez was ready to put the plan into gear. The players from Detroit, Tampa and Miami met at the Holiday Inn on Staten Island, N.Y., and the first 32-kilo shipment was set.

With regular shipments finally arriving in October -- eventually about 500 kilos moved through the Tampa-Miami-New York pipeline -- the Kalasho organization was feeling expansive.

That same month, Akrawi -- the \$2,400-a-year grocery clerk with the taste for Mercedes cars and diamond-studded gold jewelry -- took a two-week vacation in Greece, and his cousin Harry was sizing up the local competition.

The organization was about to get into the murder business. Rivals had to die to accommodate Kalasho's growth.

Hitmen hired

Over dinner in a Greektown restaurant, Kalasho griped that Salaam (Sam) Gaggo was in the way. Gaggo, according to police confessions that detailed the meeting, was blocking Harry's access to another Florida cocaine connection.

The price of Gaggo's life was \$10,000, as Harry struck a deal with Edward Stevenson and Lavaron Morris, both of Detroit.

In a subsequent meeting at a Denny's Restaurant on Telegraph in Southfield, Kalasho gave Stevenson, Morris and their friend, Kevin Minley of Ecorse, a photograph of Gaggo. Kalasho wanted a pre-emptive strike because Gaggo had already put up a kilo of cocaine as a contract on Kalasho's life.

Kalasho drove the hired killers to scout Gaggo's apartment complex near 12 Mile Road and Telegraph. On the afternoon of Nov. 17, as Gaggo walked to his Honda, a dark blue Chevy Blazer peeled across the parking lot. A man sprang out, firing at Gaggo, who died crouched behind the steering wheel.

The next month, Kalasho called another meeting to discuss his competition. The Taboo Nightclub in Detroit's warehouse district was the site and Munthir Salem was the subject, police said.

Salem, explained Kalasho, was getting his cocaine through Los Angeles and their territories were starting to overlap. Salem had to go, Kalasho said.

By Dec. 10, Kalasho was ready to send a message to the Chaldean community at the center of his

turf. He figured throwing Salem's head in the middle of West 7 Mile Road would establish his drug-trade dominance.

Again, Stevenson, Morris and Minley were called. Their \$10,000 contract had a bonus clause -- an extra \$10,000 if Salem was decapitated.

Four days later, Salem was gunned down as he drove from the Powerhouse Gym on Woodward. The killers passed on the bonus, leaving Salem's bullet-riddled head on his shoulders, according to their confessions.

But the bold execution was seen by witnesses, who noted the killers' car and license number. Stevenson, Minley and Morris were arrested and began talking.

By the time they finished, Kalasho was a man marked by authorities and rivals. Depending on who got him first, Kalasho was odds-on for indictment or death.

Kalasho gunned down

Troubles mounted with the arrival of 1989. Even though Kalasho had regular shipments arriving and two rivals were out of the picture, the continued loyalty of hired killers, now jailed, was iffy and authorities were closing in.

As the murder cases against Stevenson, Morris and Minley started rolling in late January, a well-spoken teenager named Raed Jihad was introduced to Oakland County assistant prosecutor Jeff Butler as the Gaggo family representative.

Jihad and Butler agreed that Kalasho was the main target of the murder investigation. But to get at him, a deal would have to be made with one of the men already charged. Negotiations on such a deal would continue, Jihad and Butler agreed.

Within a week, Jihad called Butler and set an appointment for the morning of Feb. 3 to discuss the case. Butler recalled the meeting as unremarkable.

The next day, Butler awoke to a radio newscast that suspected Detroit dope lord **Harry Kalasho** had been gunned down but still clung to life.

Hermiz and Konja, Kalasho's companions that afternoon, told police they recognized the shooter. They said it was Jihad.

Kalasho died on Feb. 20, and his crew, built on his charm, money and gunfire, was ripe for toppling. It was a race between survivors to hold the operation together and a federal task force to smash it.

The first to tumble were the hired killers. When Kalasho died, they lost their leverage: Authorities don't cut deals to incriminate a dead man.

Going to trial first in Oakland County for the Gaggo killing, all three were convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In Detroit Recorder's Court, Minley was convicted of second-degree murder for the Salem slaying. Morris and Stevenson, charged with first-degree murder, are to stand trial this month.

By the end of the February, a concerned Alvarez called Tampa: The Detroiters owed \$68,000 and the debt was threatening to derail the connection with the remains of the Kalasho organization.

And a month later, federal agents raided Kalasho's mother's home, arresting his brother Tommy and confiscating guns.

Before Kalasho's lieutenants could re-establish their Tampa pipeline, federal agents arrested Montello and Frontiera, their connection there.

Faced with federal charges, the Tampa men agreed to give up both ends of their pipeline: The Miami supplier, Alvarez, and the Detroit customers.

When the Detroiters next flew to Tampa in April, they were introduced to Montello's "nephew." The nephew was really an undercover FBI agent.

Federal seizure

The next day, April 5, the Detroiters and the agent traveled to the Miami area to square the debt with the Miami connection.

Back in Detroit later that month, agents staking out a gun show at the State Fairgrounds watched as Akrawi and a friend made the rounds of firearms dealers. The friend's day of shopping netted three AK47 semiautomatic assault rifles, a .308-caliber sniper rifle and a .22-caliber rifle.

On April 28, the U.S. attorney and federal agents struck at Kalasho's family, seizing his mother's \$255,000 house and other property as drug profits.

The court documents, detailing the use of autos in suspected drug transactions, needed 14 pages to list all the property taken. Included were the house, a Madison Heights apartment complex, Colombian currency and safe deposit records that led to \$250,000 in gold rings, medallions, necklaces, coins, diamonds and watches.

Agents also took a machine gun, assault rifles, a bulletproof vest, piles of ammunition, two 9mm semiautomatic pistols with the serial numbers removed, a telephone tap detector and books of sabotage and explosives instructions.

The federal net continued to tighten.

In May, Alvarez, worried that his phone was tapped, told his people to use fax machines. On

May 12, after the weeks of negotiation with the undercover agents, the Kalasho organization was set to get a new shipment through the undercover Tampa federal agent connection at a Dearborn hotel.

The federal trap was sprung as the agents made the delivery.

Federal indictments handed down in Tampa named Detroiters Mezy, Hermiz, Ballo and Konja. Also named were Alvarez from Miami, two of his relatives, and Victor Pulido, the alleged Medellin office manager in New York.

In September, the retribution reached new levels as Adnan Jihad -- father of Raed Jihad, the accused assassin of Kalasho -- was killed in front of a John R coffee house.

Nine days later two men, Tim Jackson and Thomas Harris were arrested for the Jihad killing and federal agents again raided Akrawi's house. Agents, arrested Akrawi on firearms charges and found that his were suitcases packed.

Under questioning by Detroit police, Jackson and Harris said Akrawi engineered and paid for the Jihad hit.

The statements also said there was an earlier attempted hit on another man. "This is for Harry," was to be the last thing he heard.

Akrawi was charged with murder twice, but the first charge was dismissed when a judge ruled the confessions of Jackson and Harris could not be used against him. The refiled charge collapsed when Jackson refused to testify.

Meanwhile, about a dozen dynamite bombings have rocked the Chaldean neighborhood in the 7 Mile-Woodward area. Homes, a church and a medical office were hit with blasts.

Law enforcement officials and a confidant of the Kalasho- Akrawi family said the bombings were loud messages Harry's organization is still around. Officials believe the bombings primarily are to let people know they are still around, although some probably have special messages that are known only to participants.

TOMORROW: A look at **Harry Kalasho** , who federal agents say had so much charisma that some street hoods get misty-eyed when they talk about him. Also, representatives of the Detroit area Chaldean community say the criminal acts of a few have smeared their heritage.

Caption: Photo Color Special to the Free Press Photo GEORGE WALDMAN

: Basil Mezy Ead Ballo Members of the Kalasho family organization pose with a lion cub at an unidentified location in a snapshot seized by federal agents in a raid on the family's West Bloomfield Township home. From left: **Harry Kalasho** , Ragheed (Ray) Akrawi, and Basil Mezy. Kalasho family member Ragheed (Ray) Akrawi, in a snapshot seized in a raid by federal agents, flashes a fistful of \$100 bills in front of a Mercedes-

Benz auto. Left to right: House on West Greendale in Detroit where **Harry Kalasho** was fatally shot; the coffeehouse on John R in Detroit where Adnan Jihad was slain; and the Kalasho family's West Bloomfield Township home.

Memo: First of two parts; SERIES

SEE ALSO RELATED STORIES, Page 14A

SEE CHRONOLOGY IN MICROFILM

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A;

Index Terms: HARRY KALASHO; FAMILY ; DRUG ; COCAINE ; HOMICIDE ; VIOLENCE ; COLOMBIA ; MAJOR STORY

Record Number: 8902160645

Copyright (c) 1989 Detroit Free Press