



***United States Attorney
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**U.S. ANNOUNCES LARGE-SCALE TAKEDOWN OF COLOMBIAN
HEROIN TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATION**

MICHAEL J. GARCIA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, JOHN P. GILBRIDE, the Special Agent-in-Charge of the New York Field Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), and MARTIN D. FICKE, the Special Agent-in-Charge of the New York Office of the Department of Homeland Security's United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE"), announced today the unsealing of two Indictments against members of a Colombian heroin trafficking organization -- allegedly responsible for importing large quantities of heroin into the United States.

The Indictments are a part of "Operation Death Merchant," an international investigation that was conducted by the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, the United States Department of Justice, the DEA, ICE, the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor for the City of New York, and state and local law enforcement agencies in New York City, Baltimore, Detroit, and elsewhere. The operation also involved the efforts of DEA offices in Bogota, Colombia, and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, as well as the Colombian Attorney General's Office and the Colombian National Police ANTIN Heroin Task Force. (The DEA news release for Operation Death Merchant is available at www.dea.gov).

Over the course of this investigation, a federal grand jury in Manhattan returned two Indictments charging 10 individuals with heroin trafficking conspiracies. These defendants -- among more than 110 charged internationally as a part of the operation announced today -- are alleged to be members of a large Colombia-

based heroin trafficking organization.

The investigation has resulted in the seizure of approximately 50 kilograms of heroin in Colombia, New York City, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere. Of the 10 defendants charged in the Southern District of New York, 6 were arrested in Colombia earlier today for extradition to the United States and 2 were arrested in New York City. Twenty others have been arrested in Colombia and will face charges in Columbia. If convicted, these defendants charged in the Southern District of New York each face a maximum sentence of life imprisonment and a \$4 million fine.

During earlier stages of this investigation, over 80 defendants were arrested and prosecuted by authorities in Manhattan, Baltimore, Detroit, the Dominican Republic, and Curacao.

Mr. GARCIA praised the outstanding investigative efforts of the DEA's New York Drug Enforcement Task Force, which includes agents and officers of the DEA, the New York City Police Department, the New York State Police, and ICE's New York Office. Mr. GARCIA also praised the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor for the City of New York for its role in prosecuting many of the New York City-based targets of Operation Death Merchant. In addition, Mr. GARCIA thanked the Colombian Attorney General's Office and Colombian National Police for their assistance in the investigation, and in effecting the arrests of individuals over whom extradition is sought.

Assistant United States Attorney SARAH LAI is in charge of the prosecution.

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

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