

# Cocaine ring with Colombian ties destroyed, federal officials claim

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Federal authorities said yesterday they had broken up the Philadelphia cell of the Cali, Colombia, drug cartel, which agents said imported six tons of cocaine into the city between 1987 and 1990.

Seventy-six Puerto Ricans, Colombians and Cubans were charged in indictments and warrants with importing or selling cocaine supplied by the world's biggest cocaine cartel. It was broken down into \$10 and \$20 street sales, the cocaine worth \$750 million, agents said.

Among those charged were alleged "managers" of the cell, which distributed Cali-supplied cocaine from New York and Miami to wholesalers in Philadelphia. Those wholesalers, who also were charged, in turn sold the cocaine to street gangs for corner sales, the indictments charged.

The bulk of the cocaine was sold in the section of North Philadelphia that some police have nicknamed the Badlands, agents said. Sam Billbrough, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration office in Philadelphia, said much of the cocaine seized in previous federal drug indictments in the area was supplied by the Cali cell.

Drug gangs in the Badlands are responsible for about 70 percent of all the illegal drugs sold in Philadelphia, according to the police Narcotics Field Unit. Many of those charged yesterday either lived in the area or ran cocaine operations from businesses they owned there, the indict-

ments charged.

Authorities said the three-year undercover operation produced one of the most significant drug busts in the city's history. But they also acknowledged that the arrests would have little effect on the availability of cocaine sold on the streets of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

"This case... will significantly disrupt established channels of illegal distribution in the Philadelphia area," said U.S. Attorney Michael M. Baylson. But without reducing demand for cocaine, Baylson said, "we can lock these people up for years and years but, as everyone knows, drugs are still out there."

Billbrough said the arrests would "seriously wound" the local Cali cell.

But he added: "Is it going to stop drug trafficking in Philadelphia? The answer is no. Will some people [dealers] fill the void? Yes, but they won't be as well-organized as these people."

Forty-three of the 76 people charged — many of them illegal aliens — were arrested yesterday in Philadelphia, Puerto Rico, Miami and Los Angeles. Thirty-eight of those charged were from Philadelphia, agents said, with 23 in custody yesterday afternoon.

As part of the three-year investigation, agents tape-recorded thousands of Spanish-language phone conversations between alleged suppliers and cell managers. Those conversations are dotted with coded references to cocaine shipments, including "the family," "material," "newspapers," and "expensive apparatuses."

In one conversation, two alleged members of the cell referred to a cocaine shipment as "houses for rent." Trying to explain that some of the cocaine was of poor quality, one of the callers said: "Some of those apartments [are] somewhat damaged."

Some conversations referred to a 21-ton drug seizure in Los Angeles and a five-ton seizure in New York, both in 1989. Authorities said portions of those shipments were intended for the Cali cell in Philadelphia.

The cartel has cells in many major U.S. cities, according to the DEA.

Among those arrested yesterday was Jose Luis Escobar, 53, owner of the El Kibuk Restaurant at 4535 N. Fifth St. The indictment charged Escobar with heading a major Cuban drug ring that operated from his restaurant, arranging for distribution of Cali-supplied cocaine.

Escobar and his restaurant have been featured in articles in local publications, including The Inquirer. The restaurant was seized yesterday under federal drug-forfeiture laws.

Escobar's brother, Roberto Escobar of Miami, and Jose Escobar's son, Leonardo Escobar, 26, of Sewell, N.J., also were indicted.

The indictments said that most of the Cali-supplied cocaine reached Philadelphia from New York in cars outfitted with secret compartments. The same cars were used to ferry loads of cash — much of it "street money" made up of \$10 and \$20 bills — back to New York.

In a typical month, Baylson said, the Philadelphia cell would import 170 kilograms. At \$25,000 per kilogram, the drugs were worth \$4.25 million wholesale — and roughly five times that retail, agents said.

Some of the defendants also were charged with illegally laundering drug cash, often by setting up phony business fronts, many of them in North Philadelphia.

Baylson said some members of the cell had ties to the Scarfo organized-crime family, but he declined to provide details.

The Cali cartel, named for the Colombian city where it is based, has eclipsed the better-known Medellín cartel in recent years, agents say. Some officials say the Cali group supplies up to 80 percent of the cocaine reaching the United States.

The investigation produced 16 indictments, including a 373-page indictment charging 30 defendants. Eight people — four of them living or working in Philadelphia — were charged under the federal drug-kingpin statute, which carries a prison term of 20 years to life.

Four of those eight were in custody yesterday, agents said.

Authorities identified those who had been living or working in Philadelphia as Maritza Bravo, Gentil Navia Ruiz, Elkin Quiceno and Omar Ceron. No ages or addresses were available.

The federal government is seeking the forfeiture of \$150 million in cash — the retail value of the cocaine it said was sold by the Philadelphia cell. Huge bundles of cash, along with kilograms of cocaine wrapped in heavy plastic, were displayed at a news conference yesterday at the William J. Green Jr. Federal Building.

Federal authorities also seized homes, businesses and other property in Philadelphia, Florida, Puerto Rico and California. At one house seized in San Juan, agents said, they recovered \$540,000 in cash, three vehicles and two boats.

**The amount it imported had an estimated street value of \$750 million.**

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