



PRESS RELEASE

Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation *Chief Richard Weber*

Date: May 17, 2016

Contact: *CI-HQ-COMMUNICATIONSEDCATION@ci.irs.gov
IRS – Criminal Investigation

CI Release #: CI-2016-05-17-A

Texas Authorities Make Multiple Arrests and Warn Public of Dangers of Synthetic Narcotics

A total of 16 people have been charged following a multi-year, multi-agency federal investigation into one of the largest synthetic cannabinoid trafficking enterprises in the country.

U.S. Attorney Kenneth Magidson for the Southern District of Texas made the announcement today along with Special Agent in Charge Joseph Arabit of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Acting Chief Martha Montalvo of the Houston Police Department (HPD) as well as leaders and representatives from numerous other federal, state and local law enforcement agencies.

“Today, a major criminal organization that dealt in the large-scale manufacturing and distributing of synthetic cannabinoids was dismantled,” said U.S. Attorney Magidson. “The unsealed indictment and related arrests are the results of a significant federal, state and local effort that was international in scope. These drugs are extremely dangerous and are emerging into a serious public health threat in both our area and the nation as a whole.”

A federal grand jury returned a 13-count federal indictment April 28, alleging a conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute a controlled substance, aiding and abetting possession with the intent to distribute a controlled substance, aiding and abetting the smuggling of goods into the U.S., conspiracy to commit money laundering, aiding and abetting a money transmitting business and conspiracy to commit mail fraud. With the exception of aiding and abetting a money transmitting business, which carries a possible five-year-prison term, the penalty on any of the other charges is up to 20 years in federal prison.

“The arrests made today as part of Operation ‘We Can Hear You Now’ conclude a comprehensive investigation by DEA, Houston Police Department and its law enforcement partners into the leadership structure and criminal activities of an international drug trafficking organization,” said Special Agent in Charge Arabit. “This operation highlights an intentional and deliberate effort to cut off and shut down the supply of synthetic cannabinoids trafficked by callous dealers and the corresponding negative impact that this horrific drug inflicts on our communities.”

“This is great example of the Houston Police Department's partnership and collaboration with law enforcement partners in the effort to take dangerous substances off the streets,” said Acting Chief

Montalvo. “Synthetic cannabinoids have been a major issue in our city and this was a major step in getting this illegal substance off our streets.”

The indictment alleges several co-conspirators devised a scheme to defraud by marketing their products as though they were safe. Some of the products were allegedly labeled as “potpourri” or “incense,” with some including false information such as “100% legal,” “lab certified” or “not for human consumption.” According to the charges, these products were, in fact, dangerous drugs. Specifically, they were synthetic cannabinoids that were manufactured and sold for human consumption. The substances allegedly contained hazardous chemicals that, when smoked or ingested, could cause serious bodily harm.

The indictment indicates the drugs in question were all schedule I drugs – substances or chemicals with no currently accepted medical use, have a high potential for abuse, are the most dangerous drugs of all scheduled drugs and have potential for severe psychological or physical dependence.

As part of the announcement today, authorities provided detailed information to warn of the dangers of this emerging public health threat. The effects of these drugs were described as unpredictable, with wide-ranging physiological effects to include possible kidney damage and gastrointestinal distress to possible seizures and even psychosis. Leaders also described how these are made and the unsafe and often dirty environments in which they are created, to include inconsistent batches blended in cement mixers and similar equipment. According to the information provided, this can result in “hot spots” in which one sample could have a significantly greater amount of harmful chemical than another.

Authorities also detailed the marketing of these drugs, citing the colorful packaging that targets only drug abusers, but also children and adolescents.

The law enforcement effort today resulted in the arrest of 12 people in the Houston area - Salem Fahed Tannous, 55, Omar Maher Alnasser, 36, Ali Shaker Tafesh, 35, Khalil Munier Khalil, 40, Nagy Mahmoud Ali, 59, Mohammed Rafat Taha, 27, and Steve Shafiq Amira, 58, all of Houston; Muhammad Shariq Siddiqi, 45, Ayisha Khurram, 40, and Sayed Ali, 41, all of Sugar Land; Abdalhour Izz, 31, of Missouri City; and Hazim Hisham Qadus, 31, of South Houston.

Khader Fahed Tanous, 49, of Stephens City, Virginia, and Frank Muratalla, 23, of Hawthorne, California, are also charged.

Authorities are still seeking Ziad Mahmoud Alsalameh, 56, of Pearland, Texas, and Aqil Khader, 33, of Houston. They are considered fugitives and warrants remain outstanding for their arrests. Anyone with information about their whereabouts are asked to contact DEA at 713-693-3000. The indictment includes a notice of forfeiture and seeks \$35 million money judgment as alleged illegal proceeds from the crimes.

The charges are the result of a four-year investigation conducted by the DEA, HPD, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation with the assistance of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Conroe Police Department, sheriff’s offices in Harris and Polk counties, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission and the Montgomery County District Attorney’s Office. Assistant U.S. Attorneys John Jocher and Nancy Herrera are prosecuting the case.

###