

## Buenaventura: A cocaine export center

**Colombia's largest port city is a point of origin for cocaine smuggled north and a hotbed of violence as paramilitaries battle guerrillas for control of access to the source of mountain coca production and the river routes to the Pacific.**

By Samuel Logan

The city of Buenaventura combines the richness of Colombia's culture and landscape with the plague of drug trafficking. The city's port and surrounding river systems provide access to the Pacific and ultimately cocaine markets to the north. It is a city of origin for the path of cocaine that proceeds north to the US. It is also a point of reception for laundered money and arms that flow south from the US and Central America.

Today, the city is in flux. A major trafficking organization founded in Buenaventura and operated by Pablo Rayo Montano has been dismantled. Now, dozens of smaller smuggling operations in the immediate area must find another way to consolidate and export their product. At the same time, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) seeks to maintain control of the rural regions of Buenaventura, while remnants of paramilitary units in the department of Valle de Cauca work to push them out. Both sides seek dominance over the important river systems and high mountain passes that are essential to moving coca paste from the mountains to the coast, where it is processed, packaged and shipped.

Since drug trafficking in Colombia began to make international news in the early 1980s, the Colombian cities of Medellin, Cali and Bogota have received the most attention. Buenaventura, it seems, remained in the shadow of these larger, more violent cities. It is difficult to say precisely when Buenaventura became an integral part of the narco-trafficking system on Colombia's pacific coast. Yet it is clear that the city has fallen under the control of former paramilitary combatants who in 1999 joined together to remove the guerrillas from the Valle de Cauca department and retain control over the areas that surround Buenaventura. Since at least the late 1990s, Buenaventura has been an integral part of Colombia's illicit cocaine export businesses.

### The Calima front

Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) in May 1999 kidnapped some 144 individuals during the middle of a church service in Cali, the capital city of the Valle de Cauca department. Among those kidnapped were family members of men who formed part of the region's conservative rural class. In response to the guerrillas' brazen kidnapping, land owners in the region organized the paramilitary group that eventually became known as the Calima Front.

This front, once commanded by Hector Hernandez, followed the trail of the guerrillas back to a small backwater community that lived high in the mountains on the Naya River just south of Cali. On 10, 11 and 12 April 2001, the Calima Front massacred at least 21 civilians (though some reports say 30). The massacre was in part motivated by the 1999 kidnapping. More importantly, however, following the massacre, the Calima Front and the paramilitaries gained control of one of the few access points that connected the western slopes of the Andean mountains with the Pacific port of Buenaventura and the surrounding river systems that facilitated clandestine export activities.

Based in Cali and Buenaventura, the paramilitaries sought to push the guerrillas out of the area by cutting off their access to the Pacific. Working with the Cali and then Norte de Valle cartels, various paramilitary units fought to secure river routes and mountain passes, notably the town of Cartago and the Garrapatas Canyon pass.

Since the late 1990s, the line between the paramilitaries and the drug cartels has blurred. As the paramilitary groups dissolved in the wake of recent demobilizations across Colombia, many men shed their uniforms and went to work directly for the cartels.

This tendency is a nationwide phenomenon, one that is well exemplified by the last days of the notorious Calima Front. The mystery surrounding the demobilization of the Calima Front in 2004 underlines the groups' continued involvement in the drug trade in the Valle de Cauca department and its continued control over the port town of Buenaventura.

## Shady disarmament

As the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of paramilitary units around the country began to take shape and move forward, critics of the process offered a list of reasons why the move was flawed. Of the many arguments put forward, two have manifested as reality in the Valle de Cauca. First, there was no plan to secure the areas where demobilized paramilitary units left a security vacuum. Second, there was no clear way to ensure that all the members of individual paramilitary units would disarm.

When the Calima Front presented itself for demobilization on 18 December 2004, only 557 members showed up, 243 fewer than the promised 800 applicants for the DDR program. At the time, the Colombian daily *El Tiempo* quoted a high-ranking official with the Colombian ombudsman's office, as claiming that those members of the Calima Front who did not present themselves were "probably with the narcos."

"It was assumed that the others found work with the cartels, working for their old bosses but in different ways," Adam Isacson, program director with the Center for International Policy Studies, told ISN Security Watch.

Since the demobilization of the Calima Front, narco-trafficking activity, coca growing and violence have significantly increased in both the Valle de Cauca department and Buenaventura.

## The mini-cartels

Dozens of mini-cartels - each with its own system of coca past procurement (obtaining the glue-like substance used to chemically produce cocaine), cocaine processing, security and export - have popped up around Colombia. Continued high levels of coca leaf cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia prove their nationwide presence.

Cocaine production in Colombia in 2005 totaled 640 metric tons, nearly reaching a peak of 695 metric tons recorded in 2000, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Coca leaf cultivation in 2005 was 144,000 hectares, some 30,000 hectares more than in 2004, according to the 2005 US State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Report.

Many of these smaller smuggling organizations continue to operate in the Valle de Cauca region where their predecessors, the Cali and Norte de Valle cartels, once operated.

"Valle de Cauca is probably the most narco department of all of Colombia right now with so many smaller organizations, and a lot of them work hand-in-glove with the so-called former paramilitary organizations, mainly the Calima [Front]," Isacson said.

There are so many groups that a special system for identification must be used. A unique stamp, a scorpion or a cobra, differentiates one group from the next in consolidated shipments, which are currently the most common means of exporting cocaine.

"All involved in smuggling must spread their risk," Jorge Restrepo, research associate with the Bogota-based Conflict Analysis Resource Center, told ISN Security Watch. "It is why shipments are consolidated," Restrepo said, adding, "when shipments are interdicted, dozens of identification stamps are usually found."

## The Rayo-Montano case

Pablo Rayo Montano, born and raised in Buenaventura, operated an organization that provided the essential service of putting together large shipments of cocaine. He consolidated a number of kilos of pure coke from various mini-cartels and delivered the shipment to customers in Mexico, likely either the Gulf or Sinaloa Cartel. His organization would then launder the proceeds through a complex system of front businesses and bank accounts and finally deliver payment to his Colombian customers.

Once the shipment was consolidated, his group packed it on go-fast boats anchored near the shore on one of the many rivers surrounding Buenaventura. These boats would then make their way to Panama, where the shipment was offloaded onto larger fishing vessels that could withstand the rough waters of open ocean.

Rayo Montano ran a completely integrated system of shipment consolidation, delivery and money laundering that operated out of Buenaventura, then Panama and ultimately Brazil. He began his smuggling career in the 1980s through links with organized crime based in Cali and moved into his own business as the Cali Cartel fell apart. He likely gained business from the Norte de Valle Cartel and then the mini-cartels that followed because his organization focused on consolidation and shipment, which allowed his clients to focus on procurement,

processing, security and packaging. It was a win-win business solution.

Authorities began whittling away at Rayo Montano's organization on 6 November 2002, when Operation Estero netted a relatively small amount of cocaine and heroin. Still hot on his trail, authorities inaugurated Operation Buenaventura No. 1 on 9 April 2003, which focused on the linkages between Rayo Montano's operations in Buenaventura and Panama, where he was thought to have made a number of bases both in Panama City and Colon as well as at least one island, Isla Tres Marias, on the Caribbean coast of Panama.

At the conclusion of Operation Buenaventura No 1, authorities seized boats, cars and real-estate property. Six months later, in November 2003, Operation Tranca netted 12 individuals suspected of participating in Rayo Montano's organization. A significant amount of money was also seized. Soon after in 2004, Operation Buenaventura No 2, concluded with the seizure of three million dollars, four sea-faring vessels and three smaller boats.

Information gathered over the course of these investigations indicated the Rayo Montano organization had spread across the Western Hemisphere and Europe with operations in Colombia, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Spain, Mexico and the US.

Rayo Montano moved to Brazil in 2003 after the Buenaventura No 1 Operation forced him to flee from Panama. He was finally captured in his Sao Paulo apartment by Brazilian Federal Police, after a tip-off from the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), on 17 May 2006.

Rayo Montano became an official target of the DEA in October 2005, and at least since that time the DEA has actively worked with Colombian and Panamanian officials to dismantle the Rayo Montano organization. Upon the completion of three years of investigations, the final phase, Operation Twin Oceans, seized over US\$70 million in real-estate assets, a number of boats and sea-faring vessels, and arrested over two dozen individuals.

Rayo Montano's organization is thought to have facilitated the shipment of up to 20 tons of cocaine a month, potentially as much as 240 tons a year, to customers in the US and Europe. His humble roots in Buenaventura likely grew into strong connections with boat owners and dock workers around whom he built his clandestine shipping empire, and whose main base interestingly was not in Colombia, but Panama.

Buenaventura remains a city of origin for Colombian cocaine exports, but since the arrest of Rayo Montano it has become clear that Panama's capital, Panama City, and the surrounding region, including Colon and the Panama Canal zone, play an integral role in the regional business of smuggling cocaine north and, more importantly, smuggling money back south.

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#### Editor's note:

*Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of in-depth pieces on drug smuggling in the Americas. Each piece will focus on a specific city and the surrounding region, beginning with Buenaventura, Colombia and moving north through Central America and Mexico, to conclude with Washington, DC.*

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