

Drug-Smuggling Logistics Bizarre and Often Fatal

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Second of four articles on why Latin America is now the major source of hard drugs entering the United States.

By NICHOLAS GAGE

The rainy season has ended in Chulumani, Bolivia, and on the steeply terraced mountainside, Juan Mamani is crouching in his small plot of coca plants, beginning to strip the tiny green leaves that will be his first crop of the year. He will pack the leaves into bales, called tambors, and sell the 300 pounds he harvests for \$250.

In Jackson Heights, Queens, drug dealers are waiting for new supplies of cocaine from South America. The 300 pounds from Juan Mamani's small plot will produce one kilogram of the drug (2.2 pounds). Although he will get \$250 for his crop,

the kilo of cocaine will bring in at least \$75,000 in the New York City retail market.

The huge profit between New York and Latin America, which has become the major source of hard drugs entering the United States, is what makes thousands of men and women willing to take the risks involved in smuggling cocaine into the United States.

The methods they use are imaginative, bizarre and sometimes fatal to the couriers, who have been known to soak their clothes in cocaine or to swallow drugs

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stuffed in a prophylactic pouch.

Every conceivable container has been used by couriers to secrete drugs coming in from Latin America—false-bottomed wine bottles, frames of paintings, hollow ski poles. Carmen Moreno, a member of the Alberto Bravo organization in Colombia, one of the leading narcotics rings, was captured when she was about to fly from Toronto to New York with a kilo of cocaine hidden in a hollow wooden hanger.

Large quantities of cocaine—over four kilograms—are usually sent by ship or plane. Crew members on ships are recruited by the Latin-American drug organizations to carry narcotics on their vessels into American ports. The drugs then may be carried ashore or dropped overboard in harbors to be picked up by scuba divers.

In Colombia, major drug organizations often use private planes flown by their own pilots. A pilot will rent a plane in the United States and fill out a false flight plan. Then he will fly to Colombia, where the drugs are waiting.

"In northeast Colombia there is a desert area called Guajira that is so flat that planes can land just about anywhere," said Octavio González, head of the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration office in Bogotá. "The area is controlled by Indians and there is little local law enforcement.

"When they have a shipment, Colombian traffickers will pick a time and place for the landing and hire Indians to guard the area. There will be 20 to 50 Indians armed with R-15 carbines.

The plane lands, picks up the cargo, and takes off within 45 minutes."

Large shipments of drugs—usually cocaine and marijuana—can be moved on these flights, according to Mr. González. "Some of these planes are big B-26's, B-25's, twin-engine Cessnas and, in one instance, a Lockheed Constellation. And then the planes return to the states and land at designated small airports, sometimes in South Carolina, Florida and Georgia."

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Colombian narcotics organizations have highly sophisticated logistical equipment to assist these flights, including fuel depots and elaborate ground-to-air communications equipment. If one of their planes does get into trouble or if the pilot discovers that authorities are tracking it, the standard procedure is to throw the drugs overboard.

Smaller amounts of cocaine—under four kilos—are carried generally by couriers, who account for the greatest part of the traffic. Many of the couriers come from Colombia, which sends more cocaine to the United States than any other Latin-American country. Of the 165 cocaine couriers arrested in the United States during the second half of last year, 117 were Colombians.

Latin-American drug traffickers find it isn't difficult to recruit their countrymen as couriers, called "mules," because if they are caught, many judges in the United States will give them only suspended sentences and deport them in the belief that they are not hardened criminals.

"When the couriers go

back home, they're walking advertisements for the recruiters," said John R. Bartels Jr., the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Fees Are High

Couriers, who usually earn from \$500 to a \$1,000 a kilo plus expenses for each trip, have used many methods to conceal drugs. One of the most ingenious is to soak their cotton clothing in a liquid solution that contains cocaine and on their arrival in the United States to put the clothes in a solution that releases the drug. Detection is difficult.

"They start with cocaine base (the stage before pure cocaine) that they dissolve in pure alcohol," explained Eugene Castillo, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent stationed in Bolivia. "Then they take an article of clothing, soak it in the solution and let it dry."

"When they get to the States they take the article, soak it in acetone for 10 to 15 minutes, wring it out, and run the solution through filter paper. Then they pour the solution into a flat container and let it dry. This process not only conceals the drug, it also refines the cocaine base into finished cocaine. For every 300 grams of base they soak this way, they get 100 grams of cocaine."

Another one of the more effective methods of hiding drugs also is the most dangerous: couriers fill prophylactic pouches with the drug and then swallow it before crossing the border. They intend to regurgitate the pouches later. But in at least four instances, United States citizens who went to Latin America to buy drugs, swallowed the pouches and then were stricken when their digestive juices caused the pouches to burst.

Three men—in Bolivia, Colombia and Panama—died as a result of this method of smuggling. A partner of the man in Bolivia also was stricken and went into convulsions, but his life was saved.

Key City Areas Cited

When the cocaine reaches the New York metropolitan area, it goes to major distribution rings centered in areas with large Latin populations, such as Jackson Heights in Queens, the South Bronx, Washington Heights and Union City, N.J., according to Arthur Grubert, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration's intelligence unit in New York. "Union City is known as Cocaine City in some quarters," he said.

The growth of the cocaine market in New York has created important rings to supply it. These rings are dominated by Colombians and Cubans, Mr. Grubert said.

Many of the rings are closely bound through family relationships, and disputes are generally settled by discussion, he said. Violence is used to maintain discipline, he said, but not as often as in Mafia groups.

"Latin criminal groups maintain much closer ties to the main organizations back home than American Mafia groups do with their Sicilian counterparts," Mr. Grubert said.

Mafia groups in New York have not become active in the cocaine traffic, Federal officials believe, because they do not have well-established relations with suppliers in South America.

New York cocaine dealers are doing a booming business, which has not been affected by the economic recession since many of their customers are from affluent circles where snorting cocaine has become increasingly popular.

Ounce Sells for \$1,000

When the New York rings receive the cocaine, they sell it to wholesalers in kilo lots, and they, in turn, market it in ounce portions. Mr. Grubert said that their "stores" are often Latin bars and restaurants throughout the city.

An ounce of high quality cocaine (more than 95 per cent pure) sells at these "stores" at between \$1,000 and \$1,500.

The retailers who buy the ounce then cut the cocaine three or four times and sell the diluted cocaine for \$50 a gram. Their gross for one ounce thus ranges between \$4,200 and \$5,600.

Arrests of Latin traffickers in New York has disclosed that many of them had entered the United States on forged passports and that most of them had police records back home as petty thieves.

The rings that handle cocaine distribution in the city include scores of members. Last October, for example, Federal agents and the New York police arrested 150 persons that they said were part of just one ring, the Alberto Bravo organization.

The Bravo group was said to have imported 300 pounds of cocaine in 1974 alone. Important figures in the group, according to narcotics agents, included Mario Rodriguez of Forest Hills, Queens, in whose apartment the police said they found nine pounds of cocaine, and Domingo Fernandez of Jackson Heights, now a fugitive.

But, the organization's

leader, Alberto Bravo, remains at large in Medellin, Colombia. His chief lieutenant in charge of maintaining smuggling operations to New York, Bernardo Roldan, also remains free in Medellin. They have been indicted in New York on conspiracy charges, but Colombia will not extradite its citizens to the United States.

To keep its vast New York network adequately supplied, authorities say the Bravo organization shipped cocaine to it through a variety of routes, including Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Miami. One shipment was first flown to Munich and then to New York, where it was said to have been delivered to Mario Rodriguez.

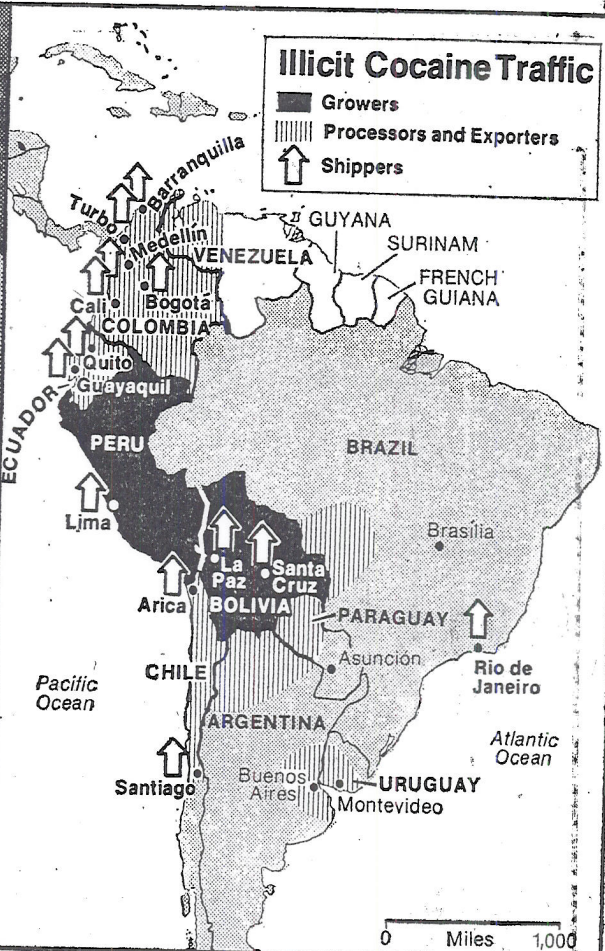
The authorities contend that New York distributors for South American traffickers are not restricted to Latins. For years, one of the biggest drug traffickers in Bolivia, Jaime Hergueta, sent almost all of the cocaine he processed to James A. Austin, who operated out of Manhattan and the Bronx, according to narcotics officials here.

Mr. Austin, who the police say accumulated four apartments, three Mercedes Benz automobiles, and a 67-foot yacht during his alleged association with Mr. Hergueta, was arrested on narcotics charges last Dec. 16 at Kennedy Airport as he stepped off a plane from Peru. He still awaits trial.

New York gets all of its cocaine, but less than 20 per cent of its heroin, from Latin America, according to Federal agents. Mexican heroin in New York has surfaced primarily in Greenwich Village, where it is said to be running 17 per cent pure compared to about seven per cent for French heroin.

But outside New York, Federal agents say Mexican heroin dominates the market, taking an 80 per cent share in Chicago, a 70 per cent share in Houston, a 60 per cent share in Los Angeles and a 50 per cent share in Denver.

Los Angeles is the source city for most of the Mexican heroin sold in the United States, according to Abraham L. Azzam, the Drug Enforcement Administration's deputy regional director in California. Dealers from other cities go to Los Angeles to pick up their supplies from wholesalers there who deal directly



Bolivian women picking coca leaves. Map indicates where illicit cocaine originates and moves in Latin America. The New York Times/April 22, 1975

with Mexican traffickers, he said.

Unlike the French heroin traffickers, who prefer to send drugs in big lots, the Mexican suppliers use the "human wave" approach. They send a multitude of couriers carrying small amounts on the theory that if some are apprehended, the majority will get through.

"The biggest seizure of French heroin we ever had was 412 kilos," said John T. Cusack, head of international operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration. "But our biggest seizure of Mexican heroin was only eight kilos."

If a Mexican drug trafficker wants to send a heroin shipment of more than three kilos to the United States, he will usually have it driven across the border in a special "load" car or flown over in a private airplane.

At checkpoints on the Mexican border, United States Customs agents use computers into which they feed the license number of any suspicious car that passes through. If any information is recorded about the car, it scores a "hit" on the com-

puter and is pulled aside and searched.

Drug traffickers will often send an empty car across the border to see if it scores a "hit." If it is passed through, they will bring it back and load it up with heroin.

Border Vigilance Difficult

Because the border between Mexico and the United States is both big (2,000 miles) and busy (25 million crossings last year) it is virtually impossible to police it thoroughly. This has tempted some United States residents to buy cocaine in Latin America and try to smuggle it to the United States through Mexico.

Those who are apprehended carrying narcotics in Mexico, however, run the risk of serving at least five years in a Mexican prison.

As of last February, there were 509 United States citizens in Mexican jails, 420 of them there on narcotics charges. Of these 420, some 123 were women.

Conversations with some of them in a Mexican prison showed that they generally believed they would soon be deported by the Mexican

government in response to pressure from the United States Government.

"They seem to be convinced that they'll be allowed to go home if they just push their Congressmen a little harder," said Peter J. Peterson, the United States Consul General in Mexico City. "They often fabricate complaints and it makes it difficult for us to handle legitimate grievances."

Asked about the Americans in prison, Pedro Ojeda-Paulada, Mexico's Attorney General, said, "I can tell you categorically that Mexico will not deport anyone until he completes his sentence. We are totally committed to the law and any person bringing drugs into Mexico faces five to 15 years in our prisons."

Although most of the other Latin-American countries have equally stiff drug laws, recruiters of "mules" in the United States assure them that the Latin-American countries don't enforce those laws. The fact is, only Colombia consistently deports North American drug violators and it holds them about a year first.

Latin-American drug traffickers like to recruit "mules" from among the most innocent and honest appearing United States residents they can find.

Two grandmothers from California, Jeanne McMichael, 61 years old, and Elizabeth Lankton, 52, were intrigued when they were approached by a woman they knew who offered them free vacations to South America plus \$6,000 each for bringing back cocaine.

The two grandmothers successfully carried cocaine back from Colombia and Bolivia. But on March 24, 1974, they were arrested going through customs in Mexico City and subsequently convicted of carrying six kilograms of cocaine in false-bottomed suitcases.

The women have been in custody for more than a year now, but they have not been sentenced yet. Because of the mandatory drug laws in Mexico, they are certain to spend at least five years in a Mexican jail.

Tomorrow: The case history of a leading Latin American drug trafficker.