

Leader of major drug trafficking ring pleads guilty

[Andres R. Martinez](#)

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BROWNSVILLE — A Starr County man pleaded guilty to running a drug smuggling ring that made more than \$38 million since 1987.

Vicente Sanchez-Guerrero entered his guilty plea Wednesday, on the eve of his trial on organized crime charges.

Although he pleaded guilty, he has declined to cooperate with U.S. attorneys who are prosecuting other drug traffickers and former Gulf Cartel leader Osiel Cardenas-Guillen. Cardenas-Guillen's case is set to go to trial in May 2008.

Sanchez-Guerrero is the eighth defendant to plead guilty in the case against him, his brother and high-ranking associates.

He and his brother Eloy started as small-time marijuana traffickers in 1987. They then moved on to cocaine smuggling, using ranches in Starr County and homes in Houston to hide the drugs.

The illicit proceeds were laundered through luxury vehicles and homes, grocery stores, used car dealerships and other properties.

The youngest member of the conspiracy pleaded guilty in July. He had been listed as a witness in the case against Sanchez-Guerrero, an indication he had cooperated with the U.S. attorneys. Six other men pleaded guilty Tuesday.

The hearing, though, was closed to the public and the minutes for it were sealed. Plea agreements also were sealed.

Information in the plea agreement likely implicates people the U.S. attorneys are investigating or have already indicted.

Sanchez-Guerrero is set to be sentenced Nov. 13 before Judge Hilda Tagle in U.S. District Court in Brownsville.

Andres R. Martinez covers courts and general assignments for The Monitor. He can be reached at (956) 683-4434.