

Mexican Cartels Bolster Foothold and Alliances in Colombia

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Between 2018 and 2022, Colombia's Ombudsman Office emitted more than 20 alerts that affiliates of Mexico's largest and most powerful cartels were active on Colombian soil. Some 40 Mexican nationals, according to the Ombudsman Office, were behind bars for drug trafficking charges in Colombia as of early 2023.

Syndicates such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation (CJNG) cartels have forged competing alliances with Colombian peers such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), Clan del Golfo, and dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombian magazine *Cambio Colombia* reported.

In a dramatic reversal from the days in which Colombian cartels dominated the bulk of the regional cocaine trade, Mexican cartels appear to be ramping up operations in Colombia. Since the downfall of Colombia's Medellín and Cali cartels in the mid-1990s, the dominance of Mexican cartels in the node of narcotics distribution has shifted power away from Colombian suppliers.

"Today, Mexican cartels control everything from coca leaf to the sale of cocaine on a New York street corner. They are more powerful for it than Pablo Escobar or Carlos Castaño," Colombia's President Gustavo Petro, then a senator, said in an August 2019 tweet.

According to think tank InSight Crime, which studies organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, the 2021 arrest and later extradition of Dairo Antonio Úsuga, alias Otoniel, head of narco-paramilitary group Clan del Golfo, may be the last arrest of a kingpin of his stature.

"Otoniel's departure leaves behind a transformed criminal landscape," InSight Crime contends. Rather than hierarchical, vertically integrated cartels, Colombia's current criminal landscape is increasingly horizontal and fragmented with distinct actors controlling the nodes of the cocaine

trade from the initial coca cultivation to domestic transport and later export of cocaine into neighboring countries.

Speaking with *AFP*, former Colombian Vice President and General of the National Police Óscar Naranjo Trujillo seemingly provided a similar analysis. “[Before] there was a kind of division of labor: Colombians produced [and] stored coca, [transported] it on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts as well as ports, and then shipped it to Mexico [...] or to the United States with the help of Mexican [traffickers],” Naranjo said, adding that today Mexican criminal syndicates have “subordinated” their Colombian counterparts.

In this context, control over the cultivation of coca in departments such as Norte de Santander, Nariño, Cauca, northern Antioquia, and southern Córdoba is the locus of conflict among Colombia’s guerrilla and paramilitary organizations. This is compounded by the fact that Mexican narcotraffickers frequently pay Colombian suppliers with high-quality weapons and have promoted the cultivation of high-yield coca cultivars, which produce high-quality, high-profit cocaine in larger quantities from a smaller area, Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think tank, advanced in a July 2022 op-ed.

Paying cocaine suppliers with weapons has helped Mexican cartels launder profits and avoid moving large quantities of cash across borders, *Reuters* reported.

“What illegal armed groups in Colombia are doing is using the Mexicans to equal and exceed the armed forces of the state in terms of weaponry,” an official at the Colombian National Police’s Anti-Terrorism and Arms Tracing Information Center (CIARA) told *Reuters* in April 2022, on condition of anonymity. “In the future, that could have serious implications, like an increase in hostilities.”

Mexican cartels are not only increasingly involved in cocaine trafficking and wholesale, but also in the internal disputes between armed groups in Colombia’s regions, often instigating violence to displace one another or gain exclusivity.

According to the Ombudsman Office, the “Zetas [Cartel] buy shipments of cocaine out of the Colombian Caribbean. The shipments are then smuggled into Venezuela, exported to Central America and from there, to Europe and the United States,” Colombian daily *Semana* reported. Conversely, the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel rely on trafficking routes in the Pacific out of coca fields in the Colombian departments of Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó.

The April 2022 arrest in Cali of Brian Donaciano Olguín Berdugo, alias Pitt, the chief liaison of the Sinaloa Cartel with groups such as the Clan del Golfo, Oficina de Envigado, and FARC dissidents, is instructive as to the role of Mexican cartels as mediators between Colombian armed groups. According to *Reuters*, the Colombian National Police referred to his arrest as the most important yet of a cartel emissary.

Alias Pitt, identified as the right-hand man of Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán, top leader of the Sinaloa Cartel who is serving a life sentence in a maximum security prison in the United States, was tasked with negotiating an end to territorial disputes between the ex-FARC’s 1st and 2nd fronts and the so-called Second Marquetalia. What’s more, Colombian intelligence signaled that the Sinaloa Cartel was involved in attempts to stop the extradition of alias Otoniel. The Sinaloa Cartel was reportedly worried that Otoniel could provide U.S. law enforcement with information that could jeopardize their North American operations and even considered a hit against the former kingpin, *Semana* reported.

Reporting from Colombian daily *El Tiempo* indicated that Alfredo Guzmán-Salazar, alias Alfredillo, son of El Chapo, headed the cartel’s Colombian operations from the city of Medellín between 2016 and 2018. According to intelligence from Colombian authorities as well as the DEA and FBI, Alfredillo operated a cocaine laboratory on the outskirts of Envigado, southeast of Medellín, that produced approximately 100 kilograms of drugs per week, *El Tiempo* reported. Guzmán-Salazar was also reportedly guarded by members of La Terraza, one of Medellín’s most notorious armed gangs affiliated to the Oficina de Envigado.

These developments are troubling and suggest that the leadership of Mexico’s largest and most sophisticated drug trafficking organizations is looking to scale up transnational operations in

Colombia. As Colombia's criminal landscape continues to fragment, the role of Mexican cartels in the cocaine trade looks certain to further complicate an already tangled set of criminal alliances and security relations.

For Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis, a security and risk analysis firm, the Mexican cartels are not only a threat to Colombia but to all the region, which should be addressed "by all countries involved," he told New York-based news site *Business Insider*.

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