

# Witness against Duke listed as 'high priority' fugitive; reward offered

By Conrad deFiebre  
Staff Writer

Federal authorities are turning up the heat in the search for a man who testified against convicted cocaine kingpin Ralph (Plukey) Duke, then disappeared last spring as he was to begin a nine-year prison term for being a courier for Duke.

Ramon Hutchinson, 23, the only Duke codefendant still at large, is listed as a "high priority" federal fugitive with a reward on his head, deputy U.S. Marshal Steven Swensen said Friday. The amount of the reward for information leading to Hutchinson's arrest has not been disclosed, but it is the only one being offered by federal marshals in Minnesota.

Swensen said he is particularly interested in hearing from an anonymous caller who has given investigators tips about Hutchinson's activities. Authorities believe Hutchinson has been involved in substantial drug dealing in the Twin Cities.

"The information has proven good," Swensen said. "We know Ramon's

still in the area."

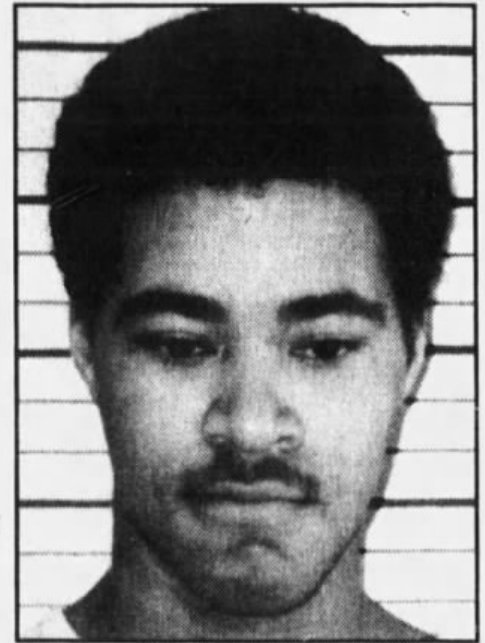
During three weeks in July, officers traced more than 1,000 calls to two telephone pagers linked to Hutchinson, Swensen said. Most of the calls came from St. Paul and the southern suburbs. Drug dealers often use pagers to keep in contact with their customers.

Hutchinson, a graduate of St. Paul Central High School, was a University of Minnesota sophomore with no criminal record when he was arrested in May 1989 following a high-speed chase. He pleaded guilty in November to a federal charge of possessing cocaine with intent to distribute and testified against Duke in December.

Free on \$10,000 bail, he was given two days to attend to family business after his sentencing March 27. He hasn't been seen since.

His failure to surrender as scheduled could add up to five years to his prison sentence if he is recaptured.

"But it would work out to his advantage if he turned himself in," Swensen said. "We also want to warn



**Ramon Hutchinson**

people off from assisting him because there are stiff penalties for that, too."

So far, 26 people have been convicted of drug crimes related to Duke's operations. He is serving three consecutive life sentences plus 40 years at a federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind.

Swensen said anyone with information about Hutchinson should call 348-1935. "We promise strict confidentiality," he said.