

Missing drug baron led two lives

Colombian prized as U.S. informant

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Colombian drug baron Julio Correa, who remains missing in his homeland, has been a prized U.S. government informant.

Correa could penetrate the secretive and deadly world of cocaine smuggling without drawing suspicion. He avoided imprisonment while facing drug-trafficking charges by informing on other major smugglers to federal investigators in Miami.

He told them about shipments. He told them about routes. He told them about rivalries.

Then last year, his cover was blown after another federal informant was arrested and told the Colombian press that he helped Correa cut a deal with U.S. prosecutors. That led some Colombian drug traffickers to suspect that Correa had become a government informant, Correa's lawyer said.

Despite this, Correa, 31, jetted in late July from Miami to his homeland to watch a soccer tournament and see his supermodel girlfriend.

Then he vanished.

"My feeling is he's dead," said his Miami lawyer, Joaquín Pérez, who added that no federal prosecution has been jeopardized by Correa's disappearance.

His mid-August disappearance has raised serious questions about how federal law enforcement agencies control their informants and keep

Drug smuggler was U.S. informer

Missing Colombian feared dead

INFORMANT, FROM 1B

them alive.

Last week, Colombian police found a man shot in the head and dumped in a field who was first believed to be Correa. The body was not his — but he is feared dead by his relatives, Pérez said.

The U.S. attorney's office declined to comment. So did the FBI.

Pérez acknowledged that his client's cooperation agreement with the government was "highly unusual."

Correa, who lived in a posh Aventura condominium, never served a day in prison since he secretly surrendered to the FBI on conspiracy drug charges in the fall of 1997.

Released on bond, he could travel anywhere.

Most drug traffickers turned informants don't get this kind of freedom, legal experts and defense lawyers say. Their bond is normally denied or granted only with tight travel restrictions.

But Pérez said: "In order for [Correa] to be effective, he had to be able to come and go.

'VERY SOPHISTICATED'

"This was not your average defendant. This was a very sophisticated, high-level informant who provided information that the United States government had no way of obtaining without him. . . . He became a conduit between the underworld and the government."

University of Miami law professor Bruce Winick agreed that the government's deal with Correa was "unusual."

"Normally, we're going to keep defendants in this country because of the potential risk of flight," Winick said. "But I could see the possibility that the normal provisions would not have applied here, because he became an important confidential informant."

Correa's path to government informant was riddled with risk.

He was a former lieutenant to Medellín Cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar and turned on him after Escobar's gunmen killed one of his relatives. In the late 1980s, Correa joined a group called People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar — *Los Pepes* — that assassinated dozens of Escobar's aides, relatives and lawyers. Escobar was killed by police in 1993.

SMUGGLING CHARGE

Correa also became a drug baron in his own right. In October 1995, he was charged as the ringleader in a conspiracy to smuggle two tons of cocaine into the Port of Miami-Dade.

Two years later, before extradition was reinstated in Colombia, he tried to reach a deal with federal authorities — to no avail. Baruch Vega, a Colombian-born Miami Beach photographer and federal informant, introduced Pérez to Correa.

The lawyer persuaded Correa to surrender and then try to make a deal with the government in October 1997. "He took a big gamble," Pérez said.

As part of his cooperation agreement with the government, Correa has been providing valuable intelligence to federal authorities about Colombian drug shipments and cartel power struggles.

Correa's own cooperation deal helped persuade other smugglers to come to the

He traveled to Colombia after his cover was blown — and vanished.

United States, with promises of lenient sentences in exchange for inside information, according to knowledgeable sources.

To travel in and out of the United States, Correa used several aliases, including Andrés David Mejía Parra. He used that name on false documents supplied by U.S. authorities, according to Col. Germán Jaramillo, the head of Colombia's version of the FBI.

Pérez did not want to discuss how his client obtained false documents.

Correa's status as an informant possibly caught up with him last year, when his name surfaced in an investigation of two Colombian-born federal informants, Baruch Vega and Román Suárez López. In March 2000, they were charged in Miami with cooking up "phony cooperation deals" with indicted and suspected Colombian drug lords — in exchange for millions of dollars.

Vega, stung by the federal charges against him, talked openly with the Colombian media about his association with drug traffickers, including Correa.

His attorney, Pérez, said that Vega "opened his big mouth" about helping to broker Correa's surrender to this country, which led other traffickers to believe that Correa had become a government informant.

A SOCCER FAN

Vega's Miami attorney, Nelson Rodríguez-Varela, declined to comment.

Despite having his cover blown last year, Correa often traveled to Colombia during the past year.

A soccer fan, Correa flew to Colombia for the final game of the Copa América, the hemisphere's top soccer tournament, on July 27 or 28.

Correa also wanted to be with his girlfriend, Natalia Paris, 27, considered the most famous supermodel in Colombia. She often flew from South Florida to her homeland for modeling assignments. They had a daughter last December.

Correa, a heavyset man with a ponytail who met Paris in a Medellín gym in the mid-1990s, frequently followed her to Colombia.

Pérez said that his client has been missing since Aug. 14, and that the girlfriend was not with Correa at the time.

Last year, Correa became known in Colombia as a member of the "cartel de los sapos." Sapos means toad in Spanish and is a derogatory term for informant — in the sense that toads have big eyes and appear to watch everything.

Last week, El Nuevo Herald reported that Colombian government agents were investigating whether Correa may have been tortured, murdered and thrown into the Cauca River by enemies who trapped him in an ambush.

"He would have very clear enemies gunning for him," said Winick, the UM law professor. "But to these guys, it may be part of their lifestyle."

Herald translator Renato Pérez contributed to this report.

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