

INSIDER: CARTEL USED INS BUSES

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Body

A former insider in a major Mexican drug cartel said Thursday that his group used U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service buses to ship thousands of pounds of cocaine north from the U.S.-Mexico border.

Juan Antonio Ortiz, who ran the gulf cartel's U.S. transportation network, also said the cartel routinely paid off Mexican police and other officials.

Ortiz, testifying in the trial of the alleged cartel leader, Juan Garcia Abrego, said the cartel began using INS buses to ship drugs in 1986 and kept it up until 1990, when one of the INS staffers working with the drug dealers was caught.

The drugs were stashed on buses used to transport illegal immigrants captured in southern Texas to Houston, 300 miles to the northeast, for flights back to their homelands, he said.

The beauty of the scheme, he testified, was that the INS buses were never checked at U.S. government checkpoints inside Texas where agents searched all vehicles for drugs.

"They just waved (them) on," said Ortiz, who was arrested in 1993 and sentenced to 70 months in prison after agreeing to cooperate with U.S. prosecutors.

He said Mexican police and other officials were easy targets for cartel bribery. On two occasions, Luis Garcia Medrano, the cartel's second in command, was arrested but freed after payoffs, he said.

"They (Mexican officials) had Mr. Medrano but they let him go. They (the cartel) would pay his way out before they took him to jail," he said.

Medrano finally went to jail in 1993. He died in prison of liver problems Aug. 20, the Mexican government said.

Under cross-examination by defense attorney Tony Canales, Ortiz told of paying \$45,000 to a Mexico City police commander in a McDonald's restaurant in the Mexican capital.

"You have no faith in the police in Mexico?" Canales asked.

"I don't have none, sir. The police over there are bribed, corrupt - you can buy them," Ortiz said.

Garcia Abrego, a former cookie-factory worker from Texas, was captured in Monterrey, Mexico, in January and flown to Houston for trial. He faces up to life in prison if convicted on 22 drug-related counts and has pleaded not guilty.

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