

Alleged drug kingpin arrested in Brazil

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SAO PAULO, Brazil --

A top leader of Colombia's biggest cocaine cartel was captured Tuesday in South America's largest city after a two-year investigation into traffickers accused of sending tons of the drug to the United States and Europe.

Juan Carlos Ramirez Abadia, who faces three U.S. federal indictments on drug and racketeering charges, was arrested just after dawn at a house in a gated community on Sao Paulo's outskirts. U.S. officials said they would seek his extradition.

The raid was aimed at breaking up a ring that laundered drug profits in Brazil, the nation's federal police said.

Ramirez Abadia - nicknamed "chupeta," or "lollypop" in Colombian Spanish - is accused of shipping cocaine since the 1990s and ordering the murders of police and informants in the United States and Colombia.

Brazilian authorities did not immediately say if he would be sent to the United States or face charges in Brazil.

Ramirez Abadia, who had plastic surgery to avoid being recognized by authorities, has been described by law enforcement officials as a crafty and ruthless survivor.

"The news of his arrest is welcome," said Richard Mei, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Brazil. He said U.S. officials are deciding who might get a \$5 million reward offered for information leading his capture.

Ramirez Abadia's Norte del Valle cartel emerged as Colombia's most powerful drug gang after the mid-1990s, and the U.S. State Department in September 2004 began offering up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest its leaders.

DEA officials have said Colombian traffickers were forced to flee to countries including Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador and Argentina as a result.

The wealth of Ramirez Abadia, 44, once reached \$1.8 billion, but he is believed to be indebted to other traffickers, the U.S. State Department said.

Colombian Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said in a radio interview Tuesday that Ramirez Abadia is the presumed owner of more than \$80 million in cash and gold found in January under floorboards and in secret compartments in several houses in the Colombian city of Cali.

Brazilian media reported that police made 12 more arrests Tuesday and seized guns and drugs in six Brazilian states to dismantle what they described as a major drug trafficking and money laundering operation.

The gang allegedly laundered profits from Mexico and Spain by purchasing hotels, mansions, industrial property and cars in Brazil, the federal police statement said.

Cocaine is not produced in Brazil, but the country has become a major transshipment point and Brazilians are also increasingly big consumers of cocaine.

Drug lords also use Brazil to purchase chemicals essential to turning coca leaves into cocaine, said Walter Maierovitch, an expert in organized crime who once headed Brazil's anti-drug efforts.

The arrest of Ramirez Abadia is "clear evidence" of Brazil's key role in the cocaine networks rooted in neighboring nations, Maierovitch said.

The Treasury Department listed him as a "specially designated narcotics trafficker" in 2000, freezing his U.S. assets and forbidding commercial transactions with him by Americans.

Adam J. Szubin, director of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, last year called Ramirez Abadia "one of the most powerful and elusive drug traffickers in Colombia."

Ramirez Abadia faces federal indictments on drug trafficking charges brought in Colorado in 1994 and New York in 1995.

In 1996, a Colombian court convicted of him drug trafficking, illicit enrichment, racketeering and fraud. He was imprisoned until 2002.

In 2004, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia indicted the Norte del Valle organization under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act and named Ramirez Abadia as a North Valle leader.