

Latins Now Leaders Of Hard-Drug Trade

Operators of Rings Supplying U.S.
Virtually Immune From Prosecution

NYTimes

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APR 21 1975

In the last two years, Latin America has become the major source of hard drugs entering the United States. Much of it is being supplied by rings controlled by businessmen and professionals who have grown so politically and economically powerful that they can operate with virtual immunity from arrest and prosecution.

Latin America now supplies all of the cocaine sold in the United States, where the demand for the drug has risen so sharply that the price of coca leaves, from which cocaine is extracted, has soared 1,500 per cent since 1973 in some Latin countries — from \$4 to \$60 a bale.

In addition, Mexico has now replaced France as the main supplier of heroin to the United States, increasing its share of the illegal heroin market from 20 to 60 per cent in the last five years.

The increasing market for drugs from Latin America, which is centered in New York, Miami and Los Angeles, is supplied by traffickers who can buy protection by bribing poor-

The New York Times has conducted a two-month investigation in eight Latin American countries to explore how the drug traffic works there, how narcotics reach the main market in New York, who the major dealers are and what the United States and Latin American nations are doing about the problem. This is the first in a series of four articles and supplemental reports on that investigation.

ly paid police officers, judges and other officials. In some cases, corrupt policemen and public officials in Latin America have gone into the profitable drug traffic themselves.

New Networks Formed

The shift of the drug flow from Europe to Latin America also has brought into power new criminal networks in New York and other cities in the United States that are dominated by Colombians, Cubans and Mexicans.

The Federal Drug Enforcement Administration has identified about 250 Latin Americans as controlling the rings that supply cocaine and heroin to the United States market. Some of them are so influential politically that they are considered "untouchable" in their native countries.

Typical of the situation is the case of Luis Rivadeneira of Ecuador, who was arrested there last Dec. 16 with two kilos (4.4 pounds) of cocaine paste in his possession. Soon after his arrest, according to authorities, Adm. Alfredo Poveda Burbano, Ecuador's Minister of Government, who directs all law-enforcement agencies in the country, called the police and ordered them to change the evidence against Mr. Rivadeneira so that the charges against him would have to be dismissed.

"Admiral Poveda explained his order by saying that Rivadeneira was a close relative of a friend of his—another ad-

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miral," said a police captain. The police complied.

If drug traffickers can't use political influence to stop investigations against them, they can often successfully bribe police officers or judges.

Traffickers have so much available cash, for example, that in Colombia judges sometimes compete to try major narcotics cases because of the potential payoffs involved.

Eduardo Dávila, reputed to be a major cocaine trafficker from the city of Santa Marta, was arrested late last year on charges of murdering a policeman. According to the Colombian national police, three judges have already tried to get his case.

Traffickers often find the police even easier to corrupt than

judges because throughout Latin America they are so badly paid. Police salaries range from about \$60 a month in Bolivia to \$250 a month in Argentina.

In Mexico, some high police officials are known to have become millionaires by taking bribes. When some police officers are transferred from one district to another, they sell to their successors the list of narcotics traffickers who paid them on a regular basis.

Extortion Is Practiced

Some Latin American policemen who won't take bribes are not averse to arresting drug traffickers and then extorting money from them—a practice called *volteo*, which means "rolling."

Last year a United States citizen was arrested trying to buy two kilos of cocaine for \$7,000 from Maj. Oscar Zeballos of a Bolivian narcotics unit



The New York Times/April 21, 1975

So much coca paste, which is shipped from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, to northern Paraguay and western Brazil that the area is called "The Silver Triangle," to compare it to the center of opium traffic in Southeast Asia called "The Golden Triangle."

who was posing as a trafficker. Major Zeballos seized the money, keeping \$5,000 for himself and letting two younger officers split the rest.

His mistake was not sharing the money with the informant who had originally put him on to the North American. The irate informant told the officer's superiors and Major Zeballos was quietly dismissed from the police force, losing all his benefits.

The astronomical profits of the drug trade sometimes prove so tempting to some underpaid Latin American policemen that they go into the business themselves.

Last year, for example, a DC-3 flying from Peru to Colombia had mechanical trouble and was forced to land on a military base in Colombia. There were five people inside. The head of the group identified himself as Lieut. Benhur Benavides of the Colombian narcotics unit of F-2—the detective division of the national police. Nevertheless, the commander of the military compound had the plane searched and inside he found 100 kilograms of cocaine paste.

Resisting Easy Money

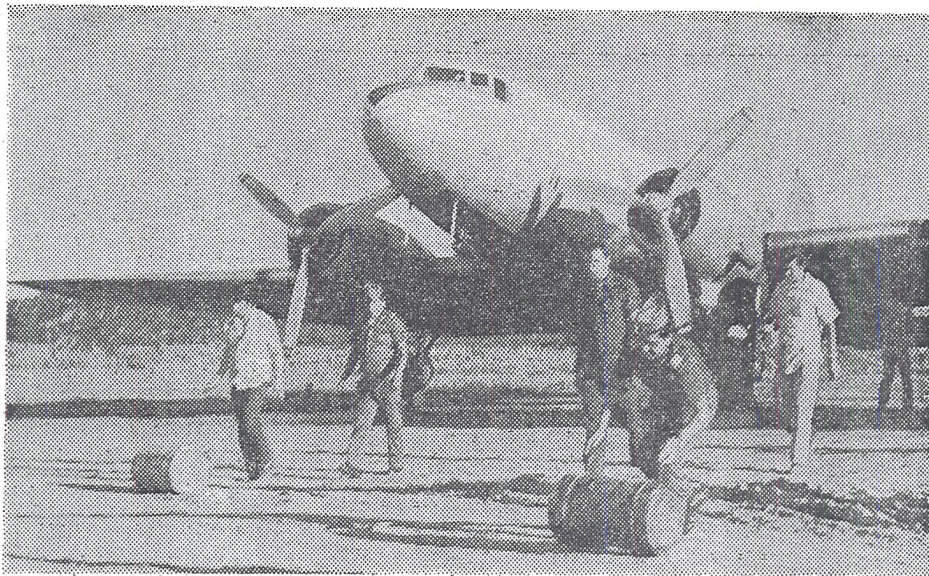
Despite the temptations, many policemen remain honest. "I've met cops making \$60 a month who wouldn't take a nickel from anybody," said Louis Bachrach, the Drug Enforcement Administration's regional director for South America.

Many government officials also are unmoved by any personal or political considerations. When the Bolivian police arrested the socially prominent Maria Malky Farah with 15 kilos of cocaine in her possession, the judge on the case dismissed the charges against her. But the Minister of the Interior, Juan Pereda Asbún, had both Miss Malky, whose family he knew, and the judge jailed on corruption charges.

Several factors have put Latin America on the crest of the wave of profitable drug traffic.

In recent years cocaine has become the most fashionable drug in the United States and Europe because it is less expensive than heroin, it is not physically addictive and it has a reputation as a sexual stimulant. One indication of the drug's growing popularity is that cocaine seizures in the United States have increased 700 per cent since 1969.

The huge profits to be made by transporting cocaine from Latin America to New York also make it clear why so many are willing to take the risk. In New York City a kilo of cocaine is sold on the street for between \$75,000 and \$100,000. In La Paz, Bolivia, that same kilo would cost only \$4,000; in Lima, Peru, \$5,000; in Quito, Ecuador, \$6,000; in Bogotá, Colombia, \$7,500, and in Buenos Aires, \$8,500. (North American customers are charged 15 to 30 per cent above these going rates.)



One example of police corruption from narcotics came to light when this DC-3, flying from Peru, got into trouble and was forced to land at a Colombian military base. The leader of the group on board said he was a national police detective lieutenant. When plane was searched, drums holding 100 kilograms of cocaine paste were confiscated.

French Source Weakened

While cocaine has been growing in price and popularity, heroin from France—the traditional source—has been declining in availability because of international law-enforcement pressure on French traffickers. This has left a gap that is increasingly being filled by Mexican heroin.

Mexico began producing heroin for the United States market during World War II. "When the war dried up the supply of heroin from Europe, several New York Mafiosi—Tom Gagliano, Frank Livorsi, Joe Bonanno—went to Mexico and set up a new source of supply," said John T. Cusack, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration's international operations. "Until then only a few Chinese immigrants were growing poppies in Mexico."

Today the Federal authorities estimate that Mexico produces 15 tons of opium base, from which heroin is made, every year. It comes from thousands of cultivation sites situated principally in the states of Sinaloa, Durango, Sonora and Guerrero. The heroin refined from Mexican poppies is brown in color while French heroin, refined by more sophisticated methods, is white.

Mexico is now employing soldiers to seek out and destroy fields of opium poppies. "So far this year we have destroyed 6,000 poppy fields and have detected another 2,000," said Pedro Ojeda-Paullada, Mexico's Attorney General, who is directing the eradication program.

But so far the drive has not slowed up poppy cultivation to any noticeable degree. When one field is destroyed, the campesinos (peasant farmers) plant again elsewhere.

Last year Mexico passed a law that provided for confiscation of land used for cultivating opium poppies. But the campesinos worked around that by planting the poppies on Federal lands—often on mountainsides that are too steep for army helicopters to land on and hard to reach on foot.

'Like the Old West'

In Mexico, the investigation of narcotics traffickers is just one of many responsibilities of a 340-man Federal police force. The Federales are led by 20 comandantes and enforcement apparently depends largely on the competence of individual commanders.

"It's like the Old West," said Robert Eyman, the Drug Enforcement Administration's regional director in Mexico. "If you have a strong Marshal Dillon, you get good enforcement."

United States officials esti-

mate that there are four Marshal Dillons among the 20 comandantes. Some of the others are said to be simply indifferent, but several are thought blatantly corrupt, having become millionaires on a job that pays about \$500 a month.

To combat such problems, Mr. Ojeda-Paullada uses selected comandantes, such as Salvador Del Toro and Ismael Díaz Laredo, to carry out special missions. He also periodically shifts comandantes from one post to another to keep them from establishing ties with traffickers.

Nevertheless, many traffickers retain their power, protected not only by the police, but also by public officials. Some narcotics dealers, in fact, are public officials themselves. Among the 70 major drug traffickers United States agents have chosen as primary targets in Mexico, is a high official in a major ministry.

Attorney General Ojeda-Paullada has tried to fight such corruption by dismissing or reassigning corrupt officials in several provinces, promoting mandatory sentences for major drug traffickers and setting up a school to provide professional standards for the Federal police.

But thus far the Mexican Government's efforts have not been enough to inhibit heroin production in Mexico. Nor have they succeeded in discouraging the use of the country as a transshipment point for cocaine from South America.

Crop From Andes

Cocaine is derived from the leaves of the coca plant, which grows at elevations of 2,000 to 3,000 feet on the eastern slopes of the Andes mountains.

Because of the large quantity of leaves required to produce cocaine—more than 300 pounds for one kilo—the leaves are processed by campesinos into "coca paste" in primitive stills close to the growing areas. These stills are no more than oil drums containing a solution of potassium carbonate, water and kerosene in which the leaves are allowed to soak.

The paste, which resembles moist flour, is then shipped to laboratories throughout Latin America to be processed into cocaine. Processing cocaine does not require the sophisticated chemistry needed to produce heroin. A cocaine laboratory can be set up with about \$1,500 worth of equipment.

Peru and Bolivia are the only two Latin American countries where the cultivation of coca leaves is legal. In Peru, new coca planting has been forbidden since 1964, but production of coca has increased 20 per cent a year. Last year Peru produced 20 million kilograms of coca leaf, only 4 million of which were used for such legitimate purposes as export for chemical use and for chewing by local Indians.

When the Peruvian Government clears jungle land for farming and turns it over to the campesinos, they almost always plant coca on the land. The Government winks at this practice, however, because it allows the campesinos, who are mostly Indians, to support themselves without any training or financial support.

"The Peruvian Government has no unified policy on coca," said an American official in Lima. "Many ministers feel that cocaine is an American problem and not a Peruvian responsibility."

Crop Test in Bolivia

Unlike Peru, Bolivia has been trying harder to bring coca production under control. Bolivia is now participating in an \$800,000 United States pilot project to find crops that the campesinos would be willing to grow instead of coca. Many observers are doubtful about the project's chances of success, however, pointing out that coca requires little attention and provides three to four harvests a year, attributes that few other crops can offer.

"I've got as much skepticism about the project as anyone," said William Stedman, the United States Ambassador to Bolivia. "But we've never tried crop substitution down here and an experimental effort should be made."

A year ago Bolivia enacted broad narcotics legislation calling for the control of coca production, stiff prison terms for drug dealers and unified police action against major traffickers. But implementation of the law has been extremely slow and the narcotics unit has made few significant arrests or seizures.

Col. Luis Carrasco, director of the Department of Narcotics, has attributed the lack of prog-

ress to organizational problems.

"We want to set up an effective unit and find honest, able men for it," he said. "This takes time."

But other officials wonder whether the lack of progress is not related to the political influence that some major traffickers are said to have in Bolivia.

For example, when Alberto Sánchez Bello, a courier for one of Bolivia's major cocaine traffickers, Carlos Balderama, needed diplomatic papers to facilitate carrying a cocaine shipment to Canada last year, he was able to go to Edwin Tapia Frontanilla, secretary to the presidency. Mr. Sánchez was arrested in Canada and Mr. Tapia's role in the affair was exposed, forcing his dismissal from office.

The centers of the narcotics traffic in Bolivia are La Paz, the capital, sprawling across the slopes of a canyon 12,000 feet above sea level, and Santa Cruz, the country's commercial center on the eastern lowlands.

Bolivian traffickers process coca paste, which they buy from the campesinos at \$350 a kilo, at a handsome profit. They also export it at \$1,000 a kilo to laboratory operators in Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and Chile.

So much coca paste is sent from Santa Cruz to northern Paraguay and western Brazil that the area is called "the Silver Triangle" to compare it to the center of opium traffic in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand known as "the Golden Triangle."

Until 1973, Bolivia exported most of its coca paste to Chile. "Chile has always had the best cocaine chemists in South America," said Col. Guido López of the Bolivian national police. "It was the Chileans in fact who first taught the Bolivian campesinos how to make paste from coca leaves."

Junta Cracks Down

But the military junta that seized power in Chile in 1973 has acted against major traffickers, jailing them, expelling them to the United States or forcing many of them to flee the country. Many dealers went to northern Argentina, where they are now setting up new laboratories. But they are moving cautiously because they have alien status and therefore are subject to expulsion.

Those remaining in Chile operate mostly around the northern city of Arica, which is near the borders of both Bolivia and Peru. The traffickers in Arica apparently still are entrenched enough to command police protection.

"When we have a case in Arica, we never tell the police what we're up to," said a lieutenant in the Carabineros in Santiago. "We've been burned too many times."

Peru, the other coca-producing country in Latin America, exports most of its coca paste to its northern neighbors, Ecuador and Colombia.

In Ecuador the major cocaine rings operate out of Quito, the capital, and Guayaquil, the principal port. Ecuadorean traffickers now send more than 100 kilograms of cocaine a month to the United States, according to Walter White, head of Drug Enforcement Administration's office in Quito.

A Faltering Effort

The police in Ecuador have not been considered effective against the drug traffickers. As is customary throughout the country's various police forces, officers in the narcotics unit are transferred to other duties every four months and they are never on the job long enough to learn how to make major drug cases.

A reorganization law for the police was drafted more than a year ago that established two-year tours of duty for narcotics work. But the law keeps bouncing from ministry to ministry without being implemented.

Even when major dealers are arrested in Ecuador, they often are able to avoid prosecution.

"If a trafficker is a landowner or a lawyer or an important man, many judges will dismiss the charges against him no matter what the evidence," said Col. Tarquino Núñez, director general of narcotics enforcement in Ecuador. "A professor was caught with three kilos of coca paste last September and the judge released him only because of his position."

Ecuador not only processes cocaine, it also produces opium poppies. Acres of poppies are planted every year in remote mountain fields, usually mixed

with other crops such as corn or barley.

"Heroin is not a serious problem in Ecuador now, but the potential is here," Mr. White said.

His immediate concern, he said, is to persuade Ecuadorians to strengthen controls along their borders with Peru and Colombia.

"Tons of paste come up from Peru with little interference and a lot of it moves on up to Colombia," he said. "If we could do something about the borders, we would disrupt the cocaine traffic not only here, but also in Colombia, which sends more of the stuff to the United States than any country in South America."

Federal authorities believe Colombia now has between 60 and 80 major criminal organizations engaged in the cocaine traffic. "Half of them are as sophisticated and as disciplined as our own Mafia families," said Octavio González, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration's office in Bogotá. "They have ample capital resources, large organizations of from 50 to 100 people and layers of authority that effectively insulate their leaders from prosecution."

These groups are based in Colombia's major cities—Medellín, the industrial capital; Bogotá, Cali, Barranquilla, Santa Maria and Cartagena. They employ their own chemists to process cocaine in sophisticated laboratories outside the main cities, own fleets of planes, trucks and automobiles, and can call on scores of couriers to transport their product.

Colombian drug rings send at least 300 kilograms of cocaine a month to the United States, mostly to New York and Miami, according to Federal law-enforcement agency estimates.

Like many Latin-American countries, Colombia has several police forces fighting the narcotics trade—the security police; F-2, the detective branch of the national police; and the customs police. The F-2 narcotics unit is considered to be the most effective.

But police action alone, no matter how intensive, cannot destroy the narcotics traffic in Latin America. "There are too many loopholes in our laws and not enough cooperation between countries," said Capt. Theodoro Campo Gómez, the 31-year-old commander of the F-2 narcotics unit in Colombia. "We have to change."

TOMORROW: The methods used to transport drugs from Latin America to New York and a look at some of the people who are doing it.