

Aurora man among 18 charged in year-long crime ring investigation

By Brock Weir

A 34-year-old Aurora man is among 18 people from York Region and the GTA charged with over 70 criminal charges in Project Tugboat.

Charges were announced last week relating to the year-long investigation, which involved police units from across the Greater Toronto Area in the seizure of firearms, ammunition, controlled substances such as cocaine and opium, and money.

Investigations began in March of 2013 surrounding Ertug Direkoglu, a 34-year-old Richmond Hill resident, also known as 'Tuggy', who police allege was at the centre of a criminal ring responsible for gun and drug trafficking, as well as vehicle and insurance thefts, fraud, possession and sale of stolen property ranging from Durham Region to Hamilton.

'This past Wednesday, March 26, the operational phase of Project Tugboat concluded with 16 pre-dawn search warrants executed in York, Durham and Peel Regions, in the City of Toronto and the City of Hamilton,' said Detective Sargent Duncan McIntyre. 'Two search warrants were executed later that day. Over 160 officers participated from York, Durham, the OPP, Toronto, and Hamilton City Police. Warrants were executed in three businesses, one financial institution, and one correctional facility with the remainder of the search warrants being done on residential properties. An additional nine search warrants were executed on motor vehicles associated with the accused.

'As a result of the investigation and subsequent search warrants, five restricted firearms or handguns were seized, four assault rifles and a shotgun.'

One of the handguns was found on the nightstand of one of the accused within easy access of young children, while another was found wedged between the mattresses where one of the suspects was found sleeping, according to Dt. Sgt. MacIntyre. Police also seized 13 kilos of cocaine with a street value of \$520,000 from a Mississauga business address, a further four kilos of opium in Richmond Hill, as well as stashes of marijuana and oxycodone.

Charges for the 18 individuals, including one 14 year old Richmond Hill boy, include weapons trafficking, possession of ammunition, conspiracy to traffic controlled substances, the possession of handguns and restricted weapons, and other property-related offences.

'A large number of the accused remain in custody at this time and are expected to appear in Newmarket Court over the next several days,' said McIntyre. 'The successful outcome of this investigation could not have been achieved without the dedication and commitment of the men and women, sworn and civilian members of the York Regional Police and their partner agencies.'

Speaking at a press conference at York Regional Police Headquarters in Aurora on Friday morning, Dt. Sgt. MacIntyre stopped short of calling Tuggy the 'kingpin' of the operation, but underscored his 'influence' on the group under investigation.

'We're alleging he is involved in gun trafficking, ammunition trafficking, trafficking of controlled substances and also involved in vehicle and insurance frauds as well,' he said.

'[The investigation] ties in with local tow truck companies in Richmond Hill [where] he ran a business. He coordinated with members of his organization to either set up or stage accidents or damage vehicles and have them moved over to locations where they can allegedly be found by the police with damage to it.'

The Aurora resident alleged to have been involved with the ring, was charged with two counts of fraud over \$5,000, one count of mischief over \$5,000, and two counts of conspiracy to commit fraud. York Regional Police allege he was involved in 'facilitating' some of the vehicle insurance frauds, according to Det. Sgt. McIntyre. He appeared in court on Friday.

A 40-year-old resident of Vaughan, was charged with two counts of trafficking cocaine, possession for the purpose of trafficking, possession of a controlled substance, and possession of proceeds from crime. He is due to answer charges in court on May 9.

Police also investigated a branch of RBC Royal Bank in Vaughan in connection with a safety deposit box associated with one of the accused.

Police say they expect more charges to be laid as the investigation continues.