

12 are arrested in counter-terrorism and drug-trafficking investigation

More indictments are expected in the probe, which has centered on L.A.'s garment district.

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A dozen people were arrested Tuesday on charges of narcotics trafficking, money laundering and selling counterfeit goods after a two-year counter-terrorism and drug investigation centered in Los Angeles' downtown garment district.

The focus of the federal investigation was Ali Khalil Elreda, 32, who was detained at Los Angeles International Airport last year, accused of trying to smuggle \$120,000 in money orders and cashier's checks, hidden in a child's toy, to Lebanon, according to an indictment and an affidavit filed in the case.

In 2005, a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department official showed a Senate committee a picture of a tattooed shop owner who had been arrested the year before on charges of selling coun-

terfeit high-fashion merchandise. The tattoo was a symbol of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed guerrillas operating in Lebanon.

In his testimony, Lt. John Stedman, a top supervisor in the department's emergency operations bureau, did not identify the shop owner. Stedman was not involved in the most recent investigation.

But two law enforcement sources said Tuesday that the merchant was Elreda.

Elreda and Hussein Saleh Saleh, 37, both of Bell, were charged in one of two indictments returned in the case with conspiring to smuggle cash out of the United States.

Five years ago, in an interview with *The Times*, Asa Hutchinson, then the administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said authorities were examining dozens of domestic drug cases with potential links to Islamic terrorists, including a methamphetamine ring allegedly tied to Hezbollah.

During the recent Los Angeles investigation, law enforcement authorities allegedly seized 30 kilograms of cocaine and counterfeit clothing worth hun-

dreds of thousands of dollars.

Others arrested Tuesday included Elreda's brother, Mohamad, 25, of Bell; his sister, Susanne, 34, of Smyrna, Ga.; Robert Bell, 36, of Corona; Dalisa Johnson, 37, of Corona; Moussa Matar, 48, of Cudahy; Matar's sons, Mohamad and Ali, both 28, of Cudahy; Juan Gonzalez, 26, of Lynwood; Frankie Higuera, 24, of Downey; and Crystal Hill, 25, of Hawthorne.

In addition to the two indictments, four complaints were brought in the case. The U.S. attorney's office said Elreda's siblings are charged in one complaint with trafficking in counterfeit goods at a store called Hip Hop Connections.

A second complaint accuses Elreda and seven others of conspiring to distribute cocaine.

A third complaint accuses Hussein Saleh of trafficking in counterfeit goods through his store, Star City A & H in the garment district.

A fourth complaint accuses Epifanio Mercado, 29, of Perris and Ricardo Nava, of El Monte of conspiring to traffic in cocaine. The two were arrested over the weekend.

A second indictment charges the Matars with structuring cash transactions to avoid federal reporting requirements.

The maximum penalty for the defendants charged with conspiring to distribute narcotics would be life without parole in federal prison, according to the U.S. attorney's office. The maximum penalty for the defendants charged with trafficking in counterfeit goods would be 10 years in prison, and conviction on the charges related to concealing cash from authorities could carry a maximum prison term of five years.

Some of the defendants made their initial court appearances Tuesday, and others were expected to appear today before a United States magistrate judge in Los Angeles.

Authorities said they expect more indictments within the next two weeks. The task force investigation included the DEA, FBI, IRS, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Los Angeles Police Department, Sheriff's Department and other law enforcement agencies.

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