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January 19, 2011

Alexandra MacAulay Abdelwahab and Liam Casey

Two Toronto men pleaded not guilty to drug trafficking charges in Los Angeles after police there raided a warehouse filled with romaine lettuce, parsley and a locked safe containing more than 47 kilograms of cocaine and about \$2.4 million (U.S.) in cash.

Agents with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations and several local police departments said they followed a Canadian man after he landed at LAX airport from Toronto's Pearson Airport on January 5, which led them to a suspected drug house in North Hollywood and a warehouse and tractor trailer in Valencia, which is about 50 km from Los Angeles.

Around 10 p.m. last Thursday, the multi-agency task force swooped down on the house, truck and warehouse. Outside the storage facility, they found a tractor trailer being loaded with romaine lettuce and parsley, according to Sgt. Saul Rodriguez of the narcotic squad of Santa Monica Police Department.

Inside they discovered a locked safe that the Los Angeles County Fire Department had to cut open, revealing cocaine and cash inside.

Vasile Babuschin, 19, and Sergei Souetov, 32, both of Toronto, were charged with possession of cocaine for sale. Babuschin was arrested inside the Valencia warehouse while Souetov was arrested in a North Hollywood house. They remain in a Los Angeles County jail as they await a February 4 preliminary-setting court date, according to Babuschin's lawyer, Ronald Richards.

"Our defence is simple," Richards told the *Star* Tuesday night. "He is a 19-year-old that was easily manipulated to watch over a storage facility and wasn't given all the facts about what was going on there."

According to Sgt. Jay Trisler of the Santa Monica Police Department, Babuschin was known to police.

Richards strongly defended his client's innocence.

Richards said Babuschin was down in Los Angeles on vacation, and wasn't staying with Souetov. Babuschin's family back in Toronto is concerned and upset, but "they're standing behind him," according to his lawyer.

Police and Richards both said Los Angeles is a major pit-stop as cocaine makes its way from Mexico to Canada. Rodriguez said the cocaine was definitely going to Canada, but wouldn't say the exact entry point.

Police speculated the lettuce would be used to hide cocaine and smuggle it into Canada.

"We believe these suspects were going to attempt to ship this cocaine by truck to Canada, where it would have sold on the streets for more than \$2 million," said special agent Claude Arnold. "Thanks to some tenacious police work, there are some very unhappy drug dealers north of the border tonight."

Police departments of Santa Monica, El Monte, Anaheim and Costa Mesa, California helped with the investigation.

With files from Associated Press



Police say about 103 lbs of cocaine and \$2.4 million (U.S.) were seized as part of the arrest of Sergei Souetov, 32, and Vasile Babuschin, 19, both of Toronto. They have been charged with narcotics-related offences in Santa Monica, California.

Submitted Photo/Santa Monica Police Department