



## **Eight year manhunt lands international drug traffickers in DC courts**

**By Julie López**

The discovery of \$14.4 million in cash in a Guatemala City wealthy neighborhood, on April 2, 2003, sent shock waves from the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Washington D.C. to Colombia. The finding reignited a three-year investigation; it also prompted an eight-year manhunt that has yet to see an end. The latest result was the November 8, 2011, arrest of Eliu Lorenzana Cordon in Guatemala. Lorenzana Cordon, 40, is among eight Guatemalans and three Colombians facing drug trafficking charges in a Washington D.C. district court. All of them are linked to the 2003 operation main protagonist: Otto Roberto Herrera Garcia, a Guatemalan handling international operations for the Mexican Sinaloa drug Cartel, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ). The Sinaloa Cartel is the largest source of cocaine smuggled into the U.S.

Eight years ago, at 38, Herrera Garcia was in the Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) list of the 41 most significant drug traffickers and money launderers in the world, the main focus of U.S. federal law enforcement. Back then, the 2003 thwarted money-laundering operation was a gold mine for U.S. prosecutors, but it slipped under the nose of Guatemalan authorities.

The \$14.4 million of dollar bills should have been under the vigilant care of Carlos Eduardo Rodriguez Monar and Jose Fernando Arizabaleta Lenis, both Colombian. But on April 23, 2003, both were caught off-guard, in a house next door, where the money was found along with ownership documents for 17 houses and two farms in Izabal, to Herrera Garcia’s name, as well as cellular and satellite phones, three assault rifles, two grenade launchers, ammunition, invoices for the purchase of yachts and small planes, deposit slips for large amounts of cash, narcotics records and computers loaded with key data.

From the start, local authorities thought the Colombians had a menial task: watch the cash, believed to have been drug proceeds traveling south. However, Arizabaleta Lenis, a.k.a. “Zimber,” was the nephew of the last *capo* standing in Colombia’s Cali Cartel: Phanor Arizabaleta Arzayus, a.k.a. “King Arizabaleta,” one of the cartel’s main money launderers in the 80s and 90s, and the last man left of the five most important men in the Cali Cartel (two of which were the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers, extradited to the U.S. in the mid-90s). The organization had then morphed into the North Valley Cartel.

The nephew’s job was hands-on supervision of cash flow in Guatemala and drug flow in Mexico, as long as his uncle’s profits were involved, according to Colombian authorities. At the time, Phanor was serving a 28-year jail sentence for kidnapping (after surrendering in 1995), but would only serve 15—part of it in

home arrest—due to a progressive kidney disease. Case documents indicate that, despite his ailments, he was still active in drug trafficking.

Arizabaleta Lenis, 35, and Rodriguez Monar, 21, were accused of being caught red-handed with the money stashed inside office furniture, in a house rented by Herrera Garcia. They had \$5,720 in cash, the origin of which they couldn't explain, and although the millions were actually in a house next door, they were arrested in connection with the money. Arizabaleta Lenis, who produced a Guatemalan ID card, told the Public Ministry that he was an economist and a car dealer. Rodriguez Monar said he was a student and a helicopter pilot. The property's owner, where the millions of dollars were found, was Jorge Mario Paredes Cordova, then 37, one of Herrera Garcia's front men in Guatemala. Only four months after the money discovery, Paredes Cordova was indicted on drug trafficking charges in New York in connection with another case.

The group linked to Herrera Garcia was indicted for manufacturing, distributing and transporting cocaine from Colombia to Mexico, "knowing it would be illegally imported into the U.S.," according to a March 10, 2009, grand jury indictment in case 03:331-(CKK), in the Washington D.C. district court. The indictment lists law violations applicable to cocaine importation and distribution into the nation's capital and other areas of the U.S. territory, according to a USDOJ official. The case is sealed, but the indictment is partially reproduced in an available Colombian court document dated January 31, 2011, regarding the extradition process number 35417, of Arizabaleta Arzayus.

The Mid-Atlantic, which encompasses D.C., has been one of the primary Sinaloa Cartel regions for cocaine distribution (among other drugs), according to a National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC). When the Herrera Garcia structure was active in 2003, 9 metric tons of cocaine were seized in the U.S. East Coast, according to a National Drug Threat Assessment. Those were part of the 87.8 percent of "cocaine entering the U.S." that is not seized at the border, a percentage reported in a July 24, 2003 diplomatic cable (reference ID #03GUATEMALA 1902).

In a 2002 report, the NDIC reveals that cocaine was distributed from public housing projects in Washington D.C. to "affluent communities," and that "dealers [distributed] high-purity cocaine to young and middle-age professionals in nightclubs, bars, and offices, particularly in the Georgetown area." Then, a May 2003 report indicated that "cocaine [was] a factor in a significant number of deaths in the District." One of the sources for those drugs was the Sinaloa Cartel and the Otto Herrera Organization.

### **Deciphering Don Otto**

Otto Herrera Garcia had come a long way from his days as a *cuatrero*, the Spanish term for men who steal and sell cattle for a living, in rural Guatemala. He was the son of a banana plantation worker, and knew the farms in the northeastern part of the country like the back of his hand: from Alta Verapaz—his place of birth according to his own post arrest statement in Colombia—to Izabal, on the Atlantic coast (listed by some Guatemalan sources as his place of birth). On board his motorcycle, those were his domains, according to a former Guatemalan military intelligence source.

Herrera Garcia allegedly traveled in the 80s to Los Angeles, California, when he was 21 and worked as a trucker. He is said to have made his first contact with members of the Cali Cartel then. When he returned, he was a changed person.

The USDOJ traces his first drug trafficking activities to 1996, but his first contact with the head of Sinaloa Cartel—Joaquin Guzman Loera, a.k.a. “El Chapo”—dates back to the early 90s, according to Michael Vigil, a retired chief of international operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). “They were introduced by mutual associates,” recalls said Vigil, who had a 30-year career, most of it as undercover, in the DEA.

In 1998, two years after the signing of the Peace Accords ended a 36-year internal armed conflict in Guatemala, Herrera Garcia was already a well-known drug trafficker at age 33, and was also known for keeping weapons’ warehouses and stashing cocaine for his network and other groups. But there were very few images of him around then. One of his first pictures published in the local press shows a young Herrera living the life on the beach, a beer in one hand and his young, bikini-clad, American wife (Shari Collen) in the other. Even then, he was destined to greater—criminal—things, which court records would display years later.

“Otto was larger than Guatemala due to his connections, and his dealings with the army and the government,” said Vigil, who now works as a private security consultant. “Otto operated on a regional level, and was key for his ability to buy protection.” In fact, a police detective says that officers searching one of his properties found a letter—dated in the late 90s—from a top government official thanking him for aiding several communities after tropical storm Mitch hit the country in November of 1998.

“He was not that much of a killer, not like they were in Mexico; he used violence more selectively, more low profile,” said the retired DEA special agent, according to whom Herrera Garcia was an “intelligent yet not ostentatious Mafioso,” who didn’t make a whole lot of noise. However, a Guatemalan police detective says that may have been the case, just not on his ascent to the top.

“He was flashy; even his wife was, driving the huge SUVs everywhere, especially when she picked up their two kids at the American School,” he said, referring to Collen, whom Herrera had met in California, and to a school attended by children of diplomats and Guatemala’s wealthiest families. “DEA agents even talked to the wife, and tried to persuade her to collaborate, but she refused,” the detective recalls. “I think they wanted to help her because she was American, but she didn’t want to have anything to do with them.”

By then, Herrera Garcia was already also known as “*El Ingeniero*,” (The Engineer), perhaps a sign of his contact with the Colombians. At the time, according to former Colombian trafficker turned author Andres Lopez, “everybody in the drug business—in Colombia—wanted to be called *Ingeniero*.” His other nicknames were “Don Otto,” “Francisco Villagran,” “The Prof,” and “The Pipe.”

## **The middle man**

*El Ingeniero's* role was clearly displayed in a November 12, 2010 note that the U.S. Embassy in Colombia sent the Colombian Supreme Court, quoted in extradition process 35418, on a document from June 8, 2011:

In late 1999 or early 2000, members of the organization led by King Arizabaleta met with the Otto Herrera Garcia Organization. As a result, the Arizabaleta Organization accepted providing cocaine to several Mexican drug trafficking organizations using the Herrera Garcia network. *Don Otto's* job was to transport the shipments Colombia to Central America, then Mexico.

From late 1998, or early 1999, until 2002, the Arizabaleta group exported cocaine out of Colombia by sea and air. Because King Arizabaleta was still in jail, his most trusted men represented him in transactions in Colombia and overseas, including his nephew, "Zimber" Arizabaleta Lenis. The organization prepared the delivery of at least three or four cocaine shipments by sea, each one averaging between 1,200 to 2,500 kilos. It also sent seven or eight cocaine shipments by air from Colombia to Guatemala, each one of 600 to 700 kilos.

The file reports "there is evidence that the cocaine was dispatched and distributed to Mexican drug traffickers by instructions of Phanor Arizabaleta Arzayus, by means of his close associates," including his nephew. "Arizabaleta Lenis was frequently present during the unloading and inventory of the cocaine, and was equally involved in overseeing the cocaine distribution to different Mexican organizations, and made sure that payments were made accordingly." This included drug proceeds sent in cash from the U.S. to Mexico. Just between November 2002 to October 2004, U.S. federal authorities seized \$15.9 million that would have been smuggled through the Texas border. When things went smoothly, Zimber made sure the money was counted and sent to Colombia. That was apparently what was doing in Guatemala, in 2003, when he was arrested.

The Otto Herrera Organization was also in charge of handling the money for the Cali and Sinaloa cartels, and buying aircraft to transport the cocaine. Millions of dollars were taken to Mexico by land from the U.S. and, perhaps, from Guatemala. The Guatemalan-Mexican border, 542 miles long, has at least 40 blind and unsupervised vehicle crossing points that the organization could have used. Once in Mexico, the money was wired to the U.S.

## **U.S. aircraft for Colombian cocaine**

When the \$14.4 million were found in Guatemala, the group was also in the midst of sending the dollars north, not south, as local authorities originally thought. Documents 3 and 48 in case 1:07-cr-20508-JAL, in a district court of Florida's Middle District, show that in October 2003 and June of 2006, the organization made 35 wire transfers from currency-exchange agencies in Mexico to the U.S. It sent \$2.7 million to the Bank of America in Oklahoma City via Miami. In April 2007, another \$600,000 were sent through six transactions via Mexico to an Advanced Aviation Sales Inc. account in Naples, Florida.

Document number 48 in the Florida case lists among the defendants the head of the Sinaloa Cartel himself, "El Chapo" Guzman, 56, and Jorge Milton Cifuentes Villa, 46, a Colombian a.k.a. "The

Economist” or “J.” Both supervised the wire transfers sent to Miami. The U.S. Department of Treasury, and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), identified “The Economist” in February 2011 as a key member of the “Cifuentes Villa Organization” for drug trafficking, and El Chapo’s main partner. Document number 3 also includes Otto Herrera Garcia, and his brother, Guillermo “Willy” Herrera Garcia, 45, as defendants in the case.

Dean DeBuck, from the Office of the Comptroller of Currency (OCC) said the agency has “nothing” to report on the October 2003, June 2006, and 2007 transactions (totaling \$3.3 million), and advised checking with the USDOJ. Yet, by 2010, the OCC had discovered similar operations (\$300,000 in wire-transfers) made in November 2005 and January 2006 from Mexico’s Casa de Cambio Puebla S.A. to Oklahoma City’s branch of Bank of America. Two years before the transactions, Wachovia had taken the Mexican currency-exchange agency as a customer and engaged in the same transactions, according to Mexican and U.S. authorities. The transfers were linked to other Sinaloa Cartel groups and the purchase of 13 planes from U.S.-based companies, according to case PGR/SIEDO/UEIORP/FAM/119/2007, from the Mexican Attorney General’s office.

The aircraft was later flown to Venezuela and Colombia, where the cocaine-laden planes took off bound to Central America and Mexico. The main source for these drugs was the Colombian guerrilla group, the FARC, which was also settled in western Venezuela by 2003, according to Michael Braun, another former chief for DEA’s International Operations. The drugs were then transported by land to the U.S.

One plane was purchased through the Powell Aircraft Title Services trust fund in the U.S. (funded by the Sinaloa Cartel), according to reports (MX-08-0115 and 0116) that DEA chief in Mexico David Gaddis sent to the Mexican Attorney General’s Office in January 2008. The aircraft was seized in Guatemala (near the Mexican border) in January 2004, carrying two tons of cocaine. Another plane, linked to the same vendor and carrying 1.5 tons of cocaine, was seized in the Colombian island of San Andrés, while a different plane (a DC-9) purchased from an Oklahoma broker was flown from St. Petersburg, Florida, to Caracas, Venezuela.

On April 10, 2006, the Mexican military seized the aircraft and a cargo of 5.6 tons of cocaine (valued in \$10 million) in Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche (500 miles east of Mexico City), while another one carrying 3.3 tons of cocaine was seized in Merida, Yucatan. On September 24, 2007, another plane carrying 3.2 tons of cocaine crashed also in Yucatan. Two months later, the Casa de Cambio Puebla Reforma was closed down by the Mexican federal government, and Pedro Alatorre Damy, manager of one of the agency’s branches, was arrested. He was later identified as the cartels’ financial operator. Another 74 people were linked to the wire-transfers to that agency alone, according to November 8 and 13, 2007 public statements from the Mexican Attorney’s office.

The investigations led to an account—later frozen—with \$2.7 million in Harrys Bank, in Chicago, Illinois. Still, almost a year later, on September 28, 2008, another plane was seized in Cuernavaca, with 5.6 tons of cocaine on board.

While 2004-2006 transactions and the Puebla agency involvement were made public last year, the 2003 wire-transfers from the same agency made by the Herrera Garcia group slipped away from public

scrutiny. All 16 of them were made in a three-day span and totaled \$1.1 million. Another 25 wire-transfers made from eight other different agencies between 2003 and 2007, by the Herrera Garcia group, also slipped under the public's radar, but not from the U.S. authorities' view.

The organization was targeted by the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (which, among other provisions, freezes the traffickers assets), which tried to expand its reach to other Cifuentes Villa brothers, like Francisco Ivan. A.k.a. *Don Pacho* or *Pancho*, he had his own plane fleet, and was the direct link to Otto Herrera Garcia, who learned the ropes from him. *Pacho* had first belonged to the Medellin Cartel, and was one of Pablo Escobar's main pilots—later inheriting his properties after Escobar was killed in 1993. *Pacho* also helped fund the Powell Aircraft Title Services trust fund, which the Sinaloa Cartel used to purchase aircraft, as reported by DEA's chief in Mexico, David Gaddis, in document MX-08-0116.

However, almost two years after the \$14.4 million dollar discovery in Guatemala, Arizabaleta Lenis and Rodriguez Monar were only convicted of cover-up, although the prosecution had charged them with money laundering. One third man, Byron Linares Cordon, a Guatemalan also arrested in connection with the money found, but was not convicted.

### **Diplomatic concern**

Diplomatic cable referenced “Confidential Guatemala 001673” revealed that the US Embassy in Guatemala was concerned about the \$14.4 million dollar case, and was certain it involved the “Herrera Organization.” By July 2003, it had pleaded with Guatemala's Supreme Court, the Guatemalan Attorney General and even President Alfonso Portillo (currently imprisoned in Guatemala and wanted on money-laundering charges in New York) to prevent the release of the Colombians and Linares Cordon, whom it described as Herrera's “second in command.” In the cable, the U.S. Embassy reported that, “DEA began picking up information that alleged trafficker Linares [Cordon] was informing his business associates that he would soon be released from jail.”

On September 29, he was released on a \$9,260 bail. By the time another judge overturned the decision, the suspect had left prison and would not be heard of until almost a decade later. Arizabaleta Lenis and Rodriguez Monar's release followed almost two years after their arrest. According to a court document dated on March 29, 2005, they received a five-year prison sentence, exchangeable for payment of \$24,333 each, and fines of \$80,000 each, which they paid, according to file “C-08-2005 Special Appeal” in Guatemala.

In the meantime, the wheels were set in motion in Washington D.C., where Herrera Garcia was indicted six months after the money was found in Guatemala. The indictment was pivotal for the defendants. Weeks later, their fate began brewing slowly, but steadily.

Since 2003, the US Attorney's Office far-reaching arm caught up with the suspects—via local authorities, sometimes with DEA accompaniment—in Mexico, Guatemala, Panama and Colombia. Now it's navigating through complex extradition processes to reel them into a D.C. district court. Four Guatemalans and two Colombians have been arrested. Six more defendants—five of them, Guatemalan—remain at large. One more man was arrested in El Salvador. His extradition, according to the USDOJ, was

expected for 2005, but his identity is not revealed in available documents. The man could be Ricardo Alfonso Bravo Isaza, also listed among the defendants in the sealed indictment, although he is not mentioned in other available documents regarding this case. The Salvadoran press quotes local prosecutors identifying Bravo Isaza as Colombian, and linking him to the Herrera Garcia operations in El Salvador.

### **Mile zero**

The tip of the iceberg was William Eliu Martinez, Salvadoran congressman from 1998 to 2002. Martinez was indicted in October of 2003 (like Otto Herrera Garcia) and arrested the following November in Panama. He was extradited in February 2004 to Washington, D.C., ten months after the \$14.4 million were found, a discovery that included documents connecting Martinez to Herrera Garcia. Some were accounting records indicating that Herrera Garcia had paid him \$2.5 million for drug transportation.

Martinez had lived in Houston, Texas, in the mid-90s, when he met a man only identified as “El Chino” (pronounced *Cheeno*, which meant Chinese), who invited him to go into business with the Herrera Garcias and Linares Cordon. This information would later explain the U.S. Embassy’s concern regarding Linares Cordon’s impending 2003 release in Guatemala.

In August 1998, the congressman returned to El Salvador and purchased two high-speed boats to pick up cocaine loads in high-seas in the Pacific Ocean (from large vessels coming from Colombia) and transport them to El Salvador. Martinez rented large properties and built high walls around them to conceal the shipments, before they were sent to Guatemala by land. Court documents reveal that he frequently stood gun-in-hand while the large black bales of cocaine—with 36 bricks each—were loaded from the boats to pickup trucks, then to larger trucks for international land transportation.

Martinez’s downfall traveled along three trucks carrying 2,556 kilos of cocaine worth \$10 million. The shipment was seized by Guatemalan police and DEA on March 16, 1999, on a highway that “transverses Guatemala toward Mexico,” right after crossing the El Salvador-Guatemala border, according to court documents. The USDOJ also linked him to four other men associated with trafficking at least 12 tons of cocaine for the “Otto Herrera Garcia Organization”, by boat from Colombia to El Salvador, and by truck from Guatemala, to Mexico and the U.S.

The DEA was tipped off “Lopez,” an informant and the driver of one of the trucks. Lopez had confided that the loss had angered many of the traffickers. On March 19, he told the agents that there were plans for another shipment, but a few days later Lopez was shot and killed in Guatemala City. Another witness, “Pedro,” said that Lopez was killed by men linked with the March 16<sup>th</sup> shipment, from the Herrera Organization. “Some of the cocaine seized...bore the same logos as cocaine later discovered in the U.S., [the American flag with an eagle, or the words ‘Mobil Super Plus’].” These were no other than delivery instructions for wholesale distributors.

Despite the murdered witness, Martinez was convicted. He also lost an appeal in February 2007. The former congressman is now serving a 29-year prison sentence at the Oakdale Federal Correctional Institution, in Louisiana, according to a 2007 USDOJ report and case number 1:08-cv-01779-MMM. In

October 2008, this case was vacated and filed in criminal case 1:03-CR-00331-MMM-1—the same case concerning Herrera Garcia.

Martinez proved to be irrelevant to Don Otto's operations long before his conviction. Even while the former Congressman awaited extradition in Panama, a Grand Jury in Miami, Florida, linked Herrera Garcia to a cocaine shipment imported into the U.S. around January 25, 2004. Herrera Garcia was already swimming along with bigger fish.

### **One close call**

On April 21, 2004 (when Martinez had already been extradited to Washington, D.C.), the unexpected happened. Don Herrera Garcia, at age 39, was arrested in Mexico City while reuniting with his Mexican girlfriend Marcela Gonzalez at the airport (according to Mexico's prosecution office). She had flown in from Guadalajara, Jalisco, while the estranged wife was allegedly living in Cancun. *Don Otto* was taken to a maximum security prison in the capital, in the midst of a flashy media display by Mexican authorities. The USDOJ also announced the "unsealing" of his indictment and dubbed him "one of the largest drug traffickers in Central America."

The indictment against "Don Otto," arrested one year after the \$14.4 million were found in Guatemala, was the result of a three-year multinational investigation involving DEA, Mexican, Guatemalan and Salvadoran authorities. The case linked Herrera Garcia and four other defendants to trafficking "five loads of cocaine, totaling more than 6,500 kilos that were destined for the U.S." approximately between March 1996 and October 2003, according to an April 23, 2004 USDOJ statement. Federal authorities also stated they would seek "the speedy extradition of Herrera Garcia to the United States," which didn't happen soon enough.

By May 14, 2005, Herrera Garcia's escape was a fact. The Mexican daily *El Universal* reported that he had left the prison two days earlier disguised as a police officer, after months of hosting parties and collecting profits from the jail's restaurants. Press reports also quoted the sum (ranging from hundreds of thousands of dollars to \$2 million) that Herrera Garcia had allegedly paid to escape. Coincidentally, days before his arrest, Mexican authorities revealed that a yacht he had sold, and was valued in \$2 million, was found in Cancun.

They also confirmed that Herrera Garcia was still in business with "*Don Pacho*" in Colombia and Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada Garcia, an associate of "El Chapo" in northeast Mexico (as noted in file PGR/SIEDO/UEIDCS/086/2004, from the Mexican's Attorney General's Office). Guatemalan authorities had also confirmed having seized three small planes and four go-fast boats from Herrera Garcia.

Until his arrest, *Don Otto* had become a valuable asset for international drug trafficking. Unofficial information indicates that several heads from the Sinaloa Cartel—with El Chapo's blessing—financed his escape, according to Vigil, who worked undercover in Mexico. "The Mexican cartels' efforts to release him proved just how important he was for them," he said. "Otto did many things for El Chapo, [who] paid him lots of money too; the relationship was of mutual benefit."

The Florida case shows that wire transfers linked to the Otto Herrera group resumed in June 2006, one year after his escape: from Mexico, via Miami, to an Oklahoma City's Bank of America branch. Other wire-transfers, pinned particularly on *Don Otto* followed in April 2007 from Mexico (involving HSBC in Mexico and the U.S.) to an account in Naples, Florida. The OCC focused on watching Wachovia closer (which handled \$378.4 billion in illicit funds from the currency-exchange agencies from 2004 to 2007, according to a 2010 Bloomberg article), so Alatorre began to use HSBC and other agencies in Mexico since 2006.

### **The hunt moves to Colombia**

In 2006, when the former Salvadoran congressman appealed his 29-year sentence in a Washington D.C. court, his co-defendant *Don Otto* was moving freely between Central America and South America, oblivious to the possibility of another arrest. According to Vigil, Herrera Garcia was a “go-between guy” and had been sent to Colombia. Court documents from Washington D.C. and Colombia indicate that he was there for over a year and conducted business with the Arizabaletas and the Cifuentes Villa. But he set up camp in Bogota unaware that on June 8 the U.S. had asked the Colombian government to arrest and extradite him, according to case number 27957 at the Colombian Supreme Court.

The USDOJ, through the U.S. Embassy in Colombia, submitted the indictment in case “03-331 (CKK)” from the D.C. court, along with statements from prosecutor Wanda J. Dixon and DEA Special Agent Stephen Fraga, regarding facts and evidence in the case. Even Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice approved the request.

In September 2006, Herrera Garcia hired himself a driver. That month, a man named Henry Quintero, a.k.a. “Nestor,” had asked Orlando Mosquera Lozada “if he was interested in being a driver for a manager of a company,” according to document 41 in the Florida case. “Nestor told Mosquera that if he wanted the job, he (Mosquera) shouldn’t ask too many questions.” Days later, Herrera Garcia introduced himself as “Diego Leon Callejas,” when he met Mosquera, then 47, in an apartment in Bogota. He offered to pay the driver the equivalent in Colombian pesos of \$500 dollars, which were handed to him monthly in cash. Herrera also gave him food and money to get to work.

Mosquera drove Herrera around—apparently with no security detail—to several meetings, and did errands for him. He also traveled once to Medellin by himself, and met Herrera there. The case file reveals that, Mosquera and Roberto, a.k.a. ‘El Mono’, another Herrera employee, drove Herrera and his “associates” around the city. “Although Mosquera was kept at arms-length when Herrera met his associates [and] conducted his business, it was clear [to the driver]...that Herrera was involved in drug trafficking.”

On one occasion, Herrera asked Mosquera to pick up a package for him in a house in Bogota. The driver knew the package contained Colombian pesos, the equivalent of \$10,000 dollars. Mosquera made the pick-up and delivery knowing he was handling drug proceeds.

The driver was indicted and arrested three years later, when he made these statements to the U.S. Attorney's Office. He was released last May. But before that, in 2007, the fortune of the Herrera Organization took a wrong, but definitive turn.

By April, Herrera Garcia was behind wire transfers totaling \$600,000—from five different transactions—from Mexico to Florida, according to his Florida indictment. Three months later, the former Salvadoran congressman lost the appeal in Washington D.C. On the surface, the court's decision did not make a dent in the Organization, but the U.S. Attorney's Office was closer than ever to catching up with Don Otto again. Colombian authorities had been following him in Bogota.

Perhaps a bad omen was the fate met by Herrera Garcia's mentor. On April 23, Francisco Cifuentes Villa was murdered in his ranch in Antioquia. Six men had barged in, tied up his five workers, gone straight to his house and shot him in his bedroom. During the days prior to his death, software was stolen from his hangar at the Olaya Herrera Airport in Medellin, according to local press reports.

Cifuentes Villa died leaving a less than desirable legacy: a debt to "El Chapo" for the purchase of planes and a 10-ton cocaine shipment that remained undelivered after the pilot's murder, according to *Semana* magazine. When collection time came, the murdered pilot's widow Maria Patricia Rodriguez Monsalve (a.k.a. *La Señora* or *La Doctora*, The Missis or The Doctor), then 35, asked to meet Guzman in Panama, where she made him a bold proposal: to go into business with her. And "El Chapo" did. Colombian authorities later identified her as one of the suspects behind the illegal wire transfers, from the Casa de Cambio Puebla in Mexico to Oklahoma. But, by then, Herrera Garcia's group used other agencies and sent money to Naples, Florida.

On June 20, two months after the last wire-transfer to Florida, the Colombian police surprised him. This time, it was his turn to be caught off-guard. The Colombian press reported that he was cornered in a shopping center, while accompanied by two Colombians. The authorities did not recognize him immediately, until an officer tied his face to the arrest warrant. Herrera Garcia's very trim haircut, slimmer face and plucked eyebrows had not helped him hide in plain sight.

This time his money was no good—from \$700,000 he offered to each arresting officer in exchange for his freedom to \$5 million, according to different reports—as it had been in the Mexican prison two years earlier. Once in custody, defeated, he gave in and "did not deny being the person wanted by the U.S. Government;" then, DEA Special Agent Terry L. Franckhauser also submitted evidence to confirm Herrera Garcia's identity, according to a Colombian Supreme Court document from case 27957.

The Florida court issued a second arrest warrant for *El Ingeniero* on July 6, 2007. The U.S. government formalized the extradition request three days later for this case as well, although the drug-trafficking and money laundering charges in the D.C. case supersede the Florida case. His brother Guillermo, Guatemalan authorities say, took over the business—even as he remains a defendant in both cases. Two other Herrera Garcia brothers, Carlos Humberto and Roger Alberto, are not mentioned in U.S. court documents.

## Extraditions drag on

The indictments in the U.S. made some traffickers more visible to the public than they ever were, like the Lorenzanas in 2009. Former U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala, Stephen McFarland told the Woodrow Wilson Center in 2010 that extradition is “very important” in prompting that visibility. “We have seen it work that way in other countries, and we think it could work here,” he said, referring to the arrest of drug traffickers wanted in the U.S. “But for [extradition] to work you have to have a judicial system that is fairly effective, efficient, as well as honest.” McFarland said the U.S. has noticed a change for the better since the UN-led International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) has been in Guatemala (late 2007).

However, the extraditions of Guatemalan major traffickers—as opposed to foreign ones—arrested in Guatemala drag on for more than a year, although a 2008 law was designed to guarantee a three-month maximum wait (40 days for the requesting country to justify the extradition request and six weeks for court processing). Others, arrested in Colombia, were extradited within a year, or sooner.

By 2008, Herrera Garcia was extradited from Colombia to the U.S. (some eight months after his arrest). In February 2010, Rodriguez Monsalve (*Pacho’s* widow) was arrested in a nation-wide *Operación Fronteras* (Borders Operation) to dismantle a network responsible for sending between five and seven tons of cocaine per year to Central America, and the U.S.

Other arrests throughout the year included King Arizabaleta on September 16 in Cali. By then, he was 72 years old, and only ten months before had finished serving a 15-year jail sentence. The U.S. government had requested his and his nephew’s arrest and extradition only four months earlier. Like with Herrera Garcia, statements from DEA Special Agent Fraga supported the petition, also approved by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. One day after King Arizabaleta’s arrest, his nephew was apprehended in Cali, according to extradition process 35418 (five years after his release in Guatemala).

The extradition of Cifuentes Villa’s widow was requested by a court in Dallas, Texas, where she was sent in October 2010. Her successor, and sister in law, Dolly Cifuentes Villa, 47, took over the business but was arrested last August 2011 in Medellin, Colombia, and will be extradited to the U.S.

Eight years after the \$14.4 million dollar seizure, members of the “Otto Herrera Organization” and the “Arizabaleta Organization” were falling like badly-stacked domino tablets.

Last April 26, two years after a series of failed arrest attempts by the Guatemalan Army and Police, and the DEA the patriarch of the Lorenzana family was arrested. Waldemar Lorenzana Lima, 72, told the press he was not a trafficker but had led a “family-oriented fruit-exporting business” for decades. U.S. authorities believe that this business is a façade for the family’s drug operation, and it was used for money laundering. “Lorenzana was mostly a local guy, [based in Guatemala],” Vigil said.

Lorenzana Lima, three of his sons (Eliu, Ovaldino and Waldemar Lorenzana Cordon), a son-in-law and another associate (Carlos Andrés Alvarenga Mejia and Gonzalo Lopez Cabrera), were also indicted in March of 2009 for conspiring to transport cocaine from the Salvadoran border and the Pacific coast into Guatemala. They were presumably receiving the drugs from former congressman Martinez, the only

defendant from El Salvador listed in the case. The Lorenzanas comprised the Guatemalan part of the operation. But, if the reward for information leading for their arrest was an indication of their stature in the narco world, they were several levels below Herrera Garcia and Paredes Cordova. The U.S. Department of State offered \$500,000 for Lorenzana Lima, \$200,000 for each of his sons, but \$2 million for Herrera, and \$5 million each for Paredes, and “El Chapo.”

In 2010, the Department of Treasury’s OFAC placed the Lorenzanas on the Drug Kingpin List. Yet, until last April, the Guatemalan Counternarcotics and Money-laundering prosecution offices were not investigating the Lorenzanas. Attorney General Claudia Paz said that their arrest warrants were issued based only on the U.S. extradition requests. According to Leonel Ruiz, who led the Counternarcotics prosecution office for ten years until that month, “there is no evidence against the big fish because they never get their hands dirty”. Ruiz, Paz announced, was fired among dozens of prosecutors due to low performance; Ruiz said he had resigned. Spokesperson for the Attorney General’s office, Ricardo Marroquin, explained that the prosecution will not release information regarding these cases beyond the extradition process.

### **Purchasing weapons in the U.S.**

Only two months after the failed arrests, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Alcohol and Explosives (ATF) and the USDOJ discovered that the Lorenzanas and the Mendozas (described as a drug trafficking group in northeastern Guatemala) wired thousands of dollars to Tennessee to purchase weapons. The recipient, Julio Cesar Rojas Lopez (arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison), and other four suspects, bought semi-automatic pistols, revolvers and ammunition. Then, Rojas Lopez smuggled them out of the U.S. He hid the weapons and ammunition in a car he drove straight to the Lorenzanas and Mendozas in Guatemala.

In a September 29, 2009 statement, the ATF revealed that between June 2008 and July 2009 it tracked the purchase of 23 weapons, but could only seize five. The rest were taken to Guatemala. Five people were made, including Rojas Lopez. The operation, dubbed “*Armas Cruzadas*,” (Crossed Firearms) was an ICE-led bilateral program similar to the Fast and Furious operation to allow the purchase of weapons sent by contraband to Mexico, to trace and dismantle weapons-smuggling networks. Several of these weapons were traced to murders in Mexico, including those of two federal agents near the border with the U.S.

An ATF official said that 6,122 of the weapons seized in Guatemala (35 percent of the total), between 2006 and 2009, were traced back to purchases in the U.S. At the time, eight of every ten homicides were attributed to firearms. Neither the Lorenzanas nor Mendozas appear as defendants in the Tennessee case.

### **Abrupt end to years on the run**

On June 8, 2011, eight years after the seizure of \$14 million in Guatemala City, Linares Cordon turned up in Solola (85 miles west of Guatemala City). The police arrested him immediately. The reason: the Washington D.C. court’s request for his extradition on drug trafficking charges, and his link to the Otto Herrera Organization.

Twenty days later, the extradition of King Arizabaleta (the co-owner of the \$14 million in 2003) was reported by the Colombian press on June 28, 2011. However, his and his nephew's whereabouts remain unknown. While the Colombian Supreme Court approved the uncle's extradition last March and the nephew's last June, according to extradition cases 35417 and 35418, by December, none of them showed up in the Inmate Locator system of the Bureau of Prisons.

By September 2011, the Embassy of Colombia in Washington D.C. had not received any news from the consulates around the U.S., or the USDOJ, regarding the defendants' arrival on U.S. soil and their incarceration in this country. Until November, those were their most recent records.

An official at the Colombian Embassy in Washington D.C. assured that the names were not on their records. "We would have noticed; believe me," he said, referring to the Arizabaletas. "They are very well-known." The official said the embassy is not always notified by the USDOJ when Colombian inmates arrive on U.S. soil in extradition processes.

The Colombian Embassy records do show that Herrera Garcia was extradited from Colombia to the U.S. in 2008 (the Colombian Supreme Court approved it on November 14, 2007), but nothing else. The Guatemalan press reported the extradition taking in February, yet document 14, in Florida case 1:07-cr-20508-JAL, registers that U.S. Marshal Christina Pharo arrested Herrera Garcia upon his arrival on October 23, 2008, in Florida's Southern District. The explanation to the eight-month gap could be in the sealed case in the D.C. court.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons shows that Herrera Garcia is being held at Rivers Correctional Institution at Winton, North Carolina. According to electronic records, his actual or projected release date is January 18, 2017, which could mean he received a larger sentence and might be eligible for parole and early release, or received a shorter sentence if he declared himself guilty to avoid going to trial. His jail sentence is short compared to former congressman Martinez's 29-year sentence, or Paredes' 31-year sentence (in Indiana).

The USDOJ declined commenting on the defendants' whereabouts. Nothing regarding the case can be discussed, according to spokesperson Laura Sweeney. In the court's electronic records, the case number 03:331-CKK or MMM appears as "Sealed v. Sealed," or "not available to public."

Exactly five months after Linares Cordon's arrest, Eliu Elixander Lorenzana Cordon (son of the Lorenzanas' patriarch) was arrested due to the extradition requested in the same drug trafficking case. The Lorenzanas (father and son) and Linares Cordon have used any appeal at their disposal to stall their extradition.

Other Guatemalan defendants, wanted by a Tampa, Florida, Middle District Court, are also linked to the Sinaloa Cartel. Mauro Salomon Ramirez and Juan Ortiz Lopez, arrested in October 2010 and March 2011, have delayed their extradition on drug trafficking charges for at least eight months. According to one police detective, everyone else—the Lorenzanas and Herreras included—is a "nobody" compared to Ortiz Lopez.

The only Guatemalans accused of drug trafficking and sent to the U.S. within the 24 hours after their arrest have been caught outside Guatemala. Two examples are Byron Berganza, arrested in El Salvador in 2003, and Paredes Cordova, arrested in Honduras, in 2008. Court documents show that both were expelled by local authorities, but were not sent to Guatemala. They were handed to DEA agents assigned to El Salvador and Honduras, who then flew them to the U.S. Neither one was indicted in their native country, like Herrera Garcia and the Lorenzanas weren't, despite mounting evidence of their trafficking activities there.

### **DEA's prompts arrests**

Two major roadblocks challenge arrests of high-profile drug traffickers in Guatemala: corruption in the government (International Transparency placed Guatemala in the 120 place out of 182 countries, the third worst in Central America) and infiltration by organized crime, as admitted by President Alvaro Colom. Also, one police detective explains that the previous DEA team based in Guatemala focused more on drug seizures than arrests, which are now the focus of the current team.

Now, Braun believes that the DEA squads known as Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Teams (FASTs) were behind some of the arrests. It's one way to explain the apprehension of five extraditable alleged Guatemalan traffickers since October 2010, when the last one before that occurred 20 years ago: Arnoldo Vargas was captured in 1990 and extradited in 1992 to the U.S. on drug trafficking charges. Vargas was mayor of Zacapa, the capital of a province bordering with Honduras.

The FASTs, consisting of DEA agents with military training, operate since the beginning of the Obama administration in 2008, although similar teams existed during previous administrations. They have been deployed to several Latin American countries. Braun, who retired from the DEA in 2008 and helped form the FASTs, says they work with DEA agents assigned to the operation's host country and "shoulder to shoulder" with local authorities. The FASTs stay in the host country from one week to two months, depending on the operations' demands.

Braun could not assure the FASTs (or their previous versions) were behind the arrests in Guatemala (of Ramirez, Ortiz, the Lorenzanas and Linares Cordon), El Salvador (Berganza, in 2003), Honduras (Paredes Cordova, in 2008), and Colombia (Otto Herrera Garcia, in 2007). But he was willing to bet they were. Authorities in Guatemala went to great lengths to assure there was no U.S. participation in this year's arrests, particularly of the Lorenzanas and Linares Cordon. The Colombian police also insisted no foreign authorities participated in the arrest of Herrera Garcia, and publicly praised the arresting officers who turned down the *Don Otto's* hefty bribe.

In Guatemala, Don Otto's connections in the police and the military had granted him immunity and impunity. The Lorenzanas enjoyed the same protection, according to a police detective. In 2002, the DEA had pushed for a search warrant to go into one of their homes. "The night before, the judge called them to warn them about it," the detective said. The search was still carried out, but nothing was found. President Colom said the failed 2009 arrest operations against the Lorenzanas failed because information was filtered. The detective said that the Lorenzanas paid off the police in Zacapa, and that any operation with any chance of success would require police from other jurisdictions. Yet, this isn't always the case.

## **Enemy within**

In April 2008, a military operation in Petén (the largest province in northern Guatemala) ended in the seizure of 1.3 tons of cocaine. “After we found the drugs, we alerted the police and the local prosecutor,” said the officer leading the operation, now a high official in the Army’s high command. “In a matter of hours, the place was swarming with cops; there were about 200, some even from the capital (ten hours away by land), so we told the prosecutor we would leave given the strong presence of civilian authorities. We were surprised when he said, ‘please don’t go until the drugs are counted and sent to the capital.’ I asked him why, and then the prosecutor said, ‘these cops are not here to protect the cocaine; they are here to steal it.’”

The military official said he video-taped a cop carrying one of the kilo packages in his hand, as he boarded the helicopter transporting the drugs. When the cocaine was counted again in the capital, authorities discovered that 250 packages had been substituted with flour.

Several judges, prosecutors and police officers have been arrested, or are under investigation, for their alleged links to organized crime, but this has not stopped others from joining criminal ranks—while on duty, after an early retirement or being fired. During the Colom administration, at least 1,700 police officers have been fired for their dealings—small or large scale—outside the law.

The military counternarcotics operations have reduced the number of landings of cocaine flights from South America in Guatemala, forcing most of them to divert to Honduras since 2009. Some landings, like one reported the second week in November, still occur near the southern Pacific coast, but were reduced from 40 nationwide in 2008 (each with 300 to 500 kilos), according to Colom, to five reported in 2010. Between January and May, 77 flights were tracked by DEA. Most landed in Honduras and Haiti. However, the military operations and the vetted police units are still unable to stop the drug Guatemala’s latest threat: the Zetas, a mercenary group that branched out of the Mexican Gulf Cartel, and has expanded operations to Central America since 2007.

The Guatemalan police have arrested at least 100 Zetas in the last four years. One third of them are Mexican; the rest are Guatemalan recruits. Minister of Interior Carlos Menocal insists the arrests weakened the Zetas, but offers no evidence to back his claim. The impact of nearly 200 weapons, dozens of vehicles, and one ton of cocaine seized from them is still unclear.

According to unofficial military sources, a former vice-minister of Defense organized the Zetas’ logistics in Alta Verapaz (Herrera Garcia’s birthplace). Also, a diplomatic cable dated February 6, 2009 (09GUATEMALA106) reported suspected Zeta ties to the military. Guatemalan police investigators report that the Zetas partnered with Walter Hearst Overdick, an alleged local narco whose son was arrested earlier this year. Overdick was also the owner of the ranch where the 1.3 tons of cocaine were found in 2008 in Peten, according to a military source.

## **Zetas change the rules**

On March 25, 2008, Guatemala awoke to a grim Zeta announcement: a shoot-out in Zacapa that left 11 dead, including Juan Leon, a.k.a. “Juancho.” He had been the former son-in-law of Lorenzana Lima, who

was known for stealing drugs from other traffickers. Military intelligence sources indicate that Juancho had killed two Zetas in Honduras and stolen cocaine from them. The Zetas returned the favor killing him and his security detail, which included three former Guatemalan police officers. Fourteen perpetrators were arrested (six of them, Mexican), and two of their weapons (Beretta 92FS 9mm pistols) were traced back to purchases from stores in McAllen, Texas, according to a May 14, 2010 USDOJ press release.

In November of the same year, in Huehuetenango, a few feet from the Mexican border, the Zetas ignited another shoot-out. This time they aimed at a Sinaloa Cartel-linked group. The body-count: 17. The shoot-out disrupted a top-breed horse race where millions of dollars were at stake. Although the Zetas are challenging the Sinaloa group, drug-related violence has not escalated to the levels of Mexico.

Although no Guatemalan public official has identified a visible Zeta national leader, in 2008, a diplomatic cable from the U.S. Embassy dated March 28, 2008 (08GUATEMALA387), offered a name and voiced concerns about his intentions of taking over drug trafficking operations in Guatemala: Miguel Treviño Morales. At the time, Treviño (a.k.a. Comandante Forty or Zeta 40) was the second in command of the Zetas in Mexico, after Heriberto Lazcano.

Treviño also faces drug trafficking charges in a Washington D.C. court since March 2008, when he and members of the Gulf Cartel (now his nemesis) were indicted in criminal case 08-057. In 2007, he was linked to two homicides in Laredo, Texas, where an arrest warrant was issued against him. The U.S. Department of State has offered a reward of up to \$5 million for information that would lead to his arrest. The DEA is still uncertain about his age, which it estimates between 31 and 41 years.

By April 2010, a retired agent from a U.S. federal agency, who investigated drug trafficking networks from Colombia to Mexico, assured that Treviño was sent to Guatemala to lead the Zeta operations. By October of that year a top official from the Executive admitted that Treviño was the “number one man” in drug trafficking in Guatemala. Other military intelligence sources in Guatemala and Mexico confirm that Treviño headed the Zetas spread in Guatemala, and operates in both countries. Yet he remains untouched while five Guatemalan associates of the Sinaloa Cartel have been arrested (including the three wanted by a Washington D.C. court).

Braun said that in Colombia, the cartels were tackled one by one, because it was impossible to go after all of them simultaneously, as a possible explanation as to why only Sinaloa leaders have been targeted in Guatemala. In the meantime, Zeta-related incidents have turned mounting evidence of their spread in the country.

Violence in Alta Verapaz linked to the Zetas led to a two-month state of siege in December 2010, while the decapitation of 27 peasants in Peten led to another state of siege in that province in May 2011. Ten days later, when most troops had retrieved from Alta Verapaz, a prosecutor who participated in the seizure of a Zeta-linked cocaine shipment, was found decapitated. One Zeta training camp and party ranch was discovered in Quiche (Guatemala’s western border with Mexico), and five counternarcotics detectives (later linked to an attempt to steal from the Zetas) were killed in 2009.

In July 2009, Ruiz said the Zetas moved freely in at least 75 percent of the country. He explained that they were aiming to open a trafficking corridor from the eastern border with Honduras and Guatemala's Atlantic coast (Izabal province), through the center and north of the country (Petén, Alta Verapaz, Quiché and Huehuetenango), straight into Mexico. The Zetas are taking by force what local traffickers, operating like a family-run business, took decades to achieve.

### **New president, new challenges**

One Stratfor report dated November 17 quoted Guatemalan president-elect Otto Perez Molina, in a statement to Mexican newspaper El Universal, saying that "he plans to engage the drug cartels in a 'full-frontal assault.'" Yet, one month earlier, a top military official admitted that "it's too late to start, to try to control them directly." The official said Guatemala does not have the man power or the proper equipment to do it. "When struck, they traffickers multiply and grow into a threat more difficult to control because the traffickers learn their lessons well," he said.

Perhaps that is why Perez Molina, who will take office next January 14, announced Guatemala will need more help from the U.S., which is already assisting the country with funds and technical resources. Local financial resources are scarce—the possibility of passing a tax reform is minimal, as the official party will only have 58 seats in a Congress of 158 representatives—and the enactment of current laws to use confiscated assets from traffickers has not yielded enough resources.

During the June 2011 Central American Integration System (SICA) Conference, however, Secretary of State Clinton argued for a more efficient and strategic use of foreign funds (Guatemala received \$5 million in FY 2010, mostly for prevention programs, plus other funds in regional aid). In 2010, the former head of the CICIG, Carlos Castresana, said that millions of dollars have been wasted because security plans are short term due to the constant removal of public officials within one presidential term. For instance, Menocal, the current minister of Interior, is the fifth official occupying that position since Colom took office in 2008.

The CICIG has had a small part in curbing drug trafficking, as it has focused in corruption cases in the police force, prosecution and court system, according to political analyst Hector Rosada. The cocaine seizures have also increased from 10.5 tons from 2004-2007 (2.6 tons average per year) to 14.2 tons from 2008 to November 2011 (3.5 tons average per year).

The Colom administration claims to have seized assets, weapons, drugs equivalent to \$10 billion, which is 150 percent larger than the national yearly budget. Yet, there is no evidence that the seizures, arrests and subsequent convictions of traffickers extradited to the U.S., affect wholesale cocaine distribution from Central America to the U.S.

The State Department reports that cocaine shipments going through Guatemala alone increased from an estimated 200 tons per year in 2002, to 300 tons per year in 2010. Yet, according to Braun, "less cocaine is going to the U.S., and now there is more demand in Europe," although the UN 2011 World Drug Report states that 36 percent of cocaine consumers are in the U.S. (the largest market), while 28 percent are in Europe (the second largest market).

The NDIC (based on information gathered from drugs seizures) claims that cocaine purity declined and prices increased four years ago. The DEA told the Senate that from January 2007 to March 11, purity declined to 49 percent (a 27 percent drop), while the price per gram went from \$101 to \$189 (an 87 percent increase) in the U.S.

In Guatemala, seizures decreased dramatically. For every ten kilos seized in 1999, only six were seized in 2009. By 2011, confiscation levels had increased, although this year only 1.6 percent has been confiscated of the estimated 300 tons going through the country. An estimated one third of the cocaine that gets through Guatemala alone is seized in the U.S.

### **Recurrent threat**

The 2011 National Drug Threat Assessment reports that the Sinaloa Cartel is still “one of the most dominant Transnational Criminal Organizations involved in drug trafficking operations in the U.S.” According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “the Arizona corridor” has become a key trafficking area for this cartel, although the NDIC has also listed California as another important crossing point.

One Mexican official told the Post in October that “El Chapo” Guzman—who will turn 57 next Christmas Day, December 25—is responsible for importing one kilo of cocaine into the U.S. every ten minutes, on average. Braun could not vouch for that figure, but spoke of multi-ton quantities of cocaine smuggled into the U.S. every year. He also said that the Guatemalan and Colombian traffickers indicted the D.C. court find themselves among dozens, if not hundreds of similar structures hired by Guzman and the Sinaloa Cartel. The NDIC reports that the cocaine that ends up in Washington D.C. is transported by road or national flights from California, or Florida, or is first taken to New York from where it’s distributed to the rest of the east coast.

The drug availability has taken a toll. “Almost 38,000 Americans die each year as a direct result of drug abuse,” Rodney G. Benson, assistant administrator and chief of intelligence for the DEA, told the Committee of Foreign Affairs, at the House of Representatives, last October. Also this year, the NDIC estimated that the annual cost of drug-related crime is more than \$61 billion. In a May 2003 report, when the Herrera Garcia network was active, the center claims that cocaine was “the drug most often associated with violent crime in D.C.,” which that year had one of the highest per capita homicide rates in the U.S.

In Guatemala, which the 2011 World Drug Report says is one of the few countries showing an increase in cocaine consumption, 40 percent of crimes are directly or indirectly drug-related according to the government. Former military intelligence director, Mario Merida, claims it’s only 15 percent. Regardless of the difference in the figures, the murders are more ruthless and decapitations have become common. They are not as ubiquitous as in Mexico, but the homicide rate in Guatemala has fluctuated between 41 and 45 violent deaths per every 100,000 inhabitants in the last four years. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) says any number above eight homicides per every 100,000 inhabitants is considered epidemic.

“Attacking the traffickers’ source of money is still the way to go,” says Rosada, regarding one of the items that should be part of incoming President Perez’s security policy in Guatemala. “But money laundering structures are more complex; they don’t depend on a drug lord deciding if he will launder his money or not.” The analyst says the corrupt system must be tackled, as well as the money already laundered, but warns that route would require “going after groups using the [Guatemalan] banking system, and that means getting into the pancreas, kidneys and brain of this country.” In the U.S., tackling the network’s core was the rationale behind the \$14.4 million seizure eight years ago and the man-hunt that ensued ever since.

One police detective familiar with the seizure recalls having heard DEA agents say that the money stashed really totaled \$59 million (other sources refer to \$28 million)—not only \$14.4 million—but that the cash was “pinched” by some of the public officials assisting with the arrests and the seizure.

Despite the outcome, the operation did not make a dent in El Chapo’s operations, whose last arrest dates back to Guatemala in 1992, when the future incoming president Perez headed the Military Intelligence Unit, allegedly responsible for the apprehension (Guzman escaped eight years later from a Mexican prison). Now, whether the cases in the Washington D.C. and Florida courts will curb the flow of cocaine into the U.S. remains to be seen. “Everyone is waiting to see what happens also when the new authorities [in Guatemala] take office,” says a civilian intelligence official. That includes the drug traffickers.