



The Rastrojos were born out of the powerful Norte del Valle drug cartel and rose to become one of the most powerful transnational criminal syndicates in Colombia, until their top leadership surrendered or was captured in 2012.

After rapidly expanding from 2006, the Rastrojos have, since 2012,

experienced internal divisions and lost their national leadership and cohesion. However, they have continued to operate in smaller, localized cells, and are known to be present in Ecuador, as well as Venezuela. The group is primarily engaged in exporting cocaine to international markets, as well as extortion, gold mining and kidnapping, and maintains drug routes both up the Pacific Coast into Central America and runs cocaine into Venezuela.

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Origins

The Rastrojos first emerged in 2002 as the armed wing for Wilber Varela, alias "Jabon." At the time, Varela was fighting a rival in the Norte del Valle Cartel, Diego Montoya, alias "Don Diego," and Montoya's private army, the "Machos." Varela lieutenant Diego Perez Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo," recruited the first members, and the group took on his name. Later, in an attempt to enter peace talks between the government and paramilitary groups, the group called itself Rondas Campesinas Populares or Popular Peasant Patrols (RCP). The paramilitaries, under the banner of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), signed a peace agreement with the government in July 2003, and

finished demobilizing their troops in 2006. However, the government did not allow the RCP to participate in the negotiations.

As the Rastrojos grew, Varela began to lose control over his subordinates. In 2008, he was murdered by Javier Antonio Calle Serna, alias "Comba," and Diego Rastrojo, after he attempted to prevent them from expanding operations in the north Colombia departments of Santander and Norte de Santander. Following Varela's death, his former armed wing grew to become one of the most powerful players in the drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping businesses.

From 2006 onwards, the Rastrojos left their traditional hub along the Pacific Coast and began to expand, first into the coffee-growing region of Quindio, Risaralda and Caldas, later into the northern Colombia border department of La Guajira. They eventually had operations in more than a third of Colombia's 32 provinces. One powerful ally of the group was Daniel Barrera, alias "El Loco," who, along with the Comba brothers and Diego Rastrojo, was part of the Rastrojos' top leadership. Loco Barrera maintained operations in the eastern departments of Meta and Guaviare and was in charge of much of the international trafficking, while Diego Rastrojo commanded the rural Rastrojos.

The Comba brothers worked in urban areas such as Cali, running their networks of "sicarios," or assassins. While maintaining their traditional stronghold in Valle del Cauca, the group expanded into neighboring Nariño and Cauca, and deepened alliances with the National Liberation Army (ELN). By 2010, the Rastrojos had arguably risen to become Colombia's most powerful criminal group.

However, the group imploded in 2012 with the fall of three of its main leaders. Javier Calle Serna, alias "Comba," who surrendered to the United States in May 2012, while Diego Perez Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo," was captured the following month and extradited to the United States in August 2013 on drug trafficking charges. In September 2012 Loco Barrera was captured in Venezuela and in October 2012, Comba's brother, Luis Enrique, also handed himself to US authorities, leaving the group with no clear leader. In further blows to the group, the US Treasury Department placed sanctions on the Rastrojos under the Kingpin Act in early 2013, while one of the group's key hitmen operating in Cali was captured in Ecuador in August 2013.

Nonetheless, the group has continued to operate in smaller, localized cells throughout the country, but particularly in their strongholds of Valle del Cauca, Nariño and Norte de Santander, as well as in Ecuador.

Modus Operandi

The Rastrojos' strongholds are primarily in the area where they formed: Valle del Cauca and Cauca provinces along the Pacific coast (see map). They also have a presence in Antioquia, Bolivar, Cesar, Choco, Cordoba, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Santander and Valle del Cauca, and have established a presence and run trafficking operations in Venezuela and Ecuador.

The group has always been somewhat decentralized due to its geographically disperse nature, which has created intra-organizational instability because of the heavy reliance of the top leadership on mid-level commanders, and the need to delegate powers to the lower ranks.

They are different from some of Colombia's other criminal groups in that they do not necessarily try to control every part of the drug distribution chain, operating instead via strategic alliances. These alliances include working with rebel groups and former right-wing paramilitaries to move their product. They also concentrate their forces along embarkation points, specifically the border with Venezuela, and the Pacific Ocean. Both points give them enough control over the drugs they are shipping or the chemicals they need to bring into the country.

For several years, the Rastrojos have had an agreement with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in the provinces of Cauca and Nariño. More recently they made a similar agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in certain other parts of the country. Both these alliances give the Rastrojos direct access to coca base -- the raw material for cocaine -- at very cheap prices. The Rastrojos' other main ally, El Loco Barrera, had struck similar



agreements with the FARC in some areas prior to his capture in Venezuela in September 2012. Together the Rastrojos and Barrera obtained a huge competitive advantage, one that also led to strong partnerships with Mexican cartels.

The Rastrojos and Barrera move cocaine via go-fast boats and semisubmersibles from the Pacific side of their operations, and airplanes via the Venezuelan side. On the Venezuelan side, the airplanes appear to fly due north over Venezuelan territory, in order to avoid Colombian radar, until they are close to the Dominican Republic. Then, they head west until they reach Honduras or Guatemala where they land and offload the narcotics, which continue their journey north.

On the enforcement side, the Rastrojos rely on their experience, connections and recruiting. Their long battle with the Machos has given them the wherewithal to operate in rural and urban areas, where they've placed a number of militias and informants. They've also penetrated the police, many of them long-time partners of the group since the days of the Norte del Valle Cartel, and the army, with the help of Barrera, who had many informants and allies within that institution. Finally, they have recruited well, adding a plethora of young and experienced soldiers from the now defunct AUC.

The Rastrojos business model of seeking strategic alliances does not always work. They have been fighting with the Urabeños, a rival gang that operates in the northwest of Colombia near the Panamanian border. Although a truce was called in the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia in late 2011, this quickly broke down as the Rastrojos fell apart, and struggles between the two groups have ensued as the Urabeños have muscled into Valle del Cauca and north Colombia.

The Rastrojos were internally divided even before the loss of Comba and Diego Rastrojo, with a split between the followers of Comba and his brothers, and those of Diego Rastrojo. The loss of these bosses has left the group without a clear leader, which has in turn caused it to lose membership. Colombian law enforcement sources believe that the group's ranks have been cut by some 20 percent in recent years, leaving it with just 1,600 members. With the Rastrojos on the decline, it is believed that groups like the Urabeños have taken advantage of their weakness and moved into their territory.

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