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Airport, on a routine schedule.

Mar. 20, 2013

March 20 — The cargo and commercial flights carried millions of U.S. greenbacks in suitcases, containers and money bags from Mexico to Texas, and then to Miami International Airport, on a routine schedule.

From there, authorities say, the money was laundered by two Mexican businessmen through a Miami-Dade check-cashing company that used the dollars to cash the payroll checks of undocumented workers at local supermarkets.

It was all part of a Mexican-Miami bulk-cash network that federal agents say may be funded by drug profits south of the U.S. border.

On Tuesday, Martin Diaz and Enrique Guerra, arrested earlier this month, appeared before a federal magistrate on charges of conspiring to launder U.S. dollars to “harbor illegal aliens” in this country. Diaz, 40, pleaded not guilty. Guerra, 39, is set for arraignment March 28. His lawyer, Norman Moscowitz, declined to comment.

Both defendants are being held without bond before trial.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Gregorie tried to persuade Magistrate Judge William Turnoff that Diaz should not qualify for a court-appointed attorney because he has enough money to hire his own. “We have him on film discussing moving millions of dollars,” Gregorie said.

But the defendant’s temporary attorney, Sam Rabin, argued: “Mr. Diaz was in the business of moving other peoples’ money,” adding that it was all “legitimate.”

Despite the prosecution’s portrayal of Diaz as an international money launderer, Turnoff assigned an assistant public defender to represent him at taxpayer expense.

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cartels' ability to move U.S. dollars in and out of traditional banking and money-exchange institutions, ICE special agent Ruben Fernandez wrote in a criminal affidavit.

Although his affidavit provides no proof that any of the bulk cash imported by the defendants came from drug proceeds, narcotics trafficking provides the context for the money-laundering allegations in the complaint.

As a rule, currency brokers can legally move cash sums greater than \$10,000 across the border, as long as they file proper paperwork, including a so-called FinCEN Form 105 with the Department of Homeland Security, customs declarations, source of the money and a travel itinerary for the courier.

According to the affidavit, Diaz and Guerra were seasoned pros.

The men are accused of using a transportation company, Enfoque Potosino, located in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, to move the bulk cash to the United States. They also set up another business, Relma, in El Paso, Texas, to assist with the currency shipments and control bank accounts in the United States.

Diaz told a government informant, who was wearing a wire, that he purchased U.S. dollars from various Mexican casas de cambios with pesos and that he established the exchange rate. Diaz also said he would package the dollars for transport to the United States and later would sell the money to check-cashing businesses.

ICE agents reviewed 44 currency import transactions by Diaz's company, Enfoque, that showed it shipped \$23.3 million from Mexico to the United States in the five months between Aug. 24, 2011, and Jan. 25, 2012, according to the affidavit.

"My review of the forms is that Diaz never listed himself or Enfoque as the owner or courier for any of the U.S. currency," Fernandez wrote in the affidavit. "Instead, Diaz

used the names of Mexican casas de cambios that he purportedly purchased the

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The latter informant told the Mexican businessmen that a check casher in South Miami-Dade needed “large sums of currency to cash checks” at local supermarkets. The informant said local companies that employ undocumented immigrants need to cash the checks to pay their employees, because the businesses cannot use banks.

In January, Diaz and Guerra used Enfoque to send six shipments of bulk cash totaling about \$1.75 million from Mexico to Texas to Miami, according to the affidavit. The partners also said they sent another \$2.5 million for the “check-cashing scheme.”

Afterward, the Mexican businessmen flew to Miami, where they met an undercover agent posing as a representative of a sugar-cane business. After arranging another deal to import U.S. dollars to pay undocumented workers, Diaz and Guerra were arrested while driving in Hialeah.

According to an indictment filed Friday, ICE agents seized \$429,718 from a Miami-Dade armored-car company, TransValue, Inc., which had arranged the transportation of the Mexican businessmen’s bulk cash.

Agents also seized about \$1.1 million from Presto Cash, an Aventura company that also did business with the partners. Presto representatives could not be reached for comment.

TransValue’s CEO, Jesus Gabriel Rodriguez Jr., praised law enforcement’s crackdown. “I’m glad they are taking action to reduce criminal activity in South Florida,” he said.

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