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THE "FOREIGN NATIONAL" IN THE SAN DIEGO CAMPAIGN FINANCE SCANDAL IS "ALMOST A LEGEND" IN MEXICO

By Leo Castaneda | inewssource



Jose Susumo Azano Matsura. Credit — 10News.com

Jose Susumo Azano Matsura, the foreign national at the center of a local campaign finance scandal, is a little-known figure in the U.S., but back home in Mexico, he has a reputation as a billionaire who reportedly moves in high government circles.

Mexican newspapers and periodicals have for years followed Azano's business dealings, his political connections, and his monumental fight with Sempra Energy over land for a liquified natural gas plant in Ensenada. El Sol de Tijuana newspaper calls him "almost a legend."

He is clearly regarded as a man with power.

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For example, a column in the Mexican newspaper El Universal reported on a meeting between incoming Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto and President Barack Obama in 2012 when they discussed threats to relations between the two nations. The number one threat identified by the U.S., according to the newspaper, was the Sempra Energy land dispute allegedly financed by Azano. Number two was the price of Mexican tomatoes, and number three, drug cartels, in that order.

inewssource reviewed the scant mentions of Azano in U.S. media and pored through dozens of Mexican newspapers and websites, as well as personal social media accounts of Azano family members for

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information about a man referred to only as a “wealthy businessman” in a federal complaint unsealed in San Diego this week.

Prosecutors contend this man funneled more than \$500,000 into local political campaigns, using a “straw donor” to make the donations with the help of a Washington, D.C.-based campaign consultant and a former San Diego cop, who are both charged with crimes. Foreign nationals like Azano are not allowed to fund political campaigns at any level in the U.S.

Azano is not named in the complaint, but *inewsourc* verified his role as the FBI-described “wealthy businessman” after matching up the donation amounts cited in the federal complaint with the San Diego City Clerk’s campaign contributions and expenditures data and Secretary of State’s business registry information.

Azano’s limited-liability company, Airsam N492RM, LLC, donated \$100,000 to a PAC named, “San Diegans for Bonnie Dumanis for Mayor 2012, Sponsored by Airsam N492RM, LLC.” Ernesto Encinas, the retired police detective at the center of the probe, also donated \$3,000 to that PAC. Those two donation amounts were highlighted in the federal complaint as examples of illegal campaign expenditures.

FULL NAME, STREET ADDRESS AND ZIP CODE OF CONTRIBUTOR (IF COMMITTEE, ALSO ENTER I.D. NUMBER)	CONTRIBUTOR CODE *	IF AN INDIVIDUAL, ENTER OCCUPATION AND EMPLOYER (IF SELF-EMPLOYED, ENTER NAME OF BUSINESS)	AMOUNT RECEIVED THIS PERIOD	CUMULATIVE TO DATE CALENDAR YEAR (JAN. 1 - DEC. 31)
Airsam N492RM, LLC Coronado CA 92118-3205	<input type="checkbox"/> IND <input type="checkbox"/> COM <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTH <input type="checkbox"/> PTY <input type="checkbox"/> SCC		\$100,000.00	\$100,000.00
Ernesto Encinas San Diego CA 92116	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IND <input type="checkbox"/> COM <input type="checkbox"/> OTH <input type="checkbox"/> PTY <input type="checkbox"/> SCC	Retired N/A	\$3,000.00	\$3,000.00

Section of the online Form 460 for the Bonnie Dumanis PAC, “San Diegans for Bonnie Dumanis for Mayor 2012, Sponsored by Airsam N492RM, LLC.”

Azano is no stranger to controversy or political intrigue.

Mexico City newspaper Reforma on Thursday morning reported Azano’s company was implicated in a money laundering and fraud investigation. The Mexican attorney general alleges that the company, Security Tracking Devices SA de CV, either through a payment or contract services, deposited 33 million pesos (almost \$2.5 million dollars) into the account of a corporation linked to two men who were charged with fraud and money laundering.

Azano is of Japanese ancestry and grew up in the western Mexican state of Jalisco. He is the son of businessman Susumo Azano Matsura, head of Grupo Azano, a corporation that has done everything from construction to manufacturing license plates. One of Azano’s websites says he earned degrees from University of Massachusetts Boston and University of Guadalajara.

He made his money in surveillance and security technology. One online news outlet in Mexico estimates the value of the family enterprises at \$30 billion.

Azano reportedly has a residence in Coronado, but the large waterfront home on Green Turtle Road is owned by a Margarita Hester de Azano, according to the county assessor. Also according to the county assessor, Azano himself owns no property in San Diego County.

Azano keeps his own blog with articles about such things as personal online security and “appropriate cars for leaders.” Alongside photos of high-end presidential cars, the article argues that unlike the cars of “common men,” the cars of leaders must be able to protect them from danger.

The most recent article on his blog is from August 2013 and talks about open-source intelligence. It ends with the quote, “Information is knowledge. Knowledge is power. But we have to remember that each piece of information has the power to make or unmake someone.”

Azano’s son is Susumo Azano Jr., who goes by the name Mr. Susu. News accounts do not mention that he has a role in his father’s company. El Universal displays information from Susu’s now-deleted Instagram

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account that shows him with exotic cars and at Las Vegas nightclubs with famous rappers and a 15-litre bottle of champagne that he reportedly bought for \$90,000.

In one of the few articles about Azano that *inewsourc* could find in the U.S. media, U-T San Diego described him as “a prominent businessman from a wealthy family” in Mexico. He was propelled into the headlines when he sued Sempra over land the energy company was using for a liquified natural gas plant in Ensenada in 2011.



Susu Azano, the son of the Mexican billionaire at the center of the San Diego probe. Credit — El Universal

According to U-T San Diego, Azano had an agreement with the alleged owner of the land, Ramon Eugenio Sanchez Ritchie, sold to Sempra. The deal would give Azano 55 percent of any money and 66 percent of any land that came from litigation or agreements with Sempra Energy.

His disputes with Sempra also made the Mexican press.

In an opinion column, the newspaper El Sol de Tijuana reported Azano paid the son of the Ensenada mayor \$2 million for “personal business” in January 2011. A few weeks later, the mayor ordered the Ensenada police to temporarily close down one of Sempra’s plants because of several urban development code violations. The mayor was quoted denying there was a connection. According to the Baja California-based Semanario Zeta, the closure brought the attention of the Mexican president.

In 1998, Azano started Security Tracking Devices, which today sells surveillance and security technology to Mexico’s defense department, Sedena. A 2011 deal for \$5 billion pesos (almost \$374 million dollars) worth of equipment raised eyebrows in the U.S. and Mexico.

According to the Mexican newspaper Aristegui, the contract was awarded to Azano’s company without competitive bidding. An editorial by the newspaper El Mexicano claimed Security Tracking Devices sold one of the systems for an almost 800 percent markup.

On this side of the border, the San Francisco-based Electronic Frontier Foundation warned about the technology being sold, which allowed the Mexican government to remotely access and activate phone microphones and download text messages, contacts and multimedia.

Security Tracking Devices has global reach and is part of the reason Azano is often referred to as a billionaire. However, Azano is not included on *Forbe’s* list of the wealthiest Mexicans.

inewsourc reporters Brad Racino and Joe Yerardi contributed to this report.

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