

Vivian Blake pleads guilty in deal with feds

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Vivian Blake stood erect, his hands clasped behind him. He was dressed in a dark blue suit and white shirt. No tie. He wore casual-looking black shoes.

He answered U.S. District Judge Norman Roettger's questions clearly and politely: "Yes, your honor. No, your honor. Guilty, your honor."

This was a different Vivian Blake from the one we had last seen in court.

Then he was dressed in the khaki uniform of the Federal Detention Center and wore socks with slippers. He had shuffled into court in ankle chains, handcuffed to a member of the white supremacist World Church of the Creator, who was being arraigned on a gun charge.

He had sat (and stood when he was required to) with his head bowed.

Blake had looked tired and older than his 49 years.

That was the summer of 1999, just two weeks after he had been brought to the United States from Jamaica.

A Privy Council ruling had ended his six-year legal battle against extradition. A public relations campaign to pressure the government

into blocking the extradition had fizzled.



David Rowe, Vivian Blake's attorney.

Now Blake showed no sign of nervousness or obsequiousness as he told U.S. District Judge Norman Roettger of his health problems and answered questions to establish, for the record, that he understood the implications of his guilty plea.

Blake happy

From time to time, as the judge perused documents or engaged in exchanges with the prosecutor about the sentencing guidelines, Blake bent over to chat with his attorney, David Rowe, a much shorter man. He even ventured a smile during those whispered conversations.

A 62-count indictment against Blake included charges of murder, conspiracy, gun-running, drug-smuggling and money-laundering.

And Vivian Blake had reason to smile. Just three months ago he was facing 62 counts of murder, attempted murder, illegal acquisition and possession of firearms, drug trafficking, money laundering, racketeering and bribery -- charges carrying an accumulated sentence of 398 years in prison and a US\$15 million fine.

Had Blake opted for a trial, Assistant U.S. Attorney Lee Milford-Stapleton told the court, the government would have proved that he was the "operational" leader of a Jamaican gang known as the Shower Posse.

She said this gang was based in Tivoli Gardens in western Kingston and was affiliated with the Jamaica Labor Party.

It had operated a criminal drug-trafficking enterprise, moving marijuana from Jamaica and cocaine from the Bahamas, through South Florida, distributing the drugs in several major U.S. and Canadian cities, Milford-Stapleton said.

Gang's crimes

In pursuance of this drug-trafficking enterprise, she said, the gang committed other crimes such as murder, money laundering and the illegal acquisition of weapons.

Among the more noteworthy crimes for which the U.S. government blames the Shower Posse is the November 1984 shooting to death of five people at a Miami apartment, which investigators say was a crack house.

Now Vivian Blake was pleading guilty to two counts each of racketeering and attempted racketeering. All the charges of murder or attempted murder had been dropped.

Federal prosecutors would recommend that he receive a sentence of no more than 28 years. He would be given credit for the nearly seven years he had spent jailed in Jamaica while fighting extradition.

With the various arrangements, for gain time, he could be out of prison in less than 10 years, a law enforcement official told Caribbean Today. "Maybe as little as six," he said. The only payment Blake was obliged to make was \$200 for court costs. Vivian Blake had reason to smile. Others may not.

Blake's disclosures

In return for this relatively lenient treatment, Blake has agreed to make full disclosure about cash, property and other assets he has acquired since 1981, whether these are held directly by him, members of his family or by other associates. These assets will be subject to seizure under U.S. law.

He has also agreed to be debriefed by Federal,

State and local law enforcement officers about the operations of the Shower Posse, which prosecutors say he led between 1982 and 1986, and about other criminals and criminal activity of which he is aware.

Blake must also testify in cases arising out of these disclosures, if the prosecutors so request.

The Fort Lauderdale Police Department is anxious to interview Blake about several unsolved crimes, including murders, in that jurisdiction. "If he could give us any information that could help us close some of these old cases, we'd be willing to point out to the judge that his cooperation had helped us," a senior detective with the Fort Lauderdale police told Caribbean Today.

Valuable information

"Mr. Blake is in possession of much information which could be useful to U.S. law enforcement." David Rowe, Blake's attorney, said.

"Soon and very soon, the world will know the truth," Blake himself says in a statement he has prepared for presentation to the court.

"My son Dwayne has just finished a novel on the Shower Posse saga... the whole truth and nothing but the truth," he says in the statement. "And I am willing and quite able to defend the contents of that book in a court of law."

The fallout could already have begun. Sources close to the case say a debriefing of Blake, which took place prior to his Feb. 23 court appearance, played no small part in the decision by the government of St. Kitts to extradite accused drug trafficker Charles "Little Nut" Miller, another alleged former Shower Posse member, who had himself been fighting extradition since 1996.

Miller was brought to Florida on Feb. 19 and

made his first court appearance Feb. 22, the day before Blake's sentencing hearing began.

Denies murder

Blake has consistently denied killing anyone, or that he was present when anyone was killed, or that he ordered any murders. He blames Miller for the killings with which he was charged in the affidavit.

Blake's attorney describes Miller as a "cold-blooded murderer". "Mr. Blake is not a murderer" Rowe said. "He is someone who made mistakes, but he is not a murderer. The government has not been able to establish that he killed anyone."

He emphasized that the plea agreement stipulates that there is no evidence supporting charges of murder or attempted murder against Blake.

Prosecutor Milford-Stapleton acknowledged that several of the charges, in particular the murders, would have been difficult to prove, especially because "this was such an old case."

"This case could have destroyed reputations both in the U.S. and Jamaica," Rowe said.

It still might.