



The case started with boxes. It ended with a guilty plea of sending arms to Venezuela FEBRUARY 05, 2017 2:22 PM

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One of three men accused of illegally sending firearms and ammunition to Venezuela, has pleaded guilty.

José Alexander Gutiérrez Morales, 30, pleaded guilty Friday before U.S. District Judge Robert Scola, who set the date for his sentencing in April. The maximum sentence Scola mentioned is 10 years in the federal penitentiary, but Gutiérrez Morales is expected to get a lighter sentence with the guilty plea. Scola also warned Gutiérrez Morales, a Venezuelan, that he may be placed in deportation proceedings.

Gutiérrez Morales is the second of three Venezuelans arrested in the case to plead guilty. The first was Alfredo Alejandro Montilla Hernández, 31, two weeks ago. The third, Abrahán José Aguilar Sánchez, 35, is expected to plead guilty this week, according to his lawyer Louis Casuso.

Marc David Seitles, Gutiérrez Morales' lawyer, declined to comment.

Gutiérrez Morales and Montilla Hernández were arrested last October.

The third Venezuelan involved in the case, Aguilar Sánchez, was arrested in December and charged in connection with the same case which arose from the discovery by federal agents of eight handguns and more than 23,500 rounds inside empty boxes for automobile batteries marked for shipment to Venezuela.

Aguilar Sánchez was arrested at Miami International Airport in December shortly before boarding a flight to Venezuela, according to a criminal complaint in the case.

Court documents related to Aguilar Sánchez's arrest revealed new details. Investigators found more firearms in addition to the ones initially discovered in car battery boxes. According to the criminal complaint lodged against Aguilar Sánchez, federal agents seized from the other two defendants five assault rifles, two more handguns and more than 1,700 bullets.

The case came to light in April when Customs and Border Protection agents at the airport opened a package sent from Maracaibo, Venezuela, by a person named Ender Soto. It contained empty boxes for vehicle batteries.

Homeland Security Investigations, a unit of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, tracked the package and found Montilla Hernández and Gutiérrez Morales.

Aguilar Sánchez appeared in the case about a month later when he arrived at MIA from Maracaibo. Officials at the airport questioned him and seized his cellphone, where they found Ender Soto's name, according to the criminal complaint.

Investigators later also managed to link Aguilar Sánchez to the defendants who have since pleaded guilty.
