

Mexican connection to Medellín Cartel uncovered in series of arrests

by an EIR Investigative Team

The Mexican Federal Judicial Police (PJF) announced on Feb. 1 that they had captured one of the most powerful drug-trafficking gangs that make up the Medellín Cartel. The group, comprised of 6 Colombians and 16 Mexicans, operated a vast network of drugs-for-arms trafficking. Thanks to the arrest, the Mexican police were able to locate an arsenal in the town of Agua Prieta, Sonora, near the Arizona border, which contained 100 Chinese-made AK-47 assault rifles, 5 U.S.-made AR-15 rifles, 65,000 cartridges, 330 circular rifle magazines, infrared lenses, bayonets, 600 kilos of cocaine, and 11 tons of marijuana. The arms cache was the largest ever confiscated in Mexico.

The head of the gang, a Colombian named Hildebrando Sanabría Martín, revealed that he is a member of the Medellín Cartel, and that the weapons were intended to boost the cartel's war to the death against the Colombian government, to prevent the activation of a new extradition treaty. "He who signs an extradition order, signs his own death sentence," declared one of those arrested, "war footing."

Information released by the arrested traffickers revealed that Sanabría is one of the right-hand men of Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha (alias "El Mexicano"), one of the top names of the Colombian-based Medellín Cartel, alongside Carlos Lehder, Pablo Escobar, and the Ochoa brothers.

Two days later, the PJF seized another arsenal in the city of Hermosillo, Sonora, composed of 80 AK-47 rifles. The PJF confirmed that the weapons were part of a Medellín Cartel order for 800 assault rifles, and that the drug traffickers also expected to receive bazookas, missiles, and grenades in future shipments. The PJF commander in charge of the raids, Guillermo González Calderón, said that a preliminary shipment of at least 200 rifles had already been sent to Colombia.

Then on Feb. 18, agents discovered yet another shipment, this one containing 180 AK-47s, 80,000 cartridges, 960 rifle magazines, gas masks, and bayonets in the state of Durango, adjoining Sonora. Thirty persons were arrested by the Army, and bank accounts and properties were seized as well. Gen. Mario Renán Castillo Fernández, who conducted the raid, has not yet stated whether this new group is linked to those arrested in Sonora.

Mexican authorities were amazed by the vast military potential of the Mexican drug traffickers and their Colombian chiefs. The arrests leave no room for doubt that the Mexican drug mafia is but a subsidiary of the Medellín Cartel, and that its strength threatens to turn Mexico into a hostage of the cartel.

In Mexico, "the Medellín Cartel has again taken" the city of Guadalajara, Jalisco "as an important springboard" for cocaine trafficking, reported the front page of the daily newspaper *Excelsior* on Feb. 16. "Slowly . . . but irreversibly, Guadalajara has again become the metropolis of the clandestine empire and a mecca for the international drug trade." The daily adds, "Renewed open warfare against the Colombian government . . . promises powerful and violent activities in the underworld, and in Mexico, the epicenter can be found here" in Guadalajara. "Among police circles, a fight for this capital is expected."

Mexico's Colombia connection is not new, but it is now stronger than ever, because it has been permitted to grow. This was the major discovery of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena Salazar, who was assassinated by cartel hirelings Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo and Rafael Caro Quintero in March 1985.

Matta Ballesteros and Camarena's murder

The Medellín Cartel set up its Mexican base of operations in 1982. The man sent to direct operations within the country was a Honduran, José Ramón Matta Ballesteros, who, according to the DEA, functioned as the "chairman of the board" of the illegal-drug business in Mexico, along with fugitives Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, Manuel Salcido, and jailbirds José Esparragoza Moreno, Rafael Caro Quintero, Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, and Jaime Herrera Herrera. The Colombian connection in Mexico was the primary object of investigations by a special DEA group including Camarena.

In November and December of 1984, the Mexican police in collaboration with the DEA, busted various cocaine shipments of the cartel. In February 1985, Camarena was kidnaped in Guadalajara, Jalisco, on orders from Matta Ballesteros, with the intention of squeezing him for information on the investigation. He was later killed.

The man upon whom the DEA's "Operation Godfather" was focused inside Mexico was, of course, Matta Ballesteros. On April 10, 1985, a DEA spokesman told the Mexican daily *El Nacional*, "This Honduran is in charge of modernizing this illegal activity. In addition to drug trafficking . . . it involves the supplying of weapons and sophisticated espionage equipment, radar, radio and telecommunications to the organized gangs."

Matta Ballesteros's arrest was about to occur in Mexico City, but then-PJF chief Manuel Ibarra Herrera ordered it postponed for two days, allowing him to flee to Spain. In 1986, Ibarra was fired, but never investigated. One year earlier, in March 1985, the chief of the PJF's anti-narcotics division Jorge Miguel Aldana Ibarra, was forced to resign, after he was proven complicit in protecting Matta Ballesteros's group. However, thanks to his political influence, Aldana was not touched and, strangely, was sent to Israel on a one-year "commission," where he relied on the influence of many friends within that country's security services.

During that period, Matta Ballesteros moved to Colombia, where he was discovered and arrested on May 1, 1986 by Colombian police. Within a few months, however, he had bought his freedom and waltzed both out of the jail and out of the country. Most surprisingly, Matta Ballesteros did not flee to Paraguay or Switzerland, as most of the criminals of his class do, but rather to the place that is closest to the U.S. military and intelligence in the region: Honduras. The man most wanted by the DEA for ordering the murder of Camarena, had taken refuge in the "mouth of the lion," where there was not only a heavy concentration of U.S. troops, but also an extensive network of CIA agents, dedicated to supplying the logistical and military requirements of the Nicaraguan "Contras."

That, however, did not distress Matta Ballesteros. Upon his return to his native land, he was arrested for a short time while pending homicide charges against him could be dismissed, and then released in November 1986. He is currently one of Honduras's most prominent businessmen.

Matta Ballesteros, Sicilia Falcón, the CIA, the KGB

The clearest reason that Matta Ballesteros chose Honduras for his refuge is that he is quite at home with the continent's intelligence services. In Mexico, he had bought protection from an important section of the Federal Security Department, which was directed at the time by José Antonio Zorilla Pérez. Zorilla was also responsible for all official contacts with agents of the CIA, then under William Casey, although Zorilla personally leaned toward the Israeli Mossad, with which he cultivated close ties along with his friend Miguel Aldana.

Paradoxically, Matta Ballesteros's career with the international drug trade soared to levels not even he had anticipated. During his stay in a Mexican jail during 1980-81,

according to a Nov. 20, 1986 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Matta Ballesteros had developed close ties to one Alberto Sicilia Falcón, the Cuban-American drug kingpin who was imprisoned in June 1975. Sicilia Falcón put Matta Ballesteros in touch with his contacts in the cocaine-smuggling world.

Sicilia Falcón's influence within the Ibero-American drug world was extensive. During the 1960s, he was a member of a group of Cubans deployed by the CIA to conduct sabotage operations inside Castro's Cuba. At that time, the CIA's clandestine operations against Cuba were directed by Lawrence Starnfield. At the beginning of the seventies, Sicilia Falcón abandoned the CIA and resurfaced within a band of drug traffickers led by Mexican Juan Hernández Chavira and the Cuban-American Mercedes Coleman Bisval. The Hernández-Coleman gang smuggled drugs into the United States from the four corners of the globe. When Hernández Chavira was arrested, the young Sicilia Falcón joined up with Coleman Bisval and became the chief of the band.

In 1973, Sicilia Falcón set up shop in Guadalajara. That same year, Larry Starnfield arrived in Mexico as the new CIA station chief, together with the new U.S. ambassador to Mexico Joseph John Jova. Both came from the U.S. embassy in Chile. Starnfield had already worked at the CIA station in Mexico, during the student disturbances of 1968.

According to the book *The Underworld Empire* by James Mills (Doubleday and Co. Inc., Garden City, New York, 1986), a special DEA team dubbed CENTAC discovered that Sicilia Falcón was receiving confidential CIA information, without knowing either why or from whom. The same book reports that Sicilia Falcón and a Mexican partner Gastón Santos were smuggling weapons in Portugal, with the backing of the CIA. The book mentions that the DEA discovered that Sicilia Falcón was selling or exchanging weapons for drugs with leftist guerrilla groups of Central and South America, as well as Mexico. Another strange fact that reinforced the DEA's suspicions of a CIA connection to Sicilia Falcón, was that the criminal had hired as his professional hitman an individual identified as Michael Decker, a Vietnam veteran who had been part of Operation Phoenix.

The DEA went on to discover that Sicilia Falcón had relations with Cuba and East Germany, as well as investments in Soviet banks. Sicilia Falcón had also become the lover of the Mexican millionairess Dolores Olmedo de Phillips, whose links to the secret Communist apparatus in the country date from her intimate relations with the Communist painter Diego Rivera. Olmedo is the world's leading propagandist for the Diego Rivera cult.

The paths of Matta Ballesteros and Sicilia Falcón suggest that the Medellín Cartel and its various branches are acting as agents of Soviet irregular warfare. U.S. counterintelligence experts know well that the main infiltration of the U.S. intelligence service was carried out by Cuba's DGI through the drug trade, and in particular by means of such "anti-Castro" Cubans as Sicilia Falcón.