

Interpol DNA Hit Catches International Serial Rapist - Only the Second Interpol DNA Hit with the United States

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Summary

Ali Achekzai was a serial rapist wanted on a \$1 million warrant for a series of violent sexual assaults that occurred in 2002 and 2004 in California. Law enforcement tracked him to Canada, but then he vanished. Achekzai was a "10 Most Wanted" fugitive for several years until a hunch by a young new detective resulted in an Interpol DNA hit to Achekzai, who was living under an assumed name in Austria. Achekzai had raped again in Austria and the DNA profiles from multiple rapes across two continents matched. Arrested, extradited and ultimately convicted, Achekzai is currently serving a sentence of 69 years-to-life in prison.

Background

Ali Achekzai was an Afghan native living in the United States on an asylum grant. In January 2004, Achekzai met a young woman at a nightclub in Orange County, California. That night, he raped her in the parking lot of a fast food restaurant. The crime was partially captured on surveillance video. The next day the victim reported the rape to police. The victim knew her attacker only as "Ali" and had little other information, but she turned over her clothes to police. The Orange County Crime Lab detected semen on the clothing and developed a DNA profile of her attacker. A CODIS search at the time developed no leads.

In May 2004, Achekzai and a male cousin met two young women in San Diego County, California. They went for a drive to the top of Mount Soledad, an isolated area near La Jolla. Achekzai got one of the young women alone and violently raped her. The victim immediately disclosed to her friend; Achekzai became angry and punched the victim in the mouth, knocking out her front tooth. The victim reported the crime to police, but she only knew her attacker as "Ali." Police collected her clothing and sent it to the San Diego Police Department Crime Lab, which located semen and developed a DNA profile of her attacker.

A CODIS case-to-case match linked both rapes to the same suspect. Using traditional investigative methods, law enforcement was eventually able to determine that the suspect was Ali Achekzai, but not before he fled the country. Authorities also linked him to another sexual assault that occurred in Orange County in October 2002. The U.S Marshall's Service and Royal Canadian Mounted Police tracked Achekzai to Canada, but then lost track of him. He simply vanished.

Achekzai was added to the Orange County District Attorney's Office "10 Most Wanted List" and remained a fugitive from justice for several years. In 2010, Achekzai's old ways and DNA technology caught up with him in Europe.

Living in Austria under an assumed name, Achekzai was arrested for rape by Austrian police in April 2009. Though criminal charges were never filed in that case, Achekzai had to provide a DNA sample to Austrian authorities.

A few months later in December 2009, Detective Ryan Coe was assigned the "cold case" to review. On a hunch -- knowing that Achekzai had fled the country -- Det. Coe asked the Orange County Crime Lab to submit the suspect DNA profile to Interpol for an international database search. Interpol's DNA database contains over 125,000 DNA profiles from 64 countries, including Austria and the United States.

The Interpol search produced a “case-to-case” hit. The DNA profile from the Austrian rape was the same as the DNA profiles from the Orange County and San Diego County rapes. It was only the second Interpol hit (or “international match”) with the United States. The first was an April 2009 hit between the United States and Switzerland on a burglary case.

Achekzai was arrested in January 2010 by the FBI and Austrian police. Achekzai was extradited to California in August 2010 and was convicted following a jury trial in December 2011. He was sentenced to 69 years-to-life in state prison.