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Around the Americas



American, Five Others Seized in Cocaine Smuggling

PANAMA — In what they claim is "the largest and most important operation" of its kind in this country, Panamanian authorities have arrested an American, three Chileans and two Ecuadorians and accused them of smuggling up to 100 kilos (220 pounds) of cocaine annually into the United States.

The alleged ringleader is Edgard Meler, 49, a German-born American who served with the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1953, some of the time as a counter intelligence agent, before settling in Arica, Chile, according to a statement he made to the district attorney's office here.

Meler, who denies involvement in drug smuggling but admits to knowing and having dealt with such smugglers, left Arica in 1963 when it closed as a free port. He came to Pan-

ama where he acquired a firm, Pan Mundial, of which he is president and general manager.

ONE OF THE THREE CHILEANS arrested, Jorge Munoz, 37, named Meler the ringleader in a sworn statement, according to the district attorney's office.

"This is a well-organized band of drug traffickers, the brains of which is Edgard Meler. As manager of Pan Mundial, he sends a letter to the employment agency in Balboa (in the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Zone), giving notice that such and such a person will work as a salesman for his company, so that this person is issued a pass to sell goods to ships arriving in Cristobal," Munoz's statement said.

"These persons who pose as salesmen for Meler get the

cocaine from ships arriving from South America. Then he gets it and sells part of it in Panama, and the rest he sends abroad," Munoz's statement said. Munoz said he believed that Meler was handling about 100 kilos of cocaine a year.

MELER TOLD PANAMANIAN authorities that his Chilean wife, who comes to Panama about once every four months, operates a store in Arica in partnership with Roberto Bravo. Bravo, Panamanian authorities claim, is listed as a narcotics trafficker in Chile.

Detained along with Munoz and Meler were Alcides Paez Gonzalez and Esteban M. Vilanoba, both Chileans, and Cesar H. Garalza and Segundo L. Aguilar, Ecuadorians. They were

arrested Aug. 4 in raids on premises occupied by Munoz and Paez Gonzalez, both of whom had cocaine. Meler was arrested Aug. 12.

In an effort to rebut repeated charges that Panama is one of the centers for drug traffic into the U. S. with the knowledge of the Panamanian government, the district attorney's office said that through the arrests "the government of Panama thus meets its international obligations to repress the traffic. The largest volume of which, as shown by the statements of the traffickers, is carried via the maritime route, on ships transiting the canal and operating in Canal Zone ports which are under North American jurisdiction. The head of the band is an American citizen."

Johnny Express Crewman Will Face Questioning in Panama

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