



The United States Attorney's Office

Central District of California



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ILLEGAL GUN TRAFFICKING, INCLUDING SALE OF MACHINE GUNS, LEADS TO ARREST OF FOUR MEN ON FEDERAL CHARGES

One Defendant Claims to be Local Operative for a Mexican Drug Cartel

An investigation into guns being trafficked from Arizona to California has led to the arrest of four individuals, one of whom sold several machine guns to a undercover operative and claimed to be tied to a Mexican drug cartel.

The four defendants were arrested early this morning by special agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and investigators with the Los Angeles Police Department. During the course of the 10-month investigation, authorities purchased or seized 50 firearms, including 17 guns that were discovered during the execution of search warrants this morning.

During the investigation, an undercover operative made a series of gun purchases from three of the defendants. The purchases included guns similar to AK-47s, Uzis and AR-15s, some of which were fully automatic weapons.

Those arrested today are:

Edgardo Prado Casteneda, aka "Primo," 26, of Azusa, who claimed to be a Southern California operative of the La Familia drug cartel based in Michoacan, Mexico;

Vicente Garcia Jr., aka "Chevy," 38, of Azusa;

Steven Scott Blanks, 47, of Norco; and

Victor Velasquez, aka "Fingers," 34, of El Monte, who is accused of delivering a quarter-pound of methamphetamine that was purchased by the undercover operative.

The four defendants are scheduled to make their initial appearances this afternoon in United States District Court in Los Angeles.

"Today's arrests and enforcement actions conclude a successful investigation by LAPD and ATF into a firearms trafficking ring with possible ties to Mexican drug cartels," said Christopher Shaefer, Acting Special Agent in Charge of ATF's Los Angeles Field Division. "Many firearms were taken off the street that may have otherwise ended up in the hands of those determined to further their criminal activity. ATF will continue to utilize our expertise in conducting firearms trafficking investigations, and will trace each firearm purchased or seized in this operation to determine who else may be facilitating illegal firearm sales."

LAPD Captain Kevin McCarthy stated: "Today's arrests were the result of a collaborative effort between the Los Angeles Police Department, ATF and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. By bringing together each agency's unique expertise, we were able to effectively and efficiently stop this firearm and drug trafficking ring. LAPD will continue to work jointly with other agencies to further reduce crime in our city."

The arrests were made today as Prado apparently made plans to collect a "debt" and possibly kidnap a man he said owed money to La Familia. Over the past several weeks, Prado allegedly had a series of conversations with the undercover operative about helping collect a large "debt" that a man owed to La Familia. According to the affidavit, Prado told the informant that a boss in the cartel that he called "Cuete" had sent a courier to Mexico to transport narcotics, but the courier was arrested and provided information to Mexican authorities that led to the arrest of another high-ranking cartel member in Mexico City. As a result of this, "Cuete" owed the Cartel \$3 million. If the informant participated in the collection of the "debt," Prado promised him a share of money that would be paid by the cartel.

A criminal complaint filed in United States District Court in Los Angeles charges Prado with selling firearms without a license and distributing methamphetamine.

Garcia is charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Blanks is charged with possession of a machine gun.

Velasquez is charged with distribution of methamphetamine.

If convicted of the crimes alleged in the criminal complaint, the defendants would face maximum potential sentences of at least 10 years in prison.

A criminal complaint contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.

The investigation that led to today's arrests was conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the Los Angeles Police Department. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department provided substantial assistance in this morning's operation.

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