

## **Three more defendants in cigarette smuggling probe pleads guilty**

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### **Body**

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Three of the 18 suspects charged in a cigarette-smuggling ring accused of raising money for the Islamic militant group Hezbollah pleaded guilty Tuesday to immigration law violations.

Guilty pleas were entered by Fatme Mohamad Harb, 20, Tonia Yvonne Moore, 27, and Terri Jeanne Pish, 33, all of Charlotte. All three women appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge Carl Horn, saying little except to acknowledge they willingly entered their respective pleas.

According to the indictment, some of the defendants in the case used sham marriages to circumvent immigration laws, then set up a smuggling business in Charlotte to buy cases of cigarettes in North Carolina, which has a low cigarette tax, and sell them at a profit in high-tax Michigan.

Earlier this month, Samir Mohamad Ali Debk, 25, also pleaded guilty to immigration law violations. None of the four suspects who have pleaded guilty so far were charged with cigarette smuggling.

Of the three, Harb faces the harshest penalties. The immigration crimes she is charged with violating are punishable by up to 40 years in prison and fines totaling more than \$1 million.

Moore and Pish each face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and \$750,000 in fines.

Horn did not schedule sentencing dates for any of the defendants.

Another defendant, Haissam Mohamad Harb, who is Fatme Mohamad Harb's brother, also appeared before Horn Tuesday. Through an interpreter, he told the judge he had entered into a plea agreement with the government in the case.

However, Assistant U.S. Attorney Ken Bell told Horn there were no plea agreements for any of the 18 individuals charged in the case. Horn ruled that Haissam Mohamad Harb could not enter his plea until an evidentiary hearing could be held on the dispute.

Following Tuesday's hearing, Bell said none of the four defendants who have entered guilty pleas so far are accused of committing any crimes linked to terrorism.

The charges against Moore and Pish stem from their willingness to enter into fraudulent marriages to bring illegal Lebanese aliens into the United States, he said.

Fatme Mohamad Harb was charged with entering into a sham marriage with another defendant, Wayne Jeffrey Swaringen, 33, of Charlotte, so she could remain in the U.S., Bell said.

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When Horn asked Fatme Mohamad Harb if she wanted to make a statement, she said through the interpreter: "I want to go back to Lebanon as quickly as possible."

## Classification

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