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Web Posted: 08/28/2009 12:00 CDT

Ex-sheriff handed 5 years in prison

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By Lynn Brezosky - Express-News

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McALLEN — Former Starr County Sheriff Reymundo Guerra was sentenced Thursday to five years and four months in federal prison for helping Gulf Cartel operatives move marijuana and cocaine through his remote border county.

The prison term, set to begin Sept. 28, makes Guerra the second Starr County sheriff in a row to do time and the latest in a line of Rio Grande Valley officials convicted of corruption and abuse of office.

"I'm saddened to see a law enforcement officer who's indicted like this," U.S. District Judge Randy Crane said, recalling the recent conviction of Cameron County Sheriff Conrado Cantu. "It is a stain on the badge."

Guerra was named in October along with 14 others on a 19-count indictment stemming from an investigation dubbed "Operation Carlito's Weigh."

He pleaded guilty in May to one of three charges against him — conspiracy — in an agreement that dropped other charges and gave hope for a lighter sentence.

Since then, the investigation has netted 28 defendants. Jose Carlos Hinojosa, a former Mexican police official pegged as the ringleader of the operation, is to be sentenced in October. In the end, Crane said, it appeared Guerra's role was as a "minor participant" in a "significant, large conspiracy."

Though he may have helped smugglers evade detection with tips on stings or recent seizures, there was no evidence that Guerra arranged to move drugs or was a key player in the cartel operation. It's unclear whether his ill-gotten gains amounted to more than a few thousand dollars.

"For really pennies and nickels, you were influenced by these people," Crane said to Guerra.

His conviction hinged on two things: a scheme to create fake lease documents to make it appear a drug load belonged to an out-of-town tenant, and a meeting between himself, Hinojosa and a sheriff's investigator working with the multiagency High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area initiative.

Guerra told the investigator Hinojosa was a Mexican police official conducting a parallel investigation and needed information about a recent bust. The investigator tipped off the FBI, which began a probe.

Guerra, 52, initially faced 10 years to life in prison on the conspiracy charge alone.

"I want to say how sorry I am for putting my wife and daughter through this nightmare," he told the judge. "I apologize to my friends, family and constituents for this wrong I have done."

He left the courtroom smiling, but declined to comment.

"The sheriff was satisfied with the sentence," said defense attorney Philip Hilder. "As the judge said, even though he was high-profile, he had a minor role."

Comments

18 comment(s) on "Ex-sheriff handed 5 years in prison"

c/o 11:02 AM

Should be 'Plata or Plomo'? Meaning you take either bribes (plata) or plomo (lead as in bullets).

phatant 9:41 AM

border, not boards....

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