

Agent bribed with cash, sex leads to dropped drug charges against Colombian, feds say

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A wanted Colombian drug lord, Jose Bayron Piedrahita pulled off a miracle of sorts when authorities say he bribed a federal agent in Miami to get his name removed as a defendant from one of the biggest cocaine-smuggling cases in the nation's history.

Piedrahita paid off the Homeland Security Investigations agent with about \$18,000 in cash — and made arrangements for Christopher V. Ciccione II to enjoy the company of prostitutes at the Marriott Hotel in Bogota as well as meals at an upscale restaurant, authorities say.

Ciccione did not disappoint the reputed drug lord.

Deploying a web of lies, the veteran agent persuaded federal prosecutors in Miami to dismiss Piedrahita from an indictment six years ago that initially charged about 100 members of the powerful Cali cartel in 1993, according to new corruption charges.

Those charges accuse Ciccione, Piedrahita and the agent's informant in Colombia of conspiring to commit fraud and obstruction of justice.

The agent, after wining and dining the suspect in Bogota, lied that Piedrahita was a fugitive who could not be identified or found, a new indictment says. Ciccione "falsified official records and lied to his supervisors and the U.S. Attorney's Office to cause" the original drug-trafficking indictment to be dismissed against Piedrahita.

Ciccione, 52, who resigned as a federal agent, was arrested in Philadelphia last month and released on a \$25,000 bond. He is scheduled for arraignment in Miami federal court on Wednesday.

“Chris is prepared to confront the allegations against him,” said his defense attorney, **Marc Seitles**. “He has worked his entire professional career in law enforcement and continues to have the support of his family and friends.”

The indictment is not only a stain on the former agent and the federal government’s high-profile investigation of the once-formidable Cali cartel, which extended from 1991 to 2011. It also calls into question all of Ciccione’s investigative work: He initially served as a U.S. Customs Service agent in 2001 before it was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The department declined to comment on the current indictment or on whether it was reviewing all of Ciccione’s criminal cases.

According to the indictment, Ciccione communicated with Piedrahita through the agent’s confidential informant, Juan Carlos Velasco Cano.

Starting in February 2010, Ciccione emailed federal prosecutors that he would be seeking dismissal of the drug-trafficking charges against Piedrahita.

Months later, in July, Velasco informed Piedrahita of Ciccione’s effort, saying the agent told him: “It will come through, brother. And you will be the first to know.” Velasco also said that the agent was trying to obtain a visa for Piedrahita to come to the United States.

One of the agent’s first favors was to alter Piedrahita’s record on a federal criminal database called TECS, so that it falsely showed he was a “former suspect of a closed investigation” rather than a defendant in the “Operation Cornerstone” case against the Carli cartel, the indictment said. In the narrative section, Ciccione falsely noted in September 2010 that Piedrahita’s case would be dismissed because he could not be extradited to the United States and he continued to “cooperate” with investigators.

By that November, Piedrahita was making arrangements for Ciccione’s visit to Bogota the following month. Piedrahita told Velasco, the informant, that “three divine women” were going to join them.

On Dec. 6, 2010, Ciccione and an unnamed Homeland Security agent traveled to Bogota and met with Piedrahita, Velasco and others at the Marriott Hotel in Bogota, according to the indictment.

“During the party, Ciccione consumed alcoholic drinks and had sexual relations with a prostitute, which were paid for by Piedrahita,” the indictment said.

The next evening, Ciccione and the other Homeland Security agent attended dinner at the upscale restaurant Pesquera Jaramillo, with Piedrahita, Velasco, a Colombia army colonel, a Colombian pop music star and several women. Piedrahita picked up the tab.

“During this trip, Ciccione received a cash bribe from Piedrahita and Velasco,” the indictment said, adding that Ciccione later deposited \$17,700 in cash in his bank account and spent \$10,166 in cash. Among his purchases: He paid \$5,000 in cash as a down payment for a new 2011 Jeep Wrangler.

After the trip to Bogota, the agent requested the dismissal of a group of fugitive defendants from the original Cali cartel indictment, including Piedrahita. In an emailed memo, Ciccione told his supervisor that attempts to identify Piedrahita were unsuccessful — that he was “never positively identified,” and “arrest warrants were never issued.”

Ciccione’s dismissal memo also said that “all investigative leads and attempts to identify” Piedrahita “have been exhausted.”

The agent’s supervisor told Ciccione that he could not state in the dismissal motion that a defendant was unidentified if he was “convicted elsewhere,” “a source,” or “listed” in another “case, but fully identified.” The agent was told to “triple check” all the names in his dismissal motion.

Ciccione ignored his supervisor. He sent the dismissal memo to the special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations office in Miami and to the U.S. attorney’s office in South Florida, the indictment said. Both signed off on it.

In the memo, Ciccione “falsely” said that the original agent in the Cali cartel case and an agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration agreed that the fugitive defendants on the list — including Piedrahita — could not be identified and found after 15 years, the indictment said.

In October 2011, a federal judge dismissed the drug-trafficking charges against 18 defendants believed to be on the lam, including Piedrahita.

Last year, Piedrahita, other members of his family and their companies were banned by the federal government from doing business in the United States. Piedrahita, 58, was also named a “Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker” under the U.S. Kingpin Act.