U.S. charges 50 Colombians in drug case

Top guerrillas are accused in major trafficking network

BY VANESSA BLUM AND TAL ABRAHADY STAFF WRITERS

In what federal authorities called the nation’s largest drug trafficking case, a federal grand jury in Washington, D.C., has indicted 50 top leaders and local commanders of Colombia’s guerrilla army.

The Department of Justice announced Wednesday a sweeping indictment charging members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia with smuggling more than $25 billion worth of cocaine into the United States.

In a separate case, federal prosecutors in Miami seek to extradite three FARC associates with ties to South Florida’s drug trade from Colombia. The men are charged with plotting to import up to 2,000 kilograms of cocaine per month into Miami.

"This is no longer a revolutionary movement. This is a networked criminal gang with ties to the drug cartel."

JERRY HAAR FIU PROFESSOR

that leads to the capture of the others.

Created in the mid-1960s, the FARC is a highly organized guerrilla army of roughly 15,000 that uses proceeds from the cocaine trade to bankroll violent attacks on the Colombian government. The U.S. Department of State considers the group a terrorist organization.

The indictment also counter European assessments that the guerrillas as freedom fighters battling Colombia’s oligarchy.

"This indictment presents them to the world as international terrorists," Gonzalez said.

Colombian officials in 2004 arrested Jorge Enrique Rodriguez Mendieta, one of the more senior FARC officials named in the indictment. Authorities said Rodriguez Mendieta served on the FARC’s leadership council and had rebels purchase hundreds of thousands of kilograms of cocaine paste — the mixture of coca leaves and chemicals used to make cocaine.

Erminso Cuevas Cabrera and Juan Jose Martinez Vega, who in custody, helped produce cocaine and exchange cocaine for arms, according to the indictment.

Venezuelan authorities arrested Martinez Vega last year when police rescued Maura Villarreal, the mother of Detroit Tigers pitcher Ugueth Urbina. Kidnappers held Villarreal in a remote Venezuelan mountain camp and demanded $6 million ransom. When police arrested Martinez Vega, he had roughly 700 kilograms of cocaine, according to U.S. officials.

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