



DRUGNET IN PURSUIT OF CYBERSPACE DRUG DEALERS

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View DEA photos from the raid.

See the FBI report on Akhil's "confession."

Read the indictment prosecutor Barbara Cohan wrote.

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THE SUSPECTS — AND THEIR LIKELY SENTENCES

More than 20 suspects around the world were targeted for arrest on April 19, 2005 — only two remain at large.

Category	Philadelphia	New York	India	Virginia
SUPPLY NETWORK Shipped more than 11 million pills into the U.S.	 Akhil Bansal Atul Patil Richard Dabney	 Sanjeev Srivastav David Armstrong Elizabeth Armstrong	 Brij Bansal Praveen Dua	 William Reed aka "Millerlight"
Legal status	Convicted, Pled guilty, Pled guilty	Convicted, Pled guilty, Pled guilty	Awaiting trial in India	Pled guilty
Likely sentence¹	30 years (minimum 20), 5 years, 0 to 6 months	15 years, Unknown, Unknown	Unknown	Less than 2 years
WEB-SITE OPERATORS Internet pharmacies supplied by the Bansal operation.	 Corrina Mehrer	 Fred Mullinix Kelly Ann Couchman	 Andrew Shackleton Rohn Wallace	 Victor DeVore Christopher Geoff Laine Matthew Joseph Melao
Legal status	Pled guilty	Convicted, Pled guilty ²	Fugitive, Pled guilty	Pled guilty, Pled guilty
Likely sentence¹	Released after several months	10 years, 2 years	Unknown, 5 years	3 years, 4 years, Serving a 3-year sentence

¹ Likely sentence indicates approximate federal sentencing guideline for the offense committed. The guidelines are advisory and U.S. District Judge Paul S. Diamond, who will sentence most of the defendants next year, has the authority to impose a greater or lesser sentence than the recommended one. Defendants who pleaded guilty and testified against codefendants are more likely to receive lenient sentences. The Armstrongs and Mehrer were prosecuted in New York. Melao was sentenced by Diamond to 37 months in September.
² Pled guilty to tax charges. ³ Operated as a middleman between the Bansals and Web sites.

SOURCES: Court records JOHN TIERNO / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Bansals' empire taken apart

ENDGAME from A14
 When the interview resumed, Akhil tried a different tack: Everything he did, Akhil told Carp, he did for his father. He opened U.S. and offshore bank accounts for his father. He met with online pharmacy owners in the United States for his father. He looked after the New York distribution depot for his father. In India, Akhil explained, a son must do whatever his father asks. Carp wasn't satisfied. "You're young," he said. "You're smart. You're working on your MBA at Temple. You have a girlfriend. You have your whole life ahead of you. Why would you think you would not get caught?" Carp saw Akhil's lip quiver. He had no answer.

FEDERAL DETENTION CENTER, CENTER CITY
 Mail call, sixth floor, north cell block, a month later. Akhil gathered with other inmates around the guard holding a handful of letters. "Laine!" A hefty gray-haired Texan with glasses stepped forward. Akhil eyed him. "Chris Laine?" "Yeah." It was the guy behind ourprescriptionsforless.com, a big Bansal client. The two men, who had spent the last year making each other rich, had never met. Akhil stuck out his hand. "Akhil Bansal." They had a lot to talk about. And plenty of time to do it.

AGRA
 Akhil's mother was visiting Brij in his dank Indian prison when her cell phone rang. It was Akhil, calling from prison in Philadelphia. She handed the phone to Brij. After his collapse during the arrest, agents had rushed him to a hospital, where he recovered. Within days, guards moved him to prison. Brij was not expected to stand trial until 2007. "Papaji, it's me. Akhil." Brij wheezed. "It's OK, Papaji. I'm OK." Brij began to sob. Akhil didn't know what to say. He had never heard his father cry.

U.S. COURTHOUSE, CENTER CITY
 In a sterile wood-paneled courtroom, the prosecutor rose before the jury and pointed at Akhil, who sat expressionless at the defense table. "Ladies and gentlemen, this man supplied the drugs..." prosecutor Bea Witzleben began. "It was a family business... and the evidence will show you that... they did it for money. And they made lots of it. Millions." Eleven months had passed since the big takedown. It was now March 2006. Barb Cohan had retired, Witzleben was arguing the case in her stead, and Akhil had decided to risk a trial. It was a huge gamble: If convicted, Akhil faced a 20-year minimum mandatory sentence. A plea, on the other hand, might mean five to 10 years. But pleading guilty was out of the question. It would wreck his medical career, his reputation, and, he believed, his ability to marry Foram.

Besides, Akhil told anyone who would listen, he was innocent. The arresting agents had twisted his words; the interrogation was not a confession. In his opening statement, defense lawyer Rich Harris told jurors that Akhil believed what he had done was legal because his father held proper Indian licenses to dispense medicine. "The government wants you to believe that this is some kind of Indian mob case, La Cosa Nostra in India..." Harris said. "This case is about a legitimate businessman who used the technology that's at his disposal to fill a niche in the marketplace." The trial ran four weeks. Prosecutors introduced thousands of incriminating e-mails, invoices and bank records. Akhil's roommate, Patil, and some Web site operators, including Laine, testified for the prosecution. Akhil took the stand, eager to set the record straight. His lawyer asked: "Did you think that your father's business, from start to finish, as you understood it, was legal?" Akhil: "It was legal." "Did you have a conspiracy with anyone to commit any crime?" "No. I don't know the Web site operators. I have never seen them, never met them..." "If your father had asked you to do something illegal, would you have done it?" "He would never ask me to do anything illegal. I'm the only son for him. It just cannot happen."

On cross-examination, prosecutor Frank Costello skewered Akhil with sarcasm. "Are you trying to tell this jury that you had nothing to do with this business?" "I was helping him in his business." "They were your customers, too, weren't they?" "Sir, I was helping my father. I don't have any choice." "Nobody forced you to do it, did they?" "Nobody forced me to work; I was obliged to do it, it's —" "You had \$8 million in accounts in your and your friends' names, didn't you?" "Yes, sir." "Not bad, was it?" "I have seen more money than that."

FEDERAL DETENTION CENTER
 Visiting room, two months later. Akhil leaned forward in his hard

prison chair and explained the law to his lawyer. Yes, the jury had quickly convicted him on 19 drug and money-laundering charges. Yes, he faced a minimum mandatory 20 years in prison, maybe even 30 years. But he had been up late in his cell studying American law books, reviewing evidence in his case, especially some suspicious entries in his Hotmail account records. Foram, who was not charged, was helping when she could from the outside. As the lawyer listened, Akhil rattled off avenues of appeal: The wiretaps were illegal, the Patriot Act was misused, his dad's licenses were proper, prosecutors misapplied conspiracy law, witnesses lied, the judge hated him, the bank accounts were his father's, DEA agents violated their own rules, they were unfairly making an example of him... The lawyer nodded.

MANHATTAN
 In late October, Carlos and Russ were feted at an awards ceremony at the Taj Pierre Hotel. Carlos was sipping pinot grigio when he saw DEA Administrator Karen Tandy making her way to their table. He put his glass down. Tandy hugged the agents. "In my office," she told them, "I have only one newspaper article framed on my wall. It's about Operation Cyber Chase." Tandy keeps the clipping as a memento of DEA's accomplishment, and the worldwide warning the bust sent to consumers and online pharmacies. It also reminds her of a lingering challenge.



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Carlos Aquino makes repairs on his fishing boat, parked in the driveway of his home in a suburb of Philadelphia. He is still working cases for DEA.

The Bansals and their associates are in prison, but, as she often says, rogue pharmacies are an ever-growing threat to public health. Thousands of them could be out there. There was no way to know for sure.

CHINATOWN
 The next week, forwarded spam arrived in Carlos' in-box. He settled into his office on Arch Street and opened the e-mail. *Subject: Very important note. You must to read.*
Dear Customers, Halloween is coming up, and we are very happy to announce crazy discounts for meds. Get ready for scary low prices! PLUS for a limited time we add 5 FREE pills to any order!

Carlos clicked on the Web site. Up popped a picture of a virile man with a wide smile, a glowing girlfriend, and offers of \$2 Viagra, \$3 Cialis, \$3.33 Levitra. *Thank you for visiting our store!*
We hope that you will find it to be a good source of qualitative generic medications. All the medicines one can see in our product list are manufactured by the most respectable plants of India.
We've efficiently streamlined our service, letting you buy from us in a very discreet, non-embarrassing and hassle-free manner.
 Carlos forwarded the e-mail to a supervisor, the first step toward opening a new case.

EPILOGUE
 Every law enforcement official who chased Akhil Bansal has enjoyed a career boost. At DEA, Jeff Breeden now lives in South Africa, where he is the agency's country attache. Eric Russ is about to embark on a major heroism assignment. Carlos Aquino has been promoted to supervisor in Philadelphia. FBI's Jason Huff has become the bureau's go-to agent for pill cases. Aaron Carp, looking for more action, left IRS to join FBI; the bureau sent him to Kansas City, Mo. Christine Konieczny, who led surveillance for DEA, returned to the Lower Merion Police Department and was promoted to detective. James Pavlock, the money-laundering expert, won a permanent transfer from D.C. back to Philly. Wendy Kelly, the first prosecutor on the case, is now assigned to coordinate terrorism trials in Guantanamo. Barbara Cohan keeps busy making beads and baking for her husband's restaurant. She is weighing a return to law enforcement. Brij Bansal remains imprisoned, awaiting trial in India. Akhil's fiancée, Foram Mankodi, now a pediatrician out West, says she still plans to marry him. Akhil Bansal will be sentenced early next year. Meantime, he has sued Barb, Carlos, and almost everybody else who hunted him down. Contact staff writer John Shiffman at 215-854-2658 or jshiffman@phillynews.com.



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Akhil Bansal, above, with fiancée Foram Mankodi, before his arrest. He maintains he is innocent. His Philadelphia attorney, Rich Harris, left, describes Akhil as the most complex client he has ever had.