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DEA Investigation Leads to OFAC Designation of Lebanese-Based Drug Trafficking and Money Laundering Network

JAN 26 -- WASHINGTON – An ongoing DEA investigation led to actions by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today designating Lebanese narcotics trafficker Ayman Joumaa, as well as nine individuals and 19 entities connected to his drug trafficking and money laundering organization as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers (SDNTs) pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act).

Ayman Joumaa has coordinated the transportation, distribution, and sale of multi-ton shipments of cocaine from South America and has laundered the proceeds from the sale of cocaine in Europe and the Middle East, according to investigations led by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Operating in Lebanon, West Africa, Panama and Colombia, Joumaa and his organization launder proceeds from their illicit activities – as much as \$200 million per month – through various channels, including bulk cash smuggling operations and Lebanese exchange houses. As a result of today's designations, U.S. persons are prohibited from conducting financial or commercial transactions with these individuals and entities and any assets the designees may have under U.S. jurisdiction are frozen.

"Ayman Joumaa and his organization can no longer hide behind front companies with their drug trafficking profits," said DEA Administrator Michele M. Leonhart. "These are not legitimate businesses. These are illegal enterprises that fuel the drug trade and its violence and corruption. As we continue to follow the money trail, we starve these traffickers of their assets and eventually put their criminal networks out of business."

"Ayman Joumaa runs a complex money laundering scheme moving hundreds of millions of dollars of illicitly derived proceeds through businesses operated by him and his associates," said OFAC Director Adam J. Szubin. "By exposing this international drug trafficking and money laundering organization, today's action will disrupt this network and obstruct their access to the international financial system."

Three Lebanon-based money exchanges used by Ayman Joumaa and his organization to launder illicit proceeds were also designated today: the Hassan Ayash Exchange Company, the Ellissa Exchange Company, and New Line Exchange Trust Co. OFAC also targeted Hassan Ayash, Hassan Mahmoud Ayache, Jamal Mohamad Kharoubi, Ali Mohammed Kharroubi, Ismael Mohammed Youssef, and Ziad Mohamad Youssef for their roles in these money exchanges. Ali Mohammed Kharroubi owns Ellissa Holding, which was designated today. Ellissa Holding controls nine companies in Lebanon, Benin and the Democratic of Congo, including Ellissa Group SA, the subsidiary of Ellissa Holding in Benin involved in the sale of used cars in Africa.

Joumaa's brothers Akram Saied Joumaa, Anwar Saied Joumaa and Mohamad Said Joumma were designated for their involvement in the drug trafficking or money laundering activities of the Joumaa organization. Akram Saied Joumaa is the CEO and general manager of Caesar's Park Hotel, also designated today, which the organization uses as a location to broker drug trafficking and money laundering activities.

Lebanon-based company Phenicia Shipping Offshore SARL, Panama-based companies Goldi Electronics S.A. and Zona Libre International Market S.A., and Colombia-based companies Almacen Junior, Almacen Junior No. 2 and Commercial Planeta were all designated today for being owned or controlled by members of the Ayman Joumaa organization.

Today's action, supported by the DEA's investigation of the Joumaa organization, is part of ongoing efforts under the Kingpin Act to apply financial measures against significant foreign narcotics traffickers worldwide. Internationally, more than 950 businesses and individuals linked to 87 drug kingpins have been designated pursuant to the Kingpin Act since June 2000. Penalties for violations of the Kingpin Act range from civil penalties of up to \$1.075 million per violation to more severe criminal penalties. Criminal penalties for corporate officers may include up to 30 years in prison and fines up to \$5 million. Criminal fines for corporations may reach \$10 million. Individuals face up to 10 years in prison and fines pursuant to Title 18 of the United States Code for criminal violations of the Kingpin Act.

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