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## **CONVICTION UPHELD ON APPEAL FOR DOUGLAS, ARIZ. DRUG TUNNEL ARCHITECT**

TUCSON, Ariz. - The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco affirmed late last week the conviction and the 18-year federal prison sentence received by Felipe de Jesus Corona-Verbera, 53, of Guadalajara, Mexico.

In March 2006, a federal jury in Tucson convicted Corona-Verbera on four drug trafficking charges. Corona-Verbera, an architect, oversaw construction of a sophisticated drug tunnel that extended from a residence in Agua Prieta, Mexico to a warehouse in Douglas, Ariz. The tunnel was discovered in May 1990 shortly after 2,037 pounds of cocaine was seized in the Phoenix area and was found to have been smuggled through the tunnel.

"We are pleased that the many years of hard work by prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office working in conjunction with ICE and our counterparts in Mexico to get a conviction has been upheld by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals," stated Daniel G. Knauss, U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona. "Dedicated professionals from these and other agencies work tirelessly to get drugs, and those who smuggle them, off our streets and out of our communities."

"This decision confirms that justice was properly served in the conviction of Corona-Verbera," said Alonzo Pena, Special Agent in Charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Arizona. "The Douglas tunnel was used to transfer thousands of pounds of narcotics into the United States, and ICE is proud to have played a role in shutting it down."

Corona-Verbera had lived in Douglas, Arizona, but fled to Mexico immediately after the cocaine was seized and the tunnel discovered. He had been a fugitive since 1990. Despite numerous appeals to the public for assistance through the television programs "Unsolved Mysteries" and "America's Most Wanted, Corona-Verbera was not located until 2002. He was arrested in 2003 and then extradited by Mexico to the United States.

Corona-Verbera was the architect for the "El Chappo" Guzman Drug Trafficking Organization. He was linked to other structures he constructed for Guzman, including residences in Mexico with hidden "clavos" that were used to hide currency, drugs, and weapons. Entry into those rooms was through the floor or other hidden entrances, often through the use of hydraulics.

To gain entrance to the Douglas Tunnel in Mexico, an outside water spigot was turned on, which resulted in a section of concrete floor inside the house, with a pool table on top, raising approximately eight feet into the air through the use of hydraulic pumps. The tunnel shaft was approximately 35 feet deep while the tunnel itself extended 200 feet into the U.S. and came up

through a false drain inside a warehouse in Douglas, Ariz. The tunnel was lined with concrete, equipped with electricity, and contained an air compressor, water drains, a storage area, and an elevator-like pulley system that was used to lift the drugs up the shaft on the American side of the tunnel.

Guzman is under indictment for narcotic violations in Tucson, Ariz. and elsewhere. He escaped from a Mexican prison in 2001 and is alleged to have paid a multi-million dollar bribe to prison officials in order to escape.

Guzman's organization has a history of violence. One of the government witnesses during the Corona-Verbera trial was a high ranking member of the Guzman organization. On three occasions Guzman attempted to silence the witness while he was in a Mexican prison awaiting extradition to the United States. During the first two attempts, the witness was stabbed multiple times. On the third attempt, two hand grenades were thrown near the witness' prison cell.

The Court of Appeals, in its unanimous decision, rejected all of Corona-Verbera's arguments, holding that the 18-year sentence was reasonable, the evidence was sufficient to support the jury's guilty verdicts, and that his various claims of unjust delay in bringing him to trial were without merit.

CASE NUMBER: CR-91-446-TUC-FRZ  
RELEASE NUMBER: 2007-252(Corona-Verbera appeal)

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