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Feds link 4 to money laundering

MICHAEL P. MAYKO mmayko@ctpost.com
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BRIDGEPORT — The money flowed out of the country last August like water from a faucet that couldn't be turned off.

There was \$15,000 on Aug. 1 and \$18,350 on Aug. 7. Those figures rose to \$55,000 on Aug. 9, \$44,035 on Aug. 16 and \$30,000 on Aug. 23 and 26.

It came as profits from what federal agents believe was a complex scheme in which pre-paid phone cards were obtained illegally and high-priced items like jewelry were bought on credit cards that were never paid off.

When the money reached the tens of thousands, Fares and Hamzeh Khraisat, two cousins, would bundle it and pay Amer Ramzi Chahal and Pierrot Ghaleb to wire it out of the U.S. — first to a bank in Hong Kong and then to another in Jordan.

Now, the four are under indictment for money laundering in a more than two-year federal investigation that includes charges of wire fraud, mail fraud, immigration fraud and false statements.

Agents from the FBI, IRS, U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the U.S. Diplomatic Security Service and the Secret Service conducted numerous searches during a tri-state sweep in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey early Friday.

Only Hamzeh Khraisat, 38, escaped arrest. He is believed to have fled to the Middle East.

Facing charges of money laundering are Hamzeh Khraisat, his cousin, Fares Khraisat, 37, of Judd Road, in Easton; Amer Ramzi Chahal, 46, of Forest Hills, N.Y.; and Pierrot Ghaleb, 35, of Fresh Meadows, N.Y. What happened to the money once it reached Jordan was not disclosed.

Assistant U.S. Attorney David Ring did say that \$300,000 was used to purchase property in Jordan.

The prosecutor said the government is seeking forfeiture of Fares Khraisat's Zam Zam Telecard Inc., 2690 E. Main St., as well as his multimillion-dollar homes at 125 Judd Road, Easton, and 36 Quarry Road, Monroe.

Additionally, Ring wants forfeiture of \$50,000 cash in a box seized from Chahal and Ghaleb after they left Zam Zam Telecard on Oct. 26, 2006.

On that day, the FBI, Secret Service and State Police set up a surveillance on Chahal and Ghaleb as they drove from New York to the East Main Street store.

Agents believe the pair were there to pick up the cash so they could start it on its journey to Jordan in violation of federal money laundering laws.

Jonathan Kaplan, 35, of Teaneck, N.J., was a vice president at iBasis, a Massachusetts-based company that provided prepaid phone cards to Zam Zam Telecard. He and Fares Khraisat are accused of seven counts each of mail and wire fraud. The indictment alleges that Fares Khraisat bribed Kaplan for preferential treatment, including selling the cards to other stores.

Zam Zam recorded sales of more than \$575,000 in phone cards in an 18-month period covering June 17, 2004, to Dec. 28, 2005.

Also arrested was Jumana Qutishat, 29, Fares Khraisat's wife. She and her husband are charged with conspiring to commit immigration fraud; citizenship fraud and false statements on documents allowing both to stay in the country.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Holly B. Fitzsimmons set bond hearings and the arraignment for Tuesday. Qutishat, the mother of three children, Kaplan and Ghaleb were released after posting bond. But Ring warned that Qutishat faces loss of her citizenship and possible deportation if convicted on the citizenship fraud charges.

The indictment charges that Fares Khraisat came to the U.S. in 1991 and Qutishat in 1995, both on visitor's visas. The pair married in Jordan and had a child before Qutishat's arrival, the indictment alleges.

But to remain in the U.S. as a permanent resident alien, Qutishat married a U.S. citizen in Yonkers, N.Y., on Nov. 20, 1996, in what investigators believe was a sham. She then filed a petition for permanent resident status without reporting her Jordanian marriage to Khraisat. She then divorced the citizen on Oct. 25, 2002, and married Khraisat in the U.S. the following year.