

Jury convicts drug kingpin of trafficking

Abrego's defense lawyers claim he is a scapegoat in America's war on drugs.

HOUSTON (AP) — Mexican drug kingpin Juan Garcia Abrego was convicted Wednesday of masterminding the shipping of tons of cocaine into the United States and then illegally laundering the profits.

Garcia Abrego looked stern and one of his hands appeared to twitch as he was found guilty of 22 counts of trafficking nearly 15 tons of cocaine and illegally laundering some \$10.5 million.

Jurors took 12 hours to convict the 52-year-old leader of the Gulf drug cartel.

U.S. District Judge Ewing Werlein Jr. set a Jan. 31 sentencing date. Garcia Abrego faces a life prison term.

After the verdict, Werlein held a brief forfeiture hearing. Jurors deliberated for about two hours before deciding that \$350 million in assets should be seized from the man nicknamed "La Muneca," or "The Doll," for his baby face.

Prosecutors had said the seizure could reach \$1 billion, based on testimony about the amount of cocaine that Garcia Abrego was accused of bringing

into the United States.

But defense attorney Mike Ramsey said such "speculative amounts" were an "impossible burden" on the jury. He told jurors to decide that no assets be seized.

Garcia Abrego's sister, Blanca Esthela Garcia Abrego, was shaken and tearful about the verdict.

"We're very upset," she said. "We're very hurt."

Other family members, including his wife and son, declined comment.

Outside the courtroom, Garcia Abrego's attorney Tony Canales expressed disappointment in the jury's decision and promised an appeal.

"I guess the jury says in this verdict that it doesn't bother them that huge amounts of money were paid to informants," he said. "There's nothing wrong with cutting deals with people."

Canales, who is a former U.S. attorney, and Ramsey had referred to some of the government's 50 witnesses as "star rats" who spoke from scripted testimony in return for reduced sentences on their own convictions.

Prosecutors countered they

had proved their case but didn't disagree with the assessment of their witnesses as "rats."

"I like the word 'rats,'" Assistant U.S. Attorney Jesse Rodriguez said during closing arguments. "Who else can lead you to the big cheese?"

Defense lawyers also described the government's case as a "show trial" put on in an election year with Garcia Abrego a convenient scapegoat in America's war on drugs.

Garcia Abrego, who had been on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List, was arrested Jan. 14 near Monterrey, Mexico, by Mexican drug agents.

They waited for hours, covered with tree branches and dirt, at the modest, two-bedroom home where he was staying and moved in when he arrived.

The next day, heavily armed federal police agents escorted him on a plane to Houston. He admitted to drug trafficking in an interview with U.S. federal agents but downplayed his role.

Garcia Abrego did not testify during his trial but sat impassively, listening through headphones to the proceedings translated into Spanish.

Abrego verdict gives hope to Rio Grande Valley

BROWNSVILLE, Texas (AP) — A region forever branded a drug corridor, where residents lived with the terror of turf wars and scandal under the watch of one of Mexico's most powerful drug kingpins.

On Wednesday, those fears diminished only for a moment in the Rio Grande Valley with the awaited conviction of Juan Garcia Abrego.

The Rio Grande Valley has been called a drug corridor. "It's a message that it sends is it may take a while, but even the kingpins are going to have their day in court," said state Rep. Rene Herrera of Brownsville.

A federal jury in Houston convicted Garcia Abrego on 22 counts of drug trafficking and money laundering. He faces life in prison.

The 52-year-old native of La Matamoros, Mexico, headed the Gulf Cartel, a trafficking organization that stretched just across the border into Brownsville.

The cartel is believed to smuggle hundreds of tons of Colombian cocaine each year into the United States via the Rio Grande Valley.

Law enforcement officials who have worked since the mid-80s to top Garcia Abrego praised his conviction as both a victory in the drug war and an inspiration to keep fighting.

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"It's a justice that's long overdue regarding one of the biggest narco-political traffickers in the world," said Phil Jordan, a retired Drug Enforcement Administration agent who helped build the case against Garcia Abrego.

"The message that it sends is it may take a while, but even the kingpins are going to have their day in court."

Alonzo Pena
U.S. Customs Service

Others said the conviction would serve as an example for the heads of other cartels.

"The message that it sends is it may take a while, but even the kingpins are going to have their day in court," said Alonzo Pena, head of the U.S. Customs Service

in Brownsville.

Jeff Stamm, a supervisory special agent with the DEA's Brownsville office, added: "The heads of the cartels in the past have been somewhat untouchable because they have so successfully insulated themselves. Now they are realizing they are in fact not untouchable."

The conviction of Garcia Abrego comes more than 10 years after U.S. authorities first learned of the up-and-coming drug lord following the seizure of 1,600 pounds of cocaine in a pickup truck on the Texas border.

It was the biggest load at the time in this region, officials said, and an indication that the drug trade was growing.

In the years to follow, hundreds more seizures would be made, some directly linked to Garcia Abrego, others not. Underlings would be arrested and property and cash seized.

Violence erupted on both sides of the border, again suspected to be connected to Garcia Abrego but usually not proven.

In Brownsville, authorities believe several unsolved crimes were committed by the Gulf Car-

tel, including the 1991 execution-style killings of a couple and their attorney near the Rio Grande.

Garcia Abrego also is believed responsible for the 1985 kidnapping of an 18-year-old man who was taken from his parents' home at gunpoint, never to be seen again.

While authorities here acknowledge Garcia Abrego probably never will be tried for those crimes, they said his conviction on the trafficking charges provides some sense of justice.

"That organization killed a lot of people and caused a lot of grief along the border. With him going down, that sends a real message," said George Gavito, a former sheriff's lieutenant who served on a DEA task force that helped investigate the 1991 murders.

Gavito admitted, however, that the conviction will do little to stop the flow of drugs into the Rio Grande Valley and beyond. It is only a matter of time before a new lord takes over the kingdom.

"That's just one little fish, and there's hundreds and hundreds out there," he said. "You knock down that organization and a lot more are born."

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