

COLOMBIA RECEIVES DRUG SUSPECT SOUGHT BY U.S. AND JAILED IN CUBA

The New York Times
February 10, 2007

MEXICO CITY, Feb. 9 — The leader of a Colombian drug cartel that American prosecutors say flooded New York City streets with cocaine remained in custody in [Colombia](#) on Friday awaiting extradition, after [Cuba](#) turned him over to the authorities there.

Cuba's decision to send the suspect, Luis Hernando Gómez Bustamante, to Colombia surprised American authorities, law enforcement officials said. Cuba's government has no diplomatic relations with the United States, and some people charged with crimes on American soil have found a haven in Havana.

Not Mr. Gómez Bustamante. He arrived in Bogotá late Thursday on a Colombian Air Force plane after Cuban authorities handed him over to Colombian antinarcotics agents.

Mr. Gómez Bustamante, the reputed boss of the Norte del Valle cartel who is known as Rasguño, had been held in Cuba since 2004, when he was arrested on [immigration](#) charges. He is wanted in New York City on charges of money laundering, racketeering and drug smuggling.

During the 1990s, his organization was one of the most violent, lucrative and extensive cocaine-smuggling rings in the world, accounting for at least 30 percent of the cocaine being imported into the United States, Justice Department officials said.

Cuban officials gave no reason for their decision Thursday, and prosecutors in the United States declined to comment on the matter.

Last year, Mr. Gómez Bustamante told a Colombian reporter that he wanted to be released from his Cuban prison, even if it meant standing trial in the United States. Mario Iguarán, Colombia's attorney general, suggested that the extradition stemmed from the prisoner's wishes. A spokesman for the Justice Department confirmed that the United States was seeking to bring Mr. Gómez Bustamante to the United States for trial.

His extradition would be a major victory for federal investigators and prosecutors in New York City, who built a case against him over a decade. Investigators started out looking into businesses in Queens that wired money to Colombia.

Those modest inquiries eventually led to the indictment of Juan Alberto Monsalve, who prosecutors charge was the cartel's boss in New York. In May 2002, he pleaded guilty to drug trafficking and murder. He is now serving a life term.

Two years later, Mr. Gómez Bustamante was indicted on racketeering charges along with eight others, and Colombian authorities seized \$100 million worth of Mr. Bustamante's assets. He fled to Cuba but never got past customs and immigration.