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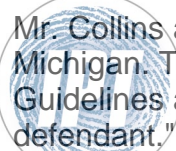
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United States Attorney Jeffrey G. Collins, Willie Hulon, Special Agent In Charge, FBI Detroit, and Valerie J. Goddard, Special Agent In Charge, BATFE Detroit Field Division, announced that Elias Mohamad Akhdar, 31, of Dearborn, Michigan was sentenced this afternoon in federal court in Detroit to 70 months imprisonment for Conspiring to Violate the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, after pleading guilty to that offense on July 29, 2003. The sentence was handed down by United States District Judge George Caram Steeh.

The information presented to the court at the time of the guilty plea showed that Elias Akhdar ran a multi-million dollar racketeering conspiracy that operated from 1996 through January 2003. The criminal conspiracy involved the smuggling of untaxed and low-taxed cigarettes between Michigan, North Carolina and the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation near Irving, New York, resulting in the evasion of some \$2,000,000 in Michigan state cigarette taxes. In connection with the cigarette fraud, Akhdar also procured and used counterfeit cigarette tax stamps and fraudulent credit cards. When it became clear that the government was investigating these crimes, Akhdar attempted to obstruct justice by instructing witnesses not to talk to law enforcement. Elias Akhdar also perpetrated the arson of a tobacco shop in Indian territory in furtherance of the racketeering conspiracy.

The criminal conspiracy had two established connections to the designated foreign terrorist organization, Hizballah, also known as "Party of God," headquartered in Lebanon. First, one of the largest suppliers of contraband cigarettes to the racketeering conspiracy was Mohamad Hammoud of the Charlotte, North Carolina Hizballah Cell, convicted of providing material support to Hizballah. Second, co-conspirator Hassan Makki pleaded guilty to providing material support to Hizballah as part of this case. Makki, who was sentenced to 57 months imprisonment on December 16, 2003, admitted that the money he sent to Hizballah from cigarette trafficking was intended to support Hizballah's "orphans of martyrs" program to benefit the families of those killed in Hizballah terrorist operations or by Hizballah's enemies.



Mr. Collins added that, "Judge Steeh also ordered Akhdar to repay the \$2,062,500 loss to the State of Michigan. The sentence, which is non-parolable, was imposed under the United States Sentencing Guidelines according to the nature of the offense and the criminal background, if any, of the defendant." Mr. Akhdar remains in the custody of the U.S. Marshal Service.

"Investigating contraband cigarette trafficking has been, is, and will continue to remain a top priority for ATF - particularly when there is a nexus to terrorism," states Special Agent in Charge Valerie J. Goddard, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Detroit Field Division.

Mr. Collins commended the Joint Terrorism Task Force for its diligent efforts in bringing Elias Akhdar to justice.