

Ex-con helps U.S. deliver satellite phones to FARC

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COMBITA, Colombia - It sounds like a spy novel: Using a cooperating drug trafficker, U.S. officials put several supposedly untraceable satellite phones in the hands of Colombia's FARC guerrillas, then listened to their chatter.

But the sting of Latin America's most secretive insurgency -- accused of direct involvement in cocaine smuggling to the U.S. and European markets -- really did take place, several U.S. officials told The Miami Herald.

U.S. intercepts of FARC communications were mentioned in a March U.S. indictment of the FARC's seven top leaders and 43 other commanders on charges of running a \$25 billion drug trafficking network responsible for 60 percent of the cocaine on U.S. streets.

Other U.S. indictments have implicated mid-level commanders and couriers. In all, at least 55 members of the 50-year-old, 17,000-fighter Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia are facing U.S. charges ranging from drug trafficking and extortion to kidnapping and terrorism.

It's not known whether the eavesdropping on the U.S.-provided satellite phones contributed to the indictments of the FARC members. But it is clear that the phones were delivered to top FARC leaders, including its top military commander, a notorious commander better known as Mono Jojoy.

COOPERATION

U.S. officials say the sting began when Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents won the cooperation of Nelson Urrego, a Colombian communications specialist who allegedly helped coordinate cocaine shipments that totaled 10 to 15 tons per month for the North Valley Cartel.

Urrego was captured, convicted and jailed in Bogotá's La Picota prison in 1998. While there, he met Yesid Arteta, a high-ranking FARC member who also had been captured, as well as Ferney Tovar, an alleged FARC courier who visited Arteta on occasion.

At the time, Tovar was general manager of Contrafluvial del Caguán, a company based in his hometown of Cartagena del Chairá that used its 65 motor boats to transport people and supplies on the Caguán River -- the main transportation route in that part of southeastern Colombia.

Until a massive military offensive in the region launched in 2003, Cartagena del Chairá had long been a FARC stronghold as well as a key coca-growing region. Tovar was captured last year and is facing extradition to the United States for conspiracy to traffic and distribute cocaine.

An affidavit filed by U.S. prosecutor Juan Antonio Gonzalez in Miami as part of the indictment against Tovar describes him as a "broker/facilitator [for higher ranking members of the FARC organization] and distributor of narcotics for the FARC organization."

Miami DEA agent Rufus Wallace wrote in another affidavit that Tovar promised to supply unidentified "cooperating government witnesses every 15 to 45 days with between 1,000 and 2,000 kilograms of cocaine which would be obtained from the FARC drug laboratories."

Tovar denied he was a FARC member during a recent interview with The Miami Herald at the Cómbita prison in the windy highlands of central Colombia. But he openly confirmed several aspects of the satellite phone deals.

U.S. officials, who asked for anonymity because of the sensitivity of the case, said the jailed Urrego first offered his FARC contacts to smuggle cocaine from FARC-controlled areas to the United States. Tovar told The Miami Herald he refused. His indictment claims he accepted and arranged for several loads to be shipped to Miami.

Tovar said he and Urrego kept in touch, and sometime in 2001 or 2002, after Urrego had served his sentence and been released from prison, Urrego offered him four NERA-brand satellite telephones -- which allow users to make telephone calls from the most isolated areas.

Urrego claimed that the phones' location, ownership and call records could not be traced because they were specially outfitted by some "Middle Eastern" people, according to Tovar. What's more, Urrego said they would never see a phone bill.

In fact, the satellite phones were provided by the DEA, which knew their phone numbers and arranged for U.S. eavesdroppers to easily listen in, the U.S. officials said.

Tovar told The Miami Herald he sent a messenger to pick up the four phones in Panama. Upon return, one of the telephones was confiscated by Colombian customs; Tovar kept one for himself and gave the others to a FARC commander in the Caguán river area known as Orlando Porcelana and to José Benito Cabrera Cuevas, second in command of the rebels' Southern Bloc.

Cabrera and his brother, Erminso Cuevas Cabrera, were among the 50 FARC members recently indicted in the United States. Tovar said he believes Cabrera later passed his NERA to a lower ranking FARC member, and that both phones are still in use. Tovar said that in 2004 Urrego provided him with four more satellite phones, this time manufactured by the Thrane&Thrane firm, but with supposedly the same untraceable protections as the NERAs.

After the new phones made it to the Caguán River region, Tovar added, he gave one to Jorge Briceño, alias Mono Jojoy, the FARC's head of military operations and a member of its overall high command. Suárez was also named in the recent U.S. indictment.

Tovar took one set for himself, gave another to Cabrera and passed the last to a FARC chieftain only known as Jairo Martínez, he said.

The scheme to sting the FARC with U.S.-monitored communications equipment was first revealed by the website narconews.com when it published a 2004 memo

written by then Justice Department attorney Thomas Kent partially describing the operation. A subsequent article by El Nuevo Herald revealed Urrego's role -- and the fact that he even supplied the DEA with a video he shot surreptitiously of his jailhouse talks with FARC's Arteta about the phones -- apparently in an effort to prove his ability to infiltrate the rebel organization.

Tovar's account also was verified to The Miami Herald by a FARC member who participated in the satellite phone deals but remains at large and did not want his name published for fear of capture.

RELEASED

Urrego was released from jail in September 2001 and could not be located for comment on this story. Arteta remains in a Colombian prison. And Tovar, who was injured when he was captured last year, is still in prison, not feeling so good now about the telephone deal.

He says that he used his phones only for "friendly conversations, to talk to family and friends, not to talk drugs." And he insists the FARC commanders did the same.

But when told that the U.S. indictment against the guerrilla commanders were based in part on U.S. intercepts of FARC communications, he seemed to become resigned.

"I was tricked and entrapped," Tovar told The Miami Herald. "Whatever happened, happened."