Written by Don Mann
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Photo courtesy of King County Sheriff’s Office Cristian Babalai, a 29-year-old Bothell man alleged to be the “Tour de Banks” robber, remains behind bars at the King County Jail after prosecutors charged him with eight counts of first-degree robbery.

His bail was set at $2 million after prosecutors deemed him a flight risk as $60,000 of the approximately $142,000 stolen in eight bank heists has yet to be recovered.

The robber was dubbed with the “Tour de Banks” moniker by King County Sheriffs for his alleged use of a bicycle to escape the crime scenes.

The eight robberies spanned from May 2, 2012, to Sep. 12, 2012. Three of the banks are in Woodinville: Key Bank and Union Bank downtown, and Bank of America in the Cottage Lake area. Two others are in Bothell. The final three hold-ups were in Monroe, Arlington and Mill Creek.

According to Probable Cause charging papers, the robberies occurred in broad daylight, and in each the defendant was armed with a handgun.

In several instances, he threatened to shoot the victim/tellers if they did not move fast enough to retrieve the money from the till. No one was hurt in any of the incidents.

According to investigators, Babalai is a Romanian national with no known felony criminal history in the United States.

Detectives said Babalai recently moved to Bothell but his actual residential address at the time of all the robberies was 18250 142nd Ave. NE #324 in Woodinville, the Chateau Woods Apartments.

They noted this apartment complex is within several hundred yards of the first two robbery scenes.

Babalei was arrested in his car near his Bothell home on October 12, following an extensive collaborative investigation by the King County Sheriff’s Office, the F.B.I. Safe Streets Task Force and detectives from Arlington, Bothell, Mill Creek and Monroe police departments. The investigation included video surveillance, bank records, cell phone records and gambling records.

“I’ve been told he was extremely surprised,” King County Sheriff Steve Strachan said at a media briefing.

Key to the investigation was an eyewitness account of the suspect placing a bicycle into a Mercedes Benz following the Arlington robbery. Once the vehicle was identified, Strachan said, it led to more information.

In charging papers signed by King County Detective Mike Mellis, Babalai is connected to the robberies by being the owner of a vehicle the same make and model described by the witness, lived in the area of the first robberies, and matches the general physical description of the suspect including speaking with a European accent. Further, he was regularly gambling money at a Kirkland casino and depositing large sums of cash into his bank account in a manner seemingly beyond the means offered by someone whose occupation was managing an adult family home business.

In addition, Babalai possessed a cell phone that had been shown to be in the general areas of all robberies either leading up to, during, or immediately after the robberies.

Finally, he possessed a black Glock pistol the same make as the suspect’s pistol.

Babalai will be arraigned at the King County Courthouse on Oct. 29.