

U.S. Charges 50 Colombian guerrillas in drug-smuggling case

By Vanessa Blum
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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.

"The entire Department of Justice, including every U.S. attorney's office, is focused on combating the problem of narco-violence and stemming the flow of illegal drugs into the United States," U.S. Attorney R. Alexander Acosta said.

Three suspects named in the Washington indictment also are in Colombian custody and the U.S. is seeking their extradition. The State Department announced more than \$75 million in rewards for information that leads to the capture of the others.

Created in the mid-1960s, the FARC is a highly organized guerilla 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.

With the FARC controlling large swaths of Colombian territory, some experts said apprehending the remaining defendants might prove difficult, particularly because they hide in dense jungles.

"That's kind of a hit and miss," said Ambler Moss, professor of international studies at the University of Miami. "The FARC are hard to catch."

Moss doubts the U.S. indictments and extradition requests would disrupt Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's peace negotiations with the guerrilla group.

"This is a commitment on the part of the U.S. to continue to pursue people involved in the drug trade," said Moss, who was U.S. ambassador to Panama during the Carter and Reagan administrations. "This is not the U.S. meddling in Colombian affairs."

Federal officials said the FARC supplies more than half of the world's cocaine and more than 60 percent of the cocaine entering the United States. To protect their hold on cocaine exports from Colombia, FARC commanders ordered executions of farmers who violated their rules, U.S. officials said.

According to the indictment, farmers who sold raw cocaine to other buyers would be shot, stabbed, or dismembered alive.

"This is no longer a revolutionary movement," said Jerry Haar, professor of management and international business at Florida International University. "This is a networked criminal gang with ties to the drug cartel."

News of the indictments brought a measured response from some Colombians in South Florida.

Orlando Gonzalez, a real estate developer who moved to Florida from Colombia eight years ago, supports the U.S. government's efforts to prosecute Colombian drug traffickers. But he said officials have to tackle the source of the problem -- drug consumption in the United States.

Gonzalez said the indictments also counter European assessments of 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, also 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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