

Gold Scam update

Legal minds combing documents

LEGAL authorities are combing a stack of documents including valuable Customs records on gold exports into the United States, originating from Guyana. But sources say the billion-dollar scam probe is far from over.

"There is enough basis to launch a (further) investigation with a view to prosecution," sources said yesterday, but cautioned that the inquiry remains "at the stage of discovery" and will likely take a long time.

Senior Finance Minister, Mr Bharat Jagdeo told reporters Friday that United States Ambassador, Mr David Hobbs Thursday afternoon submitted "a huge pile of documents" to him.

The some 200 papers covering several years, including recently, were passed over to the Director of Public Prosecutions, Mr Ian Chang for scrutiny.

Sources said the Customs' records from various American ports of entry are being sifted to determine which offer evidence for "the best chances of success".

Noting "documents can't be put on trial" sources observed that the Government has to secure enough hard-core evidence to build a proper case against those Guyanese individuals fingered in the

probe.

"It is a selective process," a source declared.

Uncovering this paper trail could lead to persons being charged with Customs violations.

However sources pointed out that some investigative muscle will be first needed to do this, with the supporting involvement of the Guyana Gold Board, the Customs and Excise Department and the Immigration authorities.

"There are enough grounds for such a (full-scale) investigation" a source argued, but pointed to the complexities of the case entailing identifying and establishing linkages among courier, supplier and financier.

Big operators fingered in the racket have since taken a 'back track' route in their illegal trade.

Jagdeo allowed there are such diversions, telling journalists at the GTV 10 briefing, the illegal gold trade is continuing "but not through traditional routes."

"We are always concerned that there is a route through (turn to centre pages)

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Trinidad" since "when we were looking at numbers in one year, (that country) exported about US\$20M worth of gold."

Trinidad is not a gold producer and investigators believe the raw item being channelled through the twin-island state, emanates from South American producers Guyana and Venezuela.

Last year, linkages surfaced with the continental states, including Chile and Bolivia.

In one instance, some 2,000 pounds of the yellow metal was ferried overseas over a three-month period.

A list with the names of the alleged smugglers was compiled by the United States Department

of Commerce at the request of the Guyana Government and copies were forwarded to Head of the Presidential Secretariat, Dr Roger Luncheon; Presidential Adviser, Navin Chandarpal and Inland Revenue Commissioner, Khurshid Sattaur.

Officials uncovered the scheme during routine tax checks, which showed the commodity was being shipped to

agents in the United States, without being officially declared here.

The Guyana Gold Board is the only local agency licensed to trade in gold.

Recently, Head of the Presidential Secretariat, Dr Roger Luncheon said the Government is "vigorously trying" to gather evidence in the scam.

The United States authori-

ties including personnel from the Justice Department and Customs "have been cooperating fully with this administration in the pursuit of specific, valid (and) reliable information that I presume are thought necessary, (before relevant) steps (can) be taken to address these breaches", he had reported. (Indranie Deolall)