

Makers of Brazilian Miracle Diet Pills Arrested in Brazil

Contributed by José Wilson Miranda
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Brazil's Federal police arrested this Wednesday, September 19, ten people involved in the making, distribution and commercialization of Emagrece Sim, a product very popular in the United States, which has also been sold throughout the world as a miracle diet pill since 2002.

The Brazilian gang is also being accused of money laundering by Brazil's authorities. According to the Federal Police's press office, eight of those arrested are from Belo Horizonte, capital of the southeastern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Another one was from São Paulo and still another other lives in Roraima state.

The arrest warrants were for 11 people, but Claudina Rodrigues Bonfim, 37, who Brazilian authorities say is the leader behind Emagrece Sim, was not found in her Belo Horizonte house. Police seized documents, a Jaguar and 60 works of art in her place. Bonfim presented herself as an entrepreneur specialized in the areas of pharmacy, cosmetics and weight-loss.

The police operation nicknamed Venus in homage to the Greek beauty goddess, seems to have broken the main gang behind the Brazilian pills for weight loss, which became a hot item in the international market, especially in the United States, where the Emagrece Sim's (Portuguese for It Does Slim You Down) kit, enough for 45 days, sells for over US\$ 200.

Still according to the Federal Police, the factory where the pills were made had no permit and was operating in a building without any identification in the Morada Nova neighborhood, in Contagem, part of the Greater Belo Horizonte. At the time of the raid there were 4000 bottles containing amphetamine. Authorities told reporter that were plans to transfer the factory to Venezuela.

The popularity of the Brazilian pill had called the attention of the American FDA, which determined that the product was not 100% natural as claimed, but contained Fenproporex, a stimulant that is not approved for marketing in the United States. Besides, it was also found the active ingredients of Librium and Prozac: Chlordiazepoxide HCl and Fluoxetine HCl, respectively.

The Brazilian operation relied on information given the Brazilian authorities by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), which is part of the US Department of Justice. The investigative work in Brazil took five months.

The illegality of the product stems from the fact that it did not get the special authorization from Anvisa, the Brazilian sanitary organ. The pills had been banned in Brazil since January 2006. Moreover the product has been marketed as a dietary supplement while in reality, according to the Brazilian authorities, it contains psychotropic and anorexigenic substances that cause physical and psychic dependence.

There were several cases reported by the US media, in which people who took Emagrece Sim, complained that they had tested positive for amphetamine while applying for a job.

In an instance, a US Customs employee had a seven-month suspension after traces of speed showed up in her body. It took her some time to convince her bosses that the culprit were some "100%-natural" pills manufactured in Brazil.

Emagrece Sim, which was also sold under the name Herbathin, was banned last year in the United States, but it has resurfaced under different names, among them PEB-One and PEB-Two and it is being sold mainly to the US Latino population with claims that the product has been approved by the FDA. People were also able to buy it on eBay at least through January 2007.

In the ads, Internet sites and billboards, the amphetamine-laced pills are always presented as the miracle diet product from Brazil.

On the website www.emagrecesim.org, which lists telephone numbers from the Miami area for contact, the product is presented as a weight-loss system made with a combination of herbs from the Brazilian rain forest: "It is extremely successful in helping both men and women to lose weight... By using the EmagreceSim system, you will eat less, control your cravings, and have more energy."

The site also informs that Alphaline Trading Corporation has been importing the pills directly from Brazil and adds: "Due to the FDA guidelines, the product's label has been fully redesigned to be properly imported into the country."