

# Drug lord resentenced to life in prison

Ralph “Plukey” Duke has already served 29 years over St. Paul cocaine ring.

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Ralph Chavous “Plukey” Duke, a kingpin of Minnesota’s largest cocaine ring in the 1980s, was resentenced to life in prison on Tuesday.

Duke, 72, appeared in court before U.S. District Judge David Doty, who originally sentenced Duke in 1990, and was resentenced to two concurrent life sentences and an additional 40-year term related to three firearm charges.

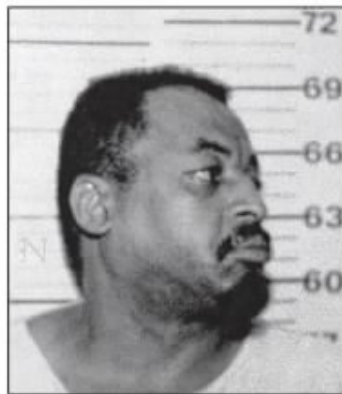
A judge from the Central District of Illinois, where Duke has served his sentence, granted him relief from three firearm convictions, which gave rise for the need for a resentencing hearing.

Duke was convicted of

heading a drug ring from 1984 to 1989 in St. Paul, where he distributed at least 173 kilos of cocaine and maintained an eight-gun arsenal at his home in Delano that included a semi-automatic Uzi pistol, a .22-caliber pistol with a silencer, two assault shotguns and two AR-15 rifles in connection to his drug crimes.

Duke has served 29 years in custody. The defense argued for Duke’s sentencing to be lessened to time served due to the law and attitudes toward his sentencing and his good behavior during his current sentencing.

At the original sentencing hearing in 1990, Doty said the punishments Duke was charged with “seem to be very strong as compared to some other things that we know are illegal — such as murder,” but “I must follow the law,” according to a memorandum by his attor-



Ralph Duke was originally sentenced in 1990.

neys asking for a more lenient sentence.

In 1990, when Doty imposed the original sentences, he noted that Duke’s copious distribution induced young people with no criminal background to become involved in the drug trade and that he was responsible for supplying drugs to many youths.

Duke’s conviction, during the peak of the War on Drugs,

mirrored harsh drug sentencing guidelines that have since changed. In 2016, Duke’s drug charges were reduced by the court to the maximum 30½, which he has exceeded after accruing four years of good-time credit.

But under the current drug trafficking guidelines, Duke was again faced with a maximum life sentence.

Current drug trafficking offense guidelines are rarely authorized: only when a death or serious bodily harm occurs, or if the defendant has two prior drug trafficking convictions. Duke is a first-time offender and no murders have been connected to him.

The state upheld the firearm enhancement by citing evidence of bags with traces of cocaine at his home in Delano.

Trevor Squire is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.