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**U.S. ANNOUNCES ARRESTS OF CORRUPT COLOMBIAN
POLICE OFFICERS AND AIRLINE EMPLOYEES AT
BOGOTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

MICHAEL J. GARCIA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and JOHN P. GILBRIDE, the Special Agent in Charge of the New York office of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, announced the arrests in Colombia of seven defendants, including corrupt Colombian police officers and a corrupt employee of Avianca Airlines, in connection with an indictment charging them with smuggling more than \$10 million worth of cocaine through the El Dorado International Airport in Bogota, Colombia, for importation into the United States. The indictment, unsealed today, charges LEONIDAS MOLINA-TRIANA, a/k/a "Sofoco," a/k/a "Don Oscar," a former Major in the Colombian National Police ("CNP"), JUAN CARLOS CARDONA, a/k/a "El Flaco," a/k/a "Gamin," a former CNP Captain, JAIME ENRIQUE ROMERO-PADILLA, a/k/a "Yimmy," a former CNP Lieutenant, JORGE PLAZAS-SILVA, a/k/a "El Flaco," an active CNP patrolman, HUMBERTO AVILA, an active CNP patrolmen, and MARIA CHRISTINA MARIN-CASTRO, an employee of Avianca Airlines, along with HENRY FERRO-VARON, a/k/a "El Mono" (collectively "the Defendants"), with conspiracy to distribute cocaine shipments through El Dorado Airport en route to the United States.

"More than ever, the public must be able to rely on the integrity of the law enforcement and airline personnel responsible for the safety of airline passengers and shipments," stated Mr. GARCIA. "When such officials allow smuggling of contraband destined for the United States, they violate our criminal laws and endanger our national security, and they will face justice in an American courtroom."

"International narcotics trafficking is a real threat to the security of the United States and we must never let our guard down," said Mr. GILBRIDE. "This operation sends a strong

signal to traffickers worldwide that the international drug enforcement community will continue to aggressively pursue any potential compromise to airport security."

According to the indictment, from approximately August 2005 until December 2005, representatives of Colombia's notorious Norte Valle Cartel, including former high-ranking Colombian police officials such as MOLINA-TRIANA, CARDONA and ROMERO-PADILLA, recruited active members of the Colombian police responsible for El Dorado Airport security operations, as well as Avianca Airlines employees at El Dorado Airport's cargo facility, to permit the smuggling of cocaine from Colombia to Mexico and ultimately into the United States. The indictment alleges that between October 14 and 17, 2005, corrupt Colombian police officials and Avianca Airlines employees permitted 409 kilograms of cocaine, worth more than \$10 million on the streets of New York City, to pass through security at the Avianca Airlines cargo facility at El Dorado Airport without detection. MARIN-CASTRO, an employee of Avianca Airlines at El Dorado Airport, knowingly processed the false paperwork to move the cocaine through the Avianca Airlines cargo facility en route to Mexico City and the United States, it was charged. According to the indictment, PLAZAS-SILVA and AVILA, active CNP patrolmen stationed at El Dorado Airport, passed the cocaine through security and guarded the shipment of drugs for three days in the Avianca cargo facility until the drugs were sent to Mexico City. As set forth in the indictment, on October 17, 2005, the 409 kilograms of cocaine were transported aboard an Avianca flight to Mexico City, Mexico, where they were seized by Mexican law enforcement personnel. A photograph of the seized cocaine is attached. An additional amount of approximately 552 kilograms of cocaine, worth more than \$10 million, was seized yesterday by Colombian authorities during the execution of a search warrant from a warehouse used by the organization.

The arrests announced today were the result of "Operation Caso Dorado," a joint investigation conducted by the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York (the "Office"), the United States Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA") in Bogota, Colombia, and New York, with the cooperation of the United States Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE") and Colombian and Mexican law enforcement authorities. Operation Caso Dorado represents a continuation of the Office's emphasis on stamping out narcotics-smuggling activities on airlines operating from Colombia and complements the agreement between the Office and Avianca Airlines, announced in October 2004, concerning the monitoring of all Avianca flights to the United States.

If convicted, the Defendants face a maximum sentence of life in prison and a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison, although the United States provides assurances to Colombia that it will not seek life sentences for defendants extradited from Colombia. The indictment also seeks forfeiture from the Defendants in the amount of \$10 million, based on their roles in conspiring to import cocaine into the United States. The Defendants are being held in Colombia pending submission of formal extradition requests by the United States.

Mr. GARCIA praised the cooperative investigative efforts of the DEA, ICE, and Colombian and Mexican law enforcement officers. Mr. GARCIA said the investigation is continuing.

The prosecution is being handled by the International Narcotics Trafficking Unit of the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York. MARC P. BERGER and KEVIN R. PUVALOWSKI are in charge of the prosecution.

The charges contained in the indictment are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.



Figure 1: 409 kilograms of cocaine transported aboard an Avianca flight to Mexico City and seized by Mexican law enforcement personnel