



***United States Attorney
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**VIOLENT COLOMBIAN DRUG KINGPIN SENTENCED TO 45 YEARS
IN PRISON FOR IMPORTING THOUSANDS OF KILOGRAMS OF
COCAINE INTO THE UNITED STATES FROM COLOMBIA**

MICHAEL J. GARCIA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that JULIO CESAR LOPEZ-PENA, a/k/a "Julito," a/k/a "Ojitos," a high-ranking member of the notorious Norte Valle Cartel in Colombia, was sentenced today to 45 years in prison for importing thousands of kilograms of cocaine into the United States from Colombia. LOPEZ-PENA, who was arrested by Colombian authorities and extradited to the United States from Colombia, was tried and found guilty in December 2007 by a jury of conspiring to import cocaine into the United States. United States District Judge DENNY CHIN, who imposed the sentence in Manhattan federal court, also ordered LOPEZ-PENA to forfeit \$100 million. According to the proof at trial:

LOPEZ-PENA, as one of the principal deputies of the Norte Valle Cartel, worked closely with Norte Valle Cartel leader WILMER ALIRIO VARELA and participated in the shipment of multi-ton quantities of cocaine, worth an estimated \$100 million dollars, to the United States between 1998 and 2003. Specifically, LOPEZ-PENA used maritime routes through the Caribbean and Mexico, sending his drugs on speed boats that each carried as much as 1,600 kilograms of cocaine. In December 2001, for example, the defendant sent a load of approximately 1,600 kilograms of cocaine to Houston, Texas, where it was divided up; 600 kilograms were taken by vehicle to Manhattan for distribution. On separate occasions in 2002, LOPEZ-PENA organized the trafficking of two loads of cocaine -- 1,200 and 1,600 kilograms -- through territory in Colombia then controlled by the Colombian right-wing paramilitary group, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia ("AUC"). LOPEZ-PENA paid a high-ranking AUC member \$310 dollars per kilogram to handle and transport the cocaine through the AUC territory to the Atlantic Ocean. In May 2003, the Colombian Marines seized 4,000 kilograms of cocaine in the coastal region of Nanguma, Colombia, of which approximately 1,600 kilograms belonged to LOPEZ-PENA.

To facilitate the Norte Valle Cartel's cocaine importation operation, LOPEZ-PENA used violence, including kidnaping and murder, bribery, extortion, and various methods of counter-surveillance. Among the several murders that LOPEZ-PENA committed to further his drug trafficking was the 2002 murder of a rival drug trafficker in a crowded nightclub in Cartagena, Colombia.

Today's conviction was the result of a joint investigation involving agents of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency ("DEA") in Bogota, Colombia and New York, and of the New York Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Strike Force (the "New York Strike Force"), which is comprised of agents and officers of the DEA, the New York City Police Department, the United States Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division, the Department of Homeland Security Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the New York State Police, the United States Marshals Service, the United States Secret Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The Strike Force is partially funded by the New York/New Jersey High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which is a federally funded crime fighting initiative. Colombian law enforcement officers stationed in Bogota, Medellin, Catragena and Cali, Colombia, also provided invaluable assistance.

Mr. GARCIA praised the cooperative investigative efforts of the DEA and the New York Strike Force, and also commended Colombian law enforcement officers for their partnership in the case.

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 REBECCA MONCK RICIGLIANO are in charge of the prosecution.