

## Man shot at Harbour Castle former drug dealer

### Cocaine in ice dispenser

**Natalie Alcoba and Adrian Humphreys**

National Post

*Wednesday, July 05, 2006*

TORONTO - A man sentenced in New York for masterminding an Ecstasy smuggling ring that used Orthodox Jews to get millions of pills through the world's airports was shot three times in an elevator of a downtown luxury hotel after a drug deal went awry, police say.

Toronto police were called to the Westin Harbour Castle around 9:40 p.m. on Monday after shots rang through the 1,000-room waterfront hotel.

When heavily armed officers arrived, they found one man bleeding from gunshot wounds, another who had been handcuffed by his assailants and a woman who was with them.

Also found were four kilograms of powdered cocaine, with an estimated street value of \$400,000, hidden in an ice dispenser on the 28th floor of the hotel's south tower. Investigators believe it had been stashed there for safe keeping in case a deal went sour.

A meeting apparently went sour enough to send Sean Erez, a 36-year-old Quebec man, running from his 28th floor hotel room and into an elevator, where he was shot in the stomach and legs, investigators say.

Police found him bleeding on the 16th floor.

Mr. Erez survived but has been charged with drug trafficking after what police call a botched drug transaction. A second man was found hiding in the hotel's basement and a woman, believed to be Mr. Erez's girlfriend, was still in the 28th floor hotel room, police said.

Detective Sergeant Larry Cowley, with the Toronto drug squad, said the man in the basement had been handcuffed by the assailant but managed to escape unharmed. The woman also was not hurt. All three are believed to have been trying to sell cocaine.

Mr. Erez, an Israeli-Canadian, gained notoriety in New York when he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to import Ecstasy into the United States in 2001.

He admitted he recruited young Orthodox Jews to smuggle more than a million Ecstasy pills from the Netherlands to the United States. The pills were hidden under Hasidic hats, next to the couriers' hearts or packed into athletic socks.

Mr. Erez was sentenced in a Brooklyn courthouse to 15 years in prison on Nov. 16, 2001, but applied to serve his sentence in a Canadian prison -- a move that shaved a decade off his jail time.

It is an attractive option for Canadian citizens sentenced in the U.S. allowed under a government treaty. Once here, prisoners are eligible for early release under Canada's more generous parole regulations.

On April 19, 2005, the U.S. Department of Justice was notified that Anne McLellan, then Canada's minister of public safety, had approved Mr. Erez's transfer to Canada and, on July 23, 2005, he was transferred from a Pennsylvania prison to a Canadian facility.

Not long after, he was released on parole in Canada.

Mr. Erez's stay in the U.S. prison system was not a pleasant one.

In January, 2002, while in prison at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, he fell ill. He repeatedly complained to guards and medical staff of severe

abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, fever and shaking chills, he claims in a lawsuit he filed against the U.S. government in January, 2004, alleging misconduct by prison officials.

On Jan. 28, 2002, he was taken to a Brooklyn hospital where he was found to be in critical condition. He underwent emergency surgery, according to his claim.

Doctors found a "belly full of pus" and "fecal contamination" of his abdominal cavity that required doctors to remove a large section of his colon, a portion of his bowel. He also required a colostomy -- a procedure that redirects one's bowel movements into an external bag.

Mr. Erez "continues to experience pain and suffering, emotional anguish, permanent loss of a major portion of his colon, permanent scarring and permanent impairment and disability," he claims in his lawsuit.

He is seeking US\$5-million in damages and his case was scheduled for a settlement conference next month in Brooklyn.

It is not known how his arrest in Toronto might impact that case. His lawyer in New York could not be reached yesterday.

After Mr. Erez was shot on Monday night, loud speakers advised hotel guests of an emergency -- although specifics were not provided -- and asked them to stay inside their rooms.

Gun-toting Emergency Task Force police officers combed through the hotel, which has two towers, but were unable to find the shooter.

Police were directed to the ice dispenser, where the drugs were recovered. "For the safe keeping of the drugs, I imagine they hid them," Det.-Sgt. Cowley said. Police do not believe the attackers have ties to organized crime.

Drug officers said high-end Toronto hotels are often used by out-of-town drug dealers arriving to conduct business in a city known as a lucrative drug market.

This was the 159th shooting of the year in Toronto. At this time last year, there were 168 shootings.

Mr. Erez, Nataly Abitan, 27, also of Quebec, and Evgene Starchik, a 22-year-old B.C. resident, are each charged with possession of cocaine and possession for the purpose of trafficking.

© National Post 2006

**CLOSE WINDOW**