



U.S. Department of Justice

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ESMOND MAN SENTENCED TO 114 MONTHS IN FEDERAL PRISON WITHOUT PAROLE FOR CONSPIRING TO DISTRIBUTE COCAINE

ROCKFORD -- PATRICK J. FITZGERALD, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois; RICHARD W. SANDERS, Special Agent-In-Charge of the Chicago Office of the Drug Enforcement Administration; MEL MESSER, Ogle County Sheriff; ROGER A. SCOTT, DeKalb County Sheriff; RICHARD A. MEYERS, Winnebago County Sheriff; and STEVEN PUGH, Chief of the Rockford Police Department, today made the following announcement:

United States District Judge Philip G. Reinhard today sentenced **BENJAMIN MERAZ-CORTES** ("Benjamin Meraz"), 47 (DOB: 03/31/56) of Esmond, Illinois, to 114 months in prison without parole for his role in a conspiracy to distribute more than 500 grams of cocaine in Rochelle, Esmond, and Rockford, from August 19 to September 4, 2003.

Benjamin Meraz, and his brother, **ELODIO MERAZ-CORTES** ("Elodio Meraz"), 65 (DOB: 08/21/38), of Rockford, Illinois, were arrested on September 4, 2003, by Special Agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Ogle County Sheriff's Department, the DeKalb County Sheriff's Department, and the Rockford-Winnebago County Metro Narcotics Unit.

Benjamin Meraz pleaded guilty on April 22, 2004, to conspiracy to distribute cocaine. In pleading guilty, Meraz admitted that on June 18, 2003, he sold a cooperating source approximately 1.7 grams of cocaine in a restaurant parking lot in Rochelle, Illinois. Meraz also admitted that on June 24, 2003, he first sold the confidential source 13.7 grams of cocaine in Rochelle, Illinois, and later 14.2 grams of cocaine at his residence in Esmond, Illinois. Meraz further admitted that on August 19, 2003, he and the cooperating source traveled to his brother's home in Rockford, where he and his brother cut one-quarter kilogram off 2 kilograms of cocaine that Elodio had at his house, which Benjamin then sold to the cooperating source.

Benjamin Meraz also admitted that on September 4, 2003, he arranged to sell a half kilogram of cocaine to the cooperating source and that he contacted Elodio Meraz and told him to bring the cocaine to his house in Esmond. Elodio arrived in Esmond with the cocaine. Benjamin and Elodio Meraz were pulling out of the driveway when law enforcement agents and officers arrived to execute a federal search warrant. Benjamin Meraz had a loaded .380 caliber pistol in the car at that time. Agents recovered the one-half kilogram of cocaine the brothers had hidden inside a grill on the property, in addition to 73 grams of cocaine and three firearms (a 20-gauge shotgun, a .22 caliber rifle, and a .22 caliber pistol) located in a bedroom in the house.

In addition to the 114 months in prison, the court ordered Benjamin Meraz to serve five years of supervised release following his release from prison, and to pay a fine of \$350.

Benjamin Meraz has been held in federal custody since his arrest. Elodio Meraz, who was released on bond, is a fugitive and a warrant has been issued for his arrest, having been charged with one count of conspiracy to distribute cocaine, one count of distribution of cocaine, and two counts of possession with intent to distribute cocaine. As to Elodio Meraz, members of the public are reminded that an indictment is only a charge and is not evidence of guilt. A defendant is entitled to a fair trial at which the government has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The case was investigated by the Rockford offices of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Ogle County Sheriff's Department, the DeKalb County Sheriff's Department, and the Rockford-Winnebago County Metro Narcotics Unit. The case was prosecuted in federal court by Assistant United States Attorney Michael F. Iasparro.

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