

## Former Starr sheriff pleads guilty

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McALLEN - Former Starr County Sheriff Reymundo "Rey" Guerra pleaded guilty Friday to one count of drug smuggling conspiracy, a week before his case was set to head to trial.

The ex-lawman told a federal judge he aided a narcotics trafficking organization based in Miguel Alemán, Tamps., over a period of almost two years. He now faces up to life in prison at a sentencing hearing scheduled for July.

"He feels that he's let down his family, friends and constituents," Guerra's attorney Phillip Hilder said Friday. "He's deeply remorseful for that."

FBI agents arrested Guerra in October as part of a nationwide sweep of Gulf Cartel members and their associates. While the former sheriff aided drug traffickers, federal prosecutors said Friday that he did not actually play a role in bringing any drugs into the United States.

Instead, he shared information with the cell's leader - Jose Carlos Hinojosa -- who he first met when the man was an attorney working with the law enforcement in Mexico.

"Hinojosa would assist Guerra with the return of various suspects who had escaped from the United States," Assistant U.S. Attorney Toni Treviño said.

Guerra had first claimed after his arrest that he had shared sensitive law enforcement intelligence with Hinojosa because of their prior working relationship. He still believed that the man was working with police, Hilder said at an Oct. 17 detention hearing.

But by as early as January 2007, Guerra was fully aware that Hinojosa had left his old job to become one of the areas top drug traffickers, Treviño alleged Friday.

Still, the former sheriff knowingly provided information that would aid operations for Hinojosa's organization in exchange for periodic payments of \$2,000 to \$3,000. Hinojosa pleaded guilty last month to two counts of drug trafficking and money laundering conspiracy.

In June 2007, federal agents allegedly raided a stash house in Starr County connected to Hinojosa's trafficking organization, where they found 314 kilograms of marijuana and one kilogram of cocaine.

Hinojosa contacted Guerra seeking the source that led authorities to the home, and the sheriff pressured one of his deputies to give up his confidential informant.

At the time, FBI agents were already investigating Guerra for suspected involvement with the Hinojosa drug trafficking organization and instructed the deputy to give his boss false information. The former sheriff also contacted Hinojosa and instructed him to tell the owner of the house to prepare fake leasing documents for a renter living in Mexico.

"He knowingly provided a false document to deflect attention," Treviño said.

Guerra's arrest last year during the middle of a re-election campaign caused problems for Starr County voters as he was the only candidate for sheriff on the ballot. He was forced to resign his post twice - once before the election and another after being re-elected - as a condition of his bond.

After a re-arraignment hearing Friday, U.S. District Judge Randy Crane allowed Guerra to remain free on

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bond pending his sentencing hearing.

Two of the former sheriff's co-defendants - Saul Mendez Jr. and Mario Alberto Mascorro -- also pleaded guilty Friday to one count of federal money laundering conspiracy. They face up to 20 years in prison.

The pleas close the case against the 20 defendants originally arrested for participating in the Hinojosa drug trafficking cell. All have pleaded guilty. Eight fugitives remain at large.

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