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Billions in drug dealers' illegal Amazon gold 'laundered' through Miami refinery, feds say

BY JAY WEAVER

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In a zeal to hide cocaine profits, South American traffickers have funneled billions of dollars of illegally mined Amazon gold to a Miami metals refinery in what federal authorities say amounts to a massive money-laundering scheme.

The man suspected of being in the middle of it all — NTR Metals director of operations Juan P. Granda — was arrested by federal agents this week at his mother's Miami home after he flew back from Colombia and got fired from his job.

Granda is accused of conspiring with two other NTR employees to buy gold from illegal mines in the Amazon rain forest, refine the precious metal, sell it and then wire the proceeds back to drug traffickers, according to a criminal complaint unsealed in federal court Thursday. Narco-traffickers use the clandestine operation to convert their cocaine profits into cash.

U.S. Customs records show that NTR imported \$3.6 billion worth of illegal gold through a “shifting array of Latin American countries” under the “responsibility” of Granda and two Miami-based NTR sales people between 2012 and 2015, according to the complaint by Homeland Security Investigations and the FBI.

“For all of the billions of dollars’ worth shipped from Latin America to NTR in Miami, NTR sent billions of dollars in wire payments to Latin America from the United States,” said the complaint, filed by prosecutor Francisco Maderal.

Maderal plans to ask a magistrate judge on Monday to detain Granda before trial because he considers him a flight risk. Granda, a 35-year-old U.S. citizen born in Ecuador, graduated from Florida State University.

Granda’s attorney said his client, who was based in Peru, is being scapegoated by the company in the money-laundering conspiracy case brought by the U.S. attorney’s office in Miami.

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HE WAS A SALESMAN WITH A FANCY TITLE. HE DIDN'T TOUCH THE GOLD; HE DIDN'T TOUCH THE MONEY — NOTHING.

Edward J. O'Donnell IV, attorney for suspect Juan P. Granda

“He was a salesman with a fancy title,” Edward J. O'Donnell IV said in an interview Friday. “He didn't touch the gold; he didn't touch the money — nothing. He relied on this major company to do the compliance. The company has made him a sacrificial lamb.”

NTR Metals, whose parent company, Element Direct, is based in Dallas, has not been charged in the case. An attorney for the company, Trey Gum, did not respond to a request for comment.

Granda's arrest on Wednesday put a spotlight on Miami's central role as an international gold-trading hub, with the majority of the precious metal imported into the United States through Miami International Airport to be refined by NTR Metals and other companies in South Florida.

"Illegal gold, mined in violation of foreign law, is a significant problem throughout Latin America and particularly Peru, where illegal mining is responsible for the devastation of large swaths of rain forest," the complaint stated. "The international gold trade has become a common method for the laundering of illegal mining, narcotics and other criminal proceeds."

Federal agents said the illicit activity implicating the Miami metals refinery came to light in 2013, when Peruvian authorities seized about \$18 million of gold bound for South Florida because the exporters could not show the legal origin, possession or purchase of the gold. At least one of the companies sending the gold to NTR was financed by a man identified as P.F. in the complaint. According to sources, he is "Peter Ferrari," whose real name is Pedro Perez Miranda.

Ferrari was acquitted of narcotics money laundering in Peru. But he was later arrested on charges of illegal gold mining and laundering more than \$500 million worth of gold.

After the Peruvian crackdown, smuggled gold was transported to Bolivia before it was shipped to NTR in Miami, the complaint said. Last year, Ecuadorean authorities made arrests involving about \$400 million in gold from Peru bound for refineries in Miami, including NTR Metals, according to the complaint.

Federal agents said customs records show that NTR also participated in "highly suspicious gold imports" from Colombia, Chile, Guyana and the Caribbean.

The complaint accuses Granda and two other NTR sales people of participating in "smiling and dialing" strategies to find out who had gold to sell, develop new relationships and promote NTR — including bringing customers to Miami to tour its facilities at 8266 NW 14th St.

Agents also disclosed they used confidential sources and wiretaps to track Granda's activities in South America. In a group chat on his smartphone, Granda referred to himself as a "modern-day Pablo Escobar," according to the complaint.

"I'm like Pablo coming to Ecuador to get the coke," Granda said.

Granda's attorney, O'Donnell, said the reference was taken out of context by the agents. "He's joking around when he's in the jungle," O'Donnell said.

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