

International ecstasy smuggling ring dismantled, U.S. officials say

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LOS ANGELES (CNN) -- The U.S. Customs Service says 24 people have been arrested in a crackdown on an international smuggling ring that used strippers, cocktail waitresses and others to import 9 million tablets of the party drug ecstasy from Paris to the United States. The targeted drug ring is the largest ecstasy syndicate ever dismantled by U.S. Customs, officials said Wednesday. "This investigation began at the bottom of the organization and ended at the top," said U.S. Customs Commissioner Raymond Kelly. "Through painstaking work, Customs investigators were ultimately able to arrest the accused ringleader and bring down a huge ecstasy trafficking syndicate," he said. The drug is popular with young people in their late teens to early 20s who use it at rave parties at nightclubs. The hallucinogenic stimulant enables users to stay up all night dancing and partying, feeling euphoric and loving.

But the National Institute on Drug Abuse warns that it's likely that ecstasy use can "cause a variety of behavioral and cognitive consequences as well as impairing memory." On Thursday, a House subcommittee is scheduled to hold a hearing on the threat posed by illegal importation, trafficking and use of ecstasy and other club-type drugs.

Alleged drug maker still at large

The 9 million tablets that the ring allegedly smuggled into the country for distribution on both the East and West coasts had an estimated street value of \$270 million, officials said. Only about 650,000, or 7 percent, of the pills -- with a retail value of nearly \$20 million -- have been seized by U.S. Customs, Drug Enforcement Administration or French authorities. Three BMW sports cars, two handguns, and more than \$170,000 in U.S. currency were also seized during the operation, Customs officials said. The 24 arrests came in the culmination of a yearlong investigation code-named "Operation Paris Express." Those arrested included 14 people in Los Angeles, four in New York, three in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, two in Houston and one in New Jersey, agents said. The ringleader was identified as Jacob Orgad, an Israeli émigré who allegedly operated in Los Angeles, New York and Europe. Also known as "Koki" and "Tony Evans," Orgad was arrested in New York on April 7 and charged with engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise, conspiracy to import and distribute narcotics and other offenses. At least one major suspect is still at large -- a Dutch chemist, thought to be in Los Angeles -- who allegedly manufactured the drug. Orgad's lawyer, Ronald Richards, told CNN that he believes his client is innocent of the charges. "There is no direct evidence of my client's involvement, except for someone else saying that he was involved," Richards said. "The government's case is based entirely on the false testimony of convicted drug dealers or couriers who were caught red-handed," Richards said.

Strippers, cocktail waitresses and decoys

Officials say the case began last July, when Customs inspectors in Los Angeles intercepted three female couriers arriving from Paris with a total of 140,000 ecstasy pills in boxes of toys and false compartments in their luggage. Building on subsequent seizures and other intelligence, Customs agents ultimately learned that the ring employed 30 couriers from California, Nevada, Texas, Arkansas, Ohio, New York, New Jersey and Florida, officials say. The couriers were described as strippers, dancers, cocktail waitresses and people traveling as married couples, in one case accompanied by a teen-ager with mental disabilities. Officials say, the man and woman with the teen were arrested by Customs agents in Houston after 200,000 ecstasy pills were found concealed in socks packed in their luggage. Couriers allegedly were compensated with a paid vacation to France and \$10,000 to \$15,000 in cash to fly back to the United States with a load

of ecstasy. In some cases, decoys allegedly were paid as much as \$2,500 to travel with couriers, dressed in a manner they thought would attract the attention of Customs agents. The idea was to distract the agents so the couriers would get by undetected. The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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