

US charges 19 with gun trafficking

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Federal officials unsealed charges relating to firearms trafficking today against 19 defendants in Mississippi and Chicago, Illinois. 18 defendants were arrested by federal, state, and local agents this morning in Chicago and Northern Mississippi, and one is in custody on an unrelated charge.

Fourteen of the defendants were charged in a federal complaint unsealed today in the Northern District of Illinois. The complaint alleges that the defendants conspired to illegally purchase firearms in pawn shops and gun stores in Clarksdale and Tunica, Mississippi, transport the firearms to Chicago, and distribute the firearms to members of Chicago street gangs. The members of the conspiracy are alleged to have transported in excess of 100 firearms from Mississippi to Chicago between August 1999 and April 2005. Some of those illegally purchased guns later were recovered at crime scenes, according to the complaint.

In addition to those charged in the Northern District of Illinois complaint, five additional defendants were charged with serving as straw purchasers of firearms in separate indictments unsealed today in the Northern District of Mississippi.

The affidavit in support of the complaint unsealed in Chicago describes an organizational structure in which firearms "brokers" from Chicago arranged to have guns purchased in Mississippi and brought to Illinois for distribution to gang members in and around Chicago. The brokers allegedly worked with "traffickers" who recruited "straw purchasers" to buy the guns at three different pawn shops and a gun shop in Mississippi. The traffickers then transported the guns to Chicago where they were distributed at the direction of the brokers.

According to the complaint, the straw purchasers falsely certified on federal forms that they were the actual purchasers of firearm, when, in fact, they knew the firearms were being purchased on behalf of co-conspirators who intended to transport them to Chicago. The complaint further alleges that in many cases, the straw purchasers knew that the firearms were to be sold to members of various Chicago street gangs and were to be used for illegal purposes. In an effort to avoid detection by law enforcement, members of the conspiracy obliterated the serial numbers from many of the firearms. According to the complaint, a number of the defendants involved in the conspiracy as brokers and traffickers are convicted felons, and thus cannot legally possess a firearm.

According to the complaint, personnel from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) analyzed gun tracing data from firearms recovered by law enforcement in the Northern District of Illinois between January 2001 and October 2006, and discovered that a total of 301 of those guns came from four federally licensed firearms dealers in Clarksdale and Tunica. Investigators used records from these dealers to identify the purchasers of the guns, and the purchasers were interviewed as part of the investigation. The 14 defendants named in the complaint allegedly were responsible for acquiring and bringing to Chicago 39 of the guns ultimately recovered by law enforcement, and for illegally purchasing, transporting to Chicago, and distributing a total of more than 100 guns, most of which have not been recovered.

The complaint describes the circumstances under which certain of the guns were recovered in Chicago, including in connection with investigations of shootings and drug transactions. According to the complaint, one gun allegedly purchased as part of the conspiracy, a 9mm semiautomatic pistol, was recovered in Chicago in December 2003, approximately 10 months after its purchase in Mississippi, following an incident in which police officers responding to a tip that individuals in a stolen car were on their way to commit a homicide, found the car and were confronted by two persons pointing guns at them. The police officers opened fire, killing the men, and one of the police officers suffered a gunshot wound to his hand.

Gary Shapiro, First Assistant United States Attorney, announced the charges together with Andrew Traver, Special Agent in Charge, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Chicago Field Division; Deputy Superintendent Hiram Grau, Chicago Police Department; and Lt. Colonel Leonard Stallworth of the Illinois State Police.

Mr. Traver said: "Criminal interstate firearms trafficking is a largely unheralded phenomenon but a widespread, efficient, and growing enterprise. As the nature of the guns traced in this investigation reflects, aspiring gang members and up and coming narcotics traffickers are no longer content to arm themselves with the cheap and disposable pocket pistols and "Saturday Night Specials" of the past, which are both unreliable and unimposing. Instead, they have shown an increasing preference for larger caliber, higher capacity, and more powerful handguns in 9mm and .40 calibers, and for AK-47-type assault weapons, which expose both police officers and law-abiding citizens to much greater danger. Groups of interstate firearms traffickers such as the ones charged today are a significant source of illegal guns for Chicago-area criminals. Our firearms trafficking task force, together with our partners from the Chicago Police Department and Illinois State Police, will continue our efforts to disrupt the flow of illegal guns into Chicago and other Illinois communities."

The investigation was conducted jointly by the Chicago Police Department, the Illinois State Police, and the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco Firearms and Explosives. Also assisting in today's arrests were agents from the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics and Deputy U.S. Marshals.

Charged in the complaint are:

• Eddie Nesby, 25, Chicago IL; a convicted felon who allegedly recruited straw purchasers to purchase firearms in Mississippi, and then transported the firearms to Chicago to sell to gang members.

• Julius Statham, 37, Chicago, IL; a convicted felon who allegedly purchased firearms transported from Mississippi to Chicago by his relative, Roy Christopher Brunt, and distributed the firearms to members of his street gang. Statham is also alleged to have traveled to Mississippi and recruited another straw purchaser to purchase firearms on his behalf to bring back to Chicago.

Â· Antonio Brunt, 30, Chicago IL; a convicted felon who allegedly assisted his relative, Roy Christopher Brunt, in selling firearms to members of his street gang in Chicago.

Â· Roy Christopher Brunt, 29, and Sylvester Rice, 29, both of Jonestown MS; both allegedly recruited straw purchasers to buy firearms on their behalf and transported the firearms to Chicago for resale.

Â· Demetrius Burnett, 33, Percy Mattox, 33, and McKinley Pitts, 29, all of Jonestown, MS; all allegedly acted as straw purchasers and recruited others to purchase firearms in Mississippi and transport the firearms to Chicago.

Â· Charles Cotton, 46, Percy Strong, 54, Arness Brunt, 26, Tammie Brown, 30, and Curtis Simmons, 25, all of Jonestown, MS, and James Jiles, 26, of Clarksdale, MS; all allegedly acted as straw purchasers who purchased firearms in Mississippi.

In addition to the complaint filed in Chicago, a federal grand jury in the Northern District of Mississippi, under the direction of United States Attorney Jim M. Greenlee and Special Agent in Charge David Harper of ATF's New Orleans Field Division, returned indictments against an additional five defendants, each of whom is charged with one or more counts of making false statements in connection with the purchase of firearms, by falsely claiming to be the actual purchaser. Those defendants and the number of counts charged against them are: Clifford Moore, 26, Friars Point, MS (eight counts), Latoria Davis, 26, Clarksdale, MS (three counts), Jeannie Mae Bedford, 36, Jonestown, MS (one count), Veronica Gilliam, 27, Jonestown MS (two counts), and George Gilliam, 25, Jonestown, MS (one count). These defendants will be prosecuted in the Northern District of Mississippi.

The government is being represented by Assistant United States Attorney Ronald DeWald in the Northern District of Illinois and Assistant United States Attorney Susan Bradley in the Northern District of Mississippi. If convicted, each defendant charged in the Chicago complaint faces a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment and \$250,000 fine, and each defendant charged in Mississippi faces a maximum penalty of ten years' imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine for each count charged. The Court, however, would determine the appropriate sentence to be imposed. All of the defendants arrested in Mississippi are scheduled for an initial appearance today in U.S. District Court in Oxford, Mississippi.

The public is reminded that an indictment contains only charges and is not evidence of guilt. The multiple defendants in this case are presumed innocent and are entitled to a fair trial at which the United States has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.