

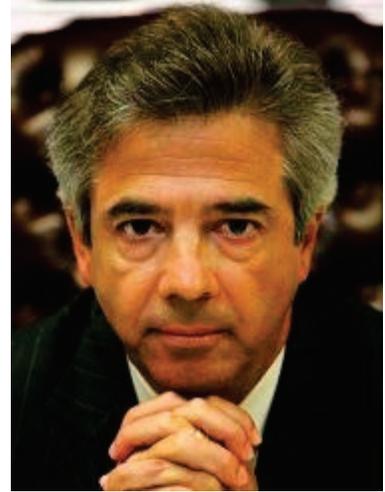
1,400 GUNS: Ferro beefs up defense

Newest attorney handling similar weapons case

By Rod Leveque, Staff Writer

Robert Ferro

RIVERSIDE - The Upland man accused of illegally storing more than 1,500 guns in his home is adding to his defense team a Florida lawyer who has experience on a strikingly similar case. Robert Ferro soon will be represented by Arturo Hernandez, a Miami attorney who has gained publicity in recent months for his defense of two Cuban exiles accused of possessing a large weapons arsenal in south Florida.



“Mr. Hernandez has a great depth and breadth of experience, especially in a case such as this,” said Christopher Johnson, Ferro’s lead attorney. Police and federal agents searched Ferro’s home on Tapia Way in April and said they found a huge weapons cache that included 35 machine guns, 130 silencers, two short-barreled rifles, a live hand grenade, a rocket launcher tube and about 89,000 rounds of ammunition.

Ferro, a Cuban immigrant, claimed he was holding the weapons for a militant group that is planning to overthrow Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, according to court documents.

He has pleaded not guilty to federal weapons charges and is scheduled to stand trial in the fall.

Hernandez, meanwhile, has spent the year working the south Florida case against a wealthy anti-Castro activist and one of his employees who are accused of possessing their own weapons stockpile.

Authorities say Santiago Alvarez and his employee, Osvaldo Mitat, had machine guns, grenades, a grenade launcher and thousands of rounds of ammunition at an apartment complex near Fort Lauderdale.

That case has drawn international attention because Alvarez is closely tied to a man named Luis Posada Carriles, who is wanted by the Cuban and Venezuelan governments in connection to the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner and the bombings of hotels in Havana in the mid 1990s, according to published reports.

Hernandez is one of six lawyers defending Alvarez.

That case is set for trial Sept. 11.

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Thom Mrozek, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles, said he wasn't aware of any direct links between Ferro's case and the one in South Florida.

Prosecutors in the Florida case declined to comment.

Hernandez is expected to officially join Ferro's defense team early this week, though he has already begun working with the Upland man's other attorneys and has attended Ferro's last two court hearings.

He declined to comment on Ferro's case last week because Ferro's judge has not yet approved him to come aboard.

Ferro, 61, was not supposed to possess guns because he was convicted of a felony in 1992 for having explosives on his Pomona chicken ranch.

Prosecutors in that case alleged Ferro was using the ranch to train young men, possibly for an invasion of Cuba.

Ferro served time in prison for that conviction.

Ferro's lawyers, meanwhile, have hinted during court hearings that Ferro will claim during his upcoming trial that the government gave him permission to have the weapons found in his home earlier this year.

They have also said Ferro will need to have access to classified government material to mount his defense.

Johnson declined to elaborate last week on details of the defense strategy.

In other developments, Ferro's attorneys plan to ask a judge this week to declare illegal the search warrants police and federal agents used to search Ferro's house.

If the judge grants the request, the case against Ferro would crumble.

Also, a federal judge last week granted Ferro's doctors access to examine and treat Ferro in jail.

Ferro suffers from diabetes and a heart ailment, and his attorneys have said his health is suffering behind bars.

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