



The woman phoned the office of the antinarcotics division (DAN) in Bolivar, in El Salvador's La Union province, on August 13, 2008, at 1:30 PM. Investigators later established that what she told agent Javier Ramon Aguilar Ordoñez during that phone call was the story of a drug trafficking network led by Juan Maria Medrano, alias "Juan Colorado."

The report that agent Aguilar Ordoñez wrote based on their conversation leaves little to the imagination regarding Colorado.

"He works illegally trafficking drugs and is part of the [criminal] structure known as the Perrones, (...). They are in charge of sending large amounts of cocaine to the United States, and they do so by using people with visas, as well as errand runners who deliver drugs by smuggling them in; on the journey back, they carry the money in small quantities in order to avoid problems at the airport." [1]

San Salvador – New York Route

The report tells the following story: a drug trafficker bought cocaine from suppliers in Honduras at \$3,000 per kilo and then resold it at \$6,500 to associates who, thanks to his contacts with DAN agents at the airport, could guarantee that the packages would fly without problems in commercial airplanes going from San Salvador to New York.

This is the fourth article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.

In Queens, a contact received the travelers and the primary operator of the trips, who later delivered the drugs to two Salvadoran distributors. One of them was a member of the Barrio 18 gang and the other was a Colombian from Freehold,

New Jersey. Alex, the gang member, transported the drugs to College Park, a city in Maryland 20 minutes away from downtown Washington DC by car.

A quick calculation based on the numbers that appear in the investigation opened by the Attorney General's Office provides an idea of the size of Juan Colorado's trade. The ring, which trafficked an average of 20 kilos per trip, made nine deliveries between June 2007 and January 2008. That is to say, 180 kilos in seven months were put directly on East Coast markets, for three times the original price, according to calculations by the Salvadoran National Civil Police (PNC). Juan Colorado sold a kilo at \$6,500, meaning that the 180 kilos trafficked would have added up to a gross profit of almost \$1.2 million.

Every trip, then, meant a \$130,000 gross profit. Out of this money, Juan Colorado paid \$5,000 to Romulo Antonio Portillo, alias "Tony Sinaloa," his chief operator; \$10,000 to those who facilitated contact with the PNC at the airport; and \$1,000 plus \$200 in travel expenses to each of the two or three errand runners who carried the drugs on each trip. All in all, around \$18,600 went to operating expenses for each journey.

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In this operation, there was a spiritual aspect that was important in addition to the money. Two witnesses cited in the police investigations and in the document produced by the Attorney General's Office said that prior to embarking on a journey to the north, Juan Colorado's men would always travel to Panchimalco, a municipality in the San Salvador province, to visit a witch who would bring them good luck and ward off evil.

"Gilma Xiomara Vasquez has a black center... There was a room where he was attended to by a woman of around 30 years, mulatto, with a normal complexion, long hair," the witness said.

"She asked him for his date of birth, then asked if anyone had tried to harm him and at the end she told him that he was clean to travel, that he could go without fear, that nothing was going to happen to him," reads the account given by one of Juan Colorado's errand runners, who later served as a witness in the process opened by the Specialized Court of San Miguel against the drug trafficking group.

Xiomara was not only a spiritual counsellor. She also chose the houses where the drugs were stored, decided the dates of the journeys and even hid money for them in her home.

Once he had received the blessing of the spiritualist, Tony Sinaloa followed a routine. First, he collected the drugs from his boss, sometimes from houses in San Miguel, other times in Placitas or in San Jorge, at the foot of the Chaparrastique volcano. With the car loaded -- the drugs in briefcases -- Tony Sinaloa set off along the Litoral Highway to meet up in a gas station with the most important contacts of the journey, the Carlos brothers, Nelson and Tito Castro, [2] of Puerto El Triunfo, Usulután, a state in the east of the country.

Tony Sinaloa had met the Castro brothers in 2005, when they had offered him free passage through the airport. "When you want to get something through the airport, I can help you; I've got a friend who works in the DAN and is of a high rank, who we can contact to facilitate the deliveries," reads the statement made in the case against Juan Colorado's network.

In 2007, after giving Juan Colorado the contact that would allow him to move through the airport with ease, Tony Sinaloa became his deputy, and was the person who established the gang's modus operandi.



The drugs would go from San Miguel to the airport, where the Castro brothers would alert their contact in the DAN -- agent Leonel Alexander Granillo Santos -- and the drugs would be loaded on the plane without a problem. In the airports of Newark and JFK in Queens, New York, there were no problems for months. On one occasion they even

stopped two travelers in the New Jersey terminal. "They made us pass through the X-rays, but they didn't detect anything," a witness recounted during judicial proceedings.

Alex, the Barrio 18 gang member, transported the cargo to a warehouse in College Park, Maryland, 398 kilometers from the New Jersey airport, from where it entered the market in Washington's metropolitan area. The testimonies gathered in Juan Colorado's trial by the Attorney General's Office indicate that Alex made his own subcontracts with transporters to move the drugs, and it was precisely some messy contracts between the subcontractors of the subcontractors that began to tear up the business. At the start of 2008, for

example, Juan Colorado was forced to suspend his deliveries for some time after Alex lost 24 kilos between New Jersey and Maryland.

Captures and Releases

On December 5, 2009, after receiving information from certain members of the ring and from US antinarcotics agents, and following an investigation that had lasted at least half a year, the PNC captured Juan Colorado in one of his favorite places: a majestic race track located between San Miguel and Santa Rosa de Lima. The track was a quarter of a mile long, with stands and a control tower, and the drug baron went there to display his automobile collection at Sunday festivals attended by people from outside the region. The agents found two firearms during the operation, a Magnum Smith & Wesson with seven cartridges and a 9 mm with a white finish. They also found a bag of cocaine.

The arrest of Juan Colorado was the final episode in a police operation headed by the Attorney General's Office and US agencies aimed at capturing the main leaders of the Perrones. This was the official version given from the central offices of the PNC. In the end, Juan Colorado was sentenced to 25 years in prison for trafficking between 180 and 200 kilos of cocaine using a network of errand runners with a "hormiga" ("ant"-like) system. In contrast with other traffickers in the group, such as Reynerio Flores Lazo or Daniel Quezada, Colorado's product reached as far as the streets of Maryland and New Jersey.



SEE ALSO: Coverage of the Perrones

There are still, however, some pieces of the puzzle that do not quite connect. Daniel Quezada was freed by a judge who, in March 2011, determined that there was insufficient proof to prosecute him. Operation Chameleon received its coup de grace that day. The operation had been set up in 2007 by anti-drug agents of the Special Anti-Narcotics Group (GEAN) with the goal of dismantling the Perrones based on the investigations against Daniel Quezada, and led to the discovery of the involvement of at least four members of the PNC in the trafficking of narcotics from Nicaragua. No head of police or medium-ranking official has since faced criminal proceedings, however, let alone jail, for the death of agent Walter Nahun Ayala Castillo during that same operation, or for the corruption found in the coastal police offices.

The drug ring was also found to have links to the Navy, but no military official was prosecuted. Tony Sinaloa was prosecuted for drug trafficking but decided to collaborate with the Attorney General's Office in 2009 and 2010 by providing information on the gang. He had been accused of organizing the network of collaborators that the gang had in the DAN's airport branch.

Even with Juan Colorado imprisoned in El Salvador and Tony Sinaloa detained in the United States, the DAN network at the airport continued to operate: in January 2013, the PNC captured nine other agents that were letting drugs pass through, but this has not led to the investigations or accusations, let alone incarceration, of any medium or high ranking official.

Of all the leaders, the worst off was Reynerio Flores Lazo, the head of the Perrones criminal group: the Attorney General's Office accused him of trafficking 2,400 kilos of cocaine, and a judge sentenced him to 80 years.

By 2010, the Perrones had reassembled, according to reports by the Police Intelligence Center (CIP) and the State Intelligence Service (OIE). Other leaders that were never investigated nor prosecuted, such as Elmer Bonifacio Medrano Escobar, regrouped and began to expand towards Honduras, buying more land on the coast and moving away from their traditional areas of influence. [3]

In 2012, both the head of the Armed Forces' Joint Chiefs of Staff [4] and the general director of the PNC [5] admitted that the drug traffickers of the eastern zone were regrouping and that their transport capacity had increased. A year earlier, despite the arrests of drug kingpins in El Salvador, a record number of up to 11 tons of cocaine transited through the country, according to a report by the US State Department.[6]

From Honduras, Romeo, one of Reynerio's collaborators, gave his own version of events: "Everything's still the same. Reynerio and Chele Colorado [Juan Colorado] were locked up because they thought they could be Mexican narcos and started showing off their money."

The following sentence reveals another reason for the arrests, perhaps the most important of them all: "Reynerio had to pay his political debts because he stopped paying politicians."

Romeo concludes:

"Already in 2006 they told us that there was a lot of pressure to pursue organized crime. We would pay informants at customs, and they told us that something big was coming. Reynerio put in more drugs and more money, a

ton of money. He even began trafficking drugs in Ilopango. The problem is that the government had to show something for it. They [Perrones] all began to show off their cars, and go boasting at country fairs over in the east, with their horses and all that. They found them alright. They looked them up and down and decided: these are the guys."

** This is a shortened version of an investigation by the Salvadoran journalist Hector Silva. The contents are part of a soon to be released book entitled: "The Infiltrators: the story of corruption in the police of El Salvador." This is the fourth article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.*

Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. For additional information, please contact the author by email .

Footnotes

[1] "Cinco capturas más por colaborar con Juan Colorado", *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 18, 2010.

[2] "Five more arrests for collaborating with Juan Colorado," *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 18, 2010.

[3] See, by the author, "Perrones. El renacimiento de la banda de narcos salvadoreños." Available at:
<http://hectorsilvavalos.blogspot.com/2012/04/perrones-el-renacimiento-de-la-banda-de.html>

[4] See "Los Perrones recibieron drogas por submarinos", *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 19, 2012.

[5] See "Los Perrones estarían por reagruparse: PNC", *La Prensa Gráfica*, April 12, 2012.

[6] "Rutas y volúmenes del tráfico de cocaína en Centroamérica. Informe de trabajo", US State Department.

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