



*United States Attorney  
Southern District of New York*

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**VIOLENT COLOMBIAN HEROIN KINGPIN**  
**SENTENCED TO 40 YEARS IN FEDERAL PRISON**

*Leader Of South American Heroin Cartel  
Smuggled \$200 Million Worth Of Heroin Into The U.S. And Used  
Torture And Intimidation To Control Criminal Enterprise*

MICHAEL J. GARCIA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today that United States District Judge ROBERT P. PATTERSON sentenced RAMIRO LOPEZ-IMITOLA, the head of an international heroin trafficking organization based in Cucuta, Colombia, and Caracas, Venezuela, to 40 years' imprisonment and ordered him to forfeit \$200 million representing the street value of the heroin his organization sold in the United States. LOPEZ-IMITOLA had previously pleaded guilty on March 15, 2005, to a two-count Indictment.

Since 1997, the Lopez-Imitola Organization imported more than 2,000 kilograms of heroin -- worth \$200 million on the streets -- into the United States. To date, 17 members of the Lopez-Imitola Organization have been arrested, and more than 50 kilograms of heroin has been seized by United States authorities. LOPEZ-IMITOLA was extradited from Colombia on February 26, 2004, and is one of the most prolific heroin traffickers ever prosecuted in the United States.

According to the Indictment and the formal request for extradition (the "Extradition Package"), and based on evidence presented at the sentencing hearing (the "Hearing"), LOPEZ-IMITOLA used more than 250 human couriers recruited in both Venezuela and the United States to smuggle heroin into the U.S. from Venezuela on a daily basis by either ingesting pellets of heroin or transporting suitcases in which heroin had been secreted. The heroin was initially imported into Venezuela from Colombia, and then transported by the couriers to various locations in the United States, including Florida, Puerto Rico and New York City. LOPEZ-

IMITOLA sent as many as 20 couriers on a single flight from Venezuela to Miami, each of whom had ingested as much as one kilogram of heroin. LOPEZ-IMITOLA ran a highly structured Organization, employing a large number of "Managers" who accompanied the fleets of couriers on their trips, collected the drugs once they were passed by the couriers, delivered the heroin to local distributors, and then repatriated the proceeds to LOPEZ-IMITOLA in Venezuela. The evidence demonstrated that LOPEZ-IMITOLA controlled nearly every move made by his Managers, as well as couriers who worked directly for him, during their trips to the United States.

In order to permit the couriers to travel to the United States, LOPEZ-IMITOLA illegally obtained over 100 United States travel visas by bribing employees at the United States Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, according to evidence presented at the Hearing and in the Extradition Package. Further, LOPEZ-IMITOLA admitted that he paid thousands of dollars to a law enforcement officer who worked at the Simon Bolivar International Airport in Caracas, Venezuela, for every courier for each trip made on behalf of the Lopez-Imitola Organization. In return, the law enforcement officer made sure that the couriers cleared through security checks at the airport, and interceded if any other law enforcement officer detained one of the couriers.

To ensure that these couriers did not attempt to steal from the Lopez-Imitola Organization or later cooperate against members of the Lopez-Imitola Organization, LOPEZ-IMITOLA and other members of the Organization used torture and intimidation to control the criminal enterprise. For example, LOPEZ-IMITOLA or one of his representatives met with the couriers at the time they were recruited and compelled them to provide the Lopez-Imitola Organization with information regarding the couriers' families, and, on occasion, visited the courier's families to make sure the couriers were telling the truth. LOPEZ-IMITOLA threatened harm to his couriers and their families if they did not comply with the directives of the Lopez-Imitola Organization. When LOPEZ-IMITOLA believed that one of the couriers stole approximately \$100,000 of the proceeds from the sale of the Organization's heroin, LOPEZ-IMITOLA arranged for the courier and his boyfriend to be taken by armed kidnapers to a city outside of Caracas, Venezuela, where LOPEZ-IMITOLA and his henchman violently tortured them. LOPEZ-IMITOLA personally burned one of the couriers with an iron after tying a plastic bag over his neck with wire and filling it with bug spray. The courier was left with brutal scars on his lower back and neck. While he was being tortured, LOPEZ-IMITOLA's henchman pulled the fingernails out of the courier's boyfriend. After LOPEZ-IMITOLA realized that the courier and his boyfriend were innocent, he shrugged it off as being "the nature of our business." LOPEZ-IMITOLA bragged about how he tortured the men, and senior members of the Organization told other couriers about the torture

in order to instill fear and to ensure their compliance with the orders of the Organization.

According to the evidence presented at the Hearing, at least one of the couriers who ingested heroin died in Miami, Florida, of a heroin overdose after one of the pellets that he had ingested burst open. LOPEZ-IMITOLA directed others in the Organization to go to a hardware store in Miami to buy supplies, including a bucket, scissors and gloves, to use to cut open the corpse and retrieve the heroin from the courier's body. When they refused to do so, LOPEZ-IMITOLA directed them to bring the body to individuals that LOPEZ-IMITOLA knew in Florida who specialized in cutting open the bodies of couriers who died of overdoses. The Organization members refused, and dumped the body (which still contained 88 pellets of heroin) into Biscayne Bay, Miami Beach, Florida, where it was recovered by the Miami Beach Police Department.

The charges were the result of a joint investigation involving cooperation between the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force ("OCDETF"), the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE"), the New York City Police Department ("NYPD"), and the New York State Police, together with the Venezuelan Judicial Police, the Colombian National Police, the Miami Beach Police Department and the Coral Gables Police Department. Mr. GARCIA praised the cooperative investigative efforts of these agencies.

Mr. GARCIA stated: "RAMIRO LOPEZ-IMITOLA is not only one of the biggest heroin traffickers ever extradited to the United States, but he maintained his empire through brutality and corruption. Federal, state, local and international law enforcement will work together to ensure that even traffickers who operate from abroad will face severe sentences for the harm they inflict in our country and in their own."

Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration JOHN P. GILBRIDE stated: "This is an example of Justice served. This drug smuggler went to gruesome extremes to further his drug empire. He tortured and threatened those who worked for him. He bribed officials to ensure prompt drug deliveries. He ordered his employees to desecrate a human courier who had overdosed on a heroin pellet that had opened in his stomach. This the extent to which a monster would go in order to make millions from the drug trade."

The case is being prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office's International Narcotics Trafficking Unit. Assistant United States Attorneys NEIL M. BAROFSKY and MARC P. BERGER are in charge of the prosecution.