

Former Haiti coup leader pleads guilty in U.S. drug case

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(Reuters) - The leader of a 2004 coup that toppled Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide pleaded guilty on Monday to a money laundering charge related to an international drug trafficking scheme, the U.S. Department of Justice said.

Guy Philippe, 49, admitted to one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering stemming from his receipt of cash payments tied to narcotics sales in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Justice Department said.

Prosecutors said Philippe, a former high-ranking official in the Haitian National Police, received more than \$1.5 million of bribe payments to ensure the safe transit of drug shipments.

The defendant entered his plea before U.S. District Judge Cecilia Altonaga in Miami.

Zeljka Bozanic, a lawyer for Philippe, said she and prosecutors are recommending that her client receive a nine-year prison term at his scheduled July 5 sentencing.

Two counts against Philippe were dismissed, including one for drug trafficking that could have resulted in a life sentence.

“Mr. Philippe has accepted responsibility by taking the plea,” Bozanic said in a phone interview. “It was an attractive plea offer that makes sense.”

Philippe was arrested on Jan. 5 in Haiti after giving a radio interview and then extradited to the United States. He had avoided capture for more than a decade in connection with a November 2005 indictment.

The arrest came four days before Philippe was scheduled to join Haiti's parliament as a senator, following his November election from the country's southwestern Grand Anse region.

U.S. prosecutors accused Philippe of conspiring from 1997 to March 2001 to import more than five kilograms (11 lbs) of cocaine into the United States, and from June 1999 to April 2003 to launder money to conceal illegal activity.

He was also accused of having in late 2000 transferred a \$112,000 check that included sums from drug trafficking.

Altonaga on March 17 rejected Philippe's bid to dismiss the case on the ground that the "outrageous" nature of his arrest - including having a hood put over his head amidst gunfire and being deprived of food and water for several hours - deprived her of jurisdiction.

The defendant has been held at a federal detention center in Miami since his arrest.

The case is U.S. v. Philippe, U.S. District Court, Southern District of Florida, No. 05-cr-20874.

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