

Note: Dedicated daily coverage of federal courts led to an exclusive investigation and a front page story linking drug violence in Mexico to the actions of people in Dallas for the DMN's Metro Section. The story actually ran in *Al Dia* a couple days before.

The Dallas Morning News

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Suspect may be linked to Zetas

Lancaster: Lawyer says man denies smuggling guns for cartel enforcers

By SERGIO CHAPA / *Al Día*

A Lancaster man arrested late last week for being a felon in possession of a firearm is part of a network that provides weapons to the drug cartel enforcers known as the Zetas, according to court documents and testimony.

Members of a local task force with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives arrested Erasmo Arciba, 42, near his Franklin Street home Thursday. The arrest came after a five-month investigation into handguns and assault rifles that were bought in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and delivered to Mexico's Gulf cartel.

Mr. Arciba's attorney, Carlton McLarty, said his client – who is being held without bail pending a Thursday hearing – admits to being a felon in possession of guns but denies being part of an international weapons smuggling ring.

In a court hearing Monday, Dallas police Officer Paul Freese told U.S. Magistrate Judge William F. Sanderson that Mr. Arciba's case is part of an ongoing investigation of the Zetas' local connections, including weapons trafficking.

The Zetas, a paramilitary group that murders rivals and collect debts on behalf of the Gulf drug cartel, have been linked to crimes in Mexico and the U.S., including at least three killings in the Dallas area first reported in *The Dallas Morning News*.

Officer Freese testified in court that Mr. Arciba is affiliated with a group "that sends weapons to Mexico and Zetas ... but he is not a member" of the Zetas.

Mr. Arciba "is a hardworking person in town" who runs a construction business out of his Lancaster home, Mr. McLarty said. "He admitted to having the guns and should be granted bond."

Police say Angilita Ortiz, 21, of Grand Prairie helped Mr. Arciba buy at least two FN Herstal 5.7 USG guns from a pawnshop in the 2900 block of West Northwest Highway in Dallas on Sept. 8 and Thursday.

A probable-cause affidavit filed in the case states that Zetas use the same type of handgun as "one of their weapons of choice" and that ATF agents have watched over the purchase of the Belgian-made weapons in the Dallas area.

The pawnshop owner declined to comment on the case Tuesday, but an affidavit states that he informed ATF investigators of the purchases, because Ms. Ortiz bought two of the same type of handgun for self-defense in a short period of time and did not buy ammunition.

Officer Freese testified that guns of the same brand bought by Ms. Ortiz were used in a shootout between Zetas and Mexican federal agents in June and that ATF officials determined those weapons came from Dallas.

Ms. Ortiz did not respond to an interview request. She has not been charged with a crime.

The affidavit states that Mr. Arciba recruited Ms. Ortiz to buy guns for him, because he served 60 months in prison for a 1991 drug trafficking case in East St. Louis, Ill.

According to federal law, an ex-felon cannot purchase or be in possession of a firearm.

Tom Crowley, ATF regional spokesperson, said arms trafficking is more common along the border, but there have been several gun-purchasing cases similar to the Arciba case in Dallas-Fort Worth. Mr. Crowley said those weapons were sold to criminals in Mexico.

Mr. Crowley said Tuesday that ATF officials are still trying to determine how many weapons were funneled into Mexico by Mr. Arciba and his associates.

According to the affidavit, ATF agents followed Mr. Arciba and Ms. Ortiz when they left Bachman Pawn and Guns on Sept. 14.

Hours after Mr. Arciba left Ms. Ortiz at her home, authorities arrested him.

He admitted to having possession of the gun she purchased earlier in the day and had it with him. He also told agents he had three more in his garage.

According to the affidavit, Mr. Arciba told investigators that the other FN Herstal gun – the one Ms. Ortiz bought Sept. 8 – ended up in Mexico.

The News was among the first news organizations to report on the existence of the Zetas and their enforcement role for the Gulf cartel. The organization has been engaged in a bloody turf war with rival cartels along the Texas-Mexico border and elsewhere in Mexico.

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