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Special delivery for traffickers

Risk is low, rewards are high for traffickers

By DANE SCHILLER
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
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Houston drug traffickers want the U.S. government to do their dirty work.

The nation's postal system and private mail services are regularly the unwitting couriers of illegal drugs delivered coast to coast and door to door, according to federal court records.

At least 15 times in the past 60 days, agents in Houston seized cocaine, marijuana, heroin and other drugs.

The packages, headed for Houston, Sugar Land, Missouri City and elsewhere, came from as close as the Rio Grande Valley and as far away as Pakistan and Iraq.

"I made a mistake. I just want to go back to my country," a man allegedly confessed to agents after accepting a package of opium from Iraq that was delivered by an undercover officer dressed as a courier.

"I just want to go home," continued the man, who apparently has not been charged in federal court.

The opium was hidden inside a package of wooden game pieces snared after arriving at a New York airport.

In another instance, U.S. agents uncovered a ring that regularly shipped bulk amounts of marijuana from Houston to the East Coast. The 17 packages shipped from Houston weighed a total of 252 pounds, according to court papers.

The amounts are small compared with the shipments that come into the United States via trucks and other means, but authorities say there is no denying that the mail system provides a sometimes-clever route around borders.

"It is obviously an avenue criminal organizations have taken to," said Patrick McElwain, assistant special agent in charge for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Houston.

"It is a situation where they are exploring different avenues in an attempt to get narcotics into the country," he said.

McElwain said that by working with Customs and Border Protection, which stops packages when they come into the country, ICE is able to further investigate.

Agents seek to take clues provided by a single seizure and trace them back to entire organizations.

Shipping money, drugs

Traffickers consider slipping drugs and cash from their sales into the mail as more efficient than using their own couriers, said attorney Philip Hilder, formerly a prosecutor in charge of the Houston office for the Department of Justice's Organized Crime Strike Force.

"It is well known that it is a pretty easy, low-risk operation to either ship fairly small amounts of dope and/or money — illegal proceeds — through (the mail)," Hilder said.

Just this week in the Rio Grande Valley, three men were sentenced for roles in a conspiracy to mail marijuana.

Drugs were wrapped in cellophane and dried chili peppers to hide their smell, then sent to U.S. cities in the South and Midwest.

"This case represents the increasing efforts by U.S. postal inspectors to protect the U.S. mail from criminal misuse in South Texas," notes a statement by prosecutors.

A postal inspector in Houston noted in a recent request for a warrant that the mail service is "frequently" used to move controlled substances throughout the United States.

Easy for dealers to track

Traffickers can track parcels via the Internet by checking status pages that provide locator information.

If deliveries are late — and suspected of falling into the hands of law enforcement for a setup — the intended recipients simply decline to accept, he said.

While in some cases traffickers have been bold enough to label packages with the name of the person expecting them, in other instances they use fake names to blur their tracks. That way, people on the receiving end can claim to agents or even jurors that they knew nothing about the package and it must have been sent by accident.

Four pints of codeine were sent to a Tomball address in care of the "Jones Family," but no one with that name lived there.

Agents don't always get it right.

In early September, agents were given the green light to open a bundle headed for Magnolia. They found nothing illegal inside.

The package was resealed and continued its journey.

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