

Florida / Metro

Friday, June 30, 1995

4 cleared by jury in laundering case

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TAMPA — Federal jurors cleared two Merrill Lynch executives, a lawyer and an accountant from Panama on Thursday of conspiracy to launder millions in cocaine profits destined for Colombian drug lords.

Afterward, jurors criticized government agents for entrapping otherwise honest businessmen. One woman on the panel said the six-week trial had destroyed her trust in government.

"The indictment did not match the evidence at all. Things in the indictment I felt were outright lies," she said. "This case did not take a bite out of crime at all."

A spokesman for U.S. Attorney Charles Wilson said prosecutors were disappointed with the jury's verdict. "We had enough evidence to take the case to the jury and we accept the jury's verdict," Assistant U.S. Attorney Gary Montilla said.

The case was one of several stemming from a two-year undercover investigation code-named Operation PROMO. A total of 28 suspects were named in five indictments. Five suspects have pleaded guilty before trial.

Also, a former Tampa detective pleaded guilty to exposing fellow agents and laundering money for his own profit while working on Operation PROMO. Former Officer of the Year Javier Guzman is now serving an 11-year prison term.

U.S. District Judge Henry Lee Adams Jr., who presided over the trial, last week removed a fifth defendant from the case. Adams ruled there was insufficient evidence Panamanian banker Luis Sanchez conspired to make cocaine profits appear to come from legitimate sources — the same charge Sanchez's four codendants were

See DEFENDANTS, Page 3

Defendants cleared in laundering case

■ From Page 1

acquitted of Thursday.

Defense lawyers in the case said federal agents and prosecutors had no business targeting their clients.

"The government really was outrageous," said George Tragos, who represented Charles McFadden, a former senior partner in charge of Latin America for the accounting firm of Peat Marwick.

"They think they can prosecute and convict anyone and they don't need any evidence. Sometimes they need to be taught some humility," Tragos said.

Evidence showed former Merrill Lynch account executive Steven L. Mills was clearly insane when an agent approached him, defense lawyer John Fitzgibbons said.

Gary Trombley, who repre-

sented former Merrill Lynch Vice President Frank L. Greene, said jurors concluded the defendants were tricked into joining the government-sponsored money laundering scheme by undercover DEA agent Robert Mazur.

"I don't think the jury condoned the government's behavior in this case," Trombley said.

Defendant Ricardo Leyton said he knew Mazur was a DEA agent all along and thought he was assisting the agent, not a target of the investigation.

Mazur made headlines in the late 1980s when he exposed money laundering at the Bank of Commerce and Credit International's Tampa office. That case eventually led to the collapse of BCCI.

Mazur could not be reached for comment Thursday. His boss, Spe-

cial Agent Rich Fiano, said juries often have trouble understanding international money laundering operations.

"I'm very surprised at the verdict, but I still think the [jury] system works," Fiano said.

Mazur and his agents laundered more than \$8.1 million for the Colombian cartels while keeping or seizing almost \$4 million in cash and 113 pounds of cocaine.

Fiano said Mazur and other agents were formally cleared earlier this month of allegations that Guzman was not the only law officer to take money during Operation PROMO.

A spokesman for Merrill Lynch said the company had no comment on the acquittal of its former employees.