



The inheritors of Pablo Escobar's drug trafficking empire in Colombia, the Oficina de Envigado is now a hodgepodge of smaller organizations that seeks alliances with street gangs to keep control of their territory and businesses that is in nearly constant flux. The Oficina de Envigado first arose as a faction of assassins established by Pablo Escobar in Envigado, a small municipality adjacent to

Medellin, in the 1980s. Since then, the Oficina has evolved into a sizable, though conflicted, drug-running operation, drawing many of its leaders from former paramilitary blocs, while its lower ranks are filled with an endless pool of willing young men from the working-class neighborhoods of Medellin.

Despite its internal conflicts and external rivalries, the Oficina managed to create a sizable drug trafficking network from Medellin to the northern coast of Colombia and the Panamanian border area, although this has for the most part now been lost. It also controls extortion, gambling and money laundering businesses within the Valle de Aburra area that surrounds Medellin. Its battles have left numerous public figures dead as a result of the Oficina's penchant for settling debts with firepower. Much of the unrest in and around Medellin can be attributed to the Oficina. Its leaders have alternated between battling each other and rallying to fight outside foes, but it has been consistent in one thing: its cooption of local police and other security officials.

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## Origins

The Oficina de Envigado's "Godfather" is Diego Fernando Murillo, alias "Don Berna," who after operating as a guerrilla fighter for the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación - EPL), began working in the criminal underworld as an assassin for the Galeano and Moncada families. These families worked with Pablo Escobar until Escobar ordered the assassinations of the Moncada and Galeano brothers in 1992 for allegedly stealing money from him, after which his control of the Oficina began to slip. Don Berna supposedly only escaped with his life as he was accompanying Galeano's mistress to the beauty salon at the time. After Escobar assassinated Don Berna's bosses, Don Berna teamed up with paramilitary leaders Fidel and Carlos Castaño to organize the People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar - PEPES), a paramilitary group designed to destroy Escobar's massive network. Combining portions of the Medellín underworld, rural right-wing paramilitaries, the Cali Cartel and elements of the Colombian National Police, the PEPES attacked every facet of Escobar's life and business, eventually enabling the Colombian police to find him and gun him down in December 1993.

After Escobar's death, Don Berna took control of Medellín. The Oficina became the chief mediator and debt collector in drug trafficking disputes, and Don Berna maintained major trafficking drugs through his numerous contacts. Don Berna's connections with the paramilitaries continued as well, and in the late 1990s he was named the commander of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc by the paramilitary umbrella organization the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC). He also consolidated his control of the Medellín street gangs, drove the guerrillas from the city and presided over the country's most feared hitmen network, La Terraza. His ruthless approach included fighting with his cohorts in the AUC and La Terraza. When La Terraza rebelled against his command, he assassinated several of its leaders and exterminated the breakaway members of the gang in a bloody conflict. He also waged war against one time ally turned rival AUC commander Carlos Mauricio García Fernández, alias "Doblezero," and his Bloque Metro paramilitary unit in a dispute over demobilization negotiations with the government, which led to the eventual decimation of the Bloque Metro and the murder of Doblezero. Before his death, Doblezero accused Don Berna of being behind the assassination of AUC leader Carlos Castaño. Although no one has been charged with the murder, it is believed Don Berna and other traffickers in the AUC ordered Castaño's brother Vicente to have him murdered as they believed Castaño was about to sever ties with the traffickers and turn himself in to the US authorities.

Don Berna demobilized with other AUC leaders in 2003, along with several hundred of his Cacique Nutibara Bloc troops. But he was imprisoned in 2005 when authorities connected him to the assassination of a local politician after talks had begun. Nonetheless, in prison Don Berna found a safe haven where he could continue running his operations at a safe distance from his enemies, while on the outside, Murillo's spokesman, Carlos Mario Aguilar, alias "Rogelio," along with a former paramilitary, Daniel Alberto Mejia, alias "Danielito," managed the Oficina's drugs trafficking and assassin network. The charges against Don Berna for the murder of the politician were eventually dropped -- although this was overturned three years later on appeal -- and he began collaborating with justice officials in an attempt to avoid extradition to the United States. This included ordering the Oficina to keep murder rates at a minimum -- the so-called "donbernabilidad," which kept Medellin's murder rate low from 2003 to 2008.

The Oficina itself was never without internal rivalries, as evidenced when Aguilar ordered Mejia's assassination in November 2006, after Danielito had assassinated former paramilitary and football club owner Gustavo Upegui Lopez. Mejia's body was never found, and was reportedly dumped into a vat of acid.

Murillo's relationship with the government eventually soured, and he was extradited to the United States, along with 13 other paramilitary leaders, in May 2008. The Oficina quickly splintered. In July, a top operative was captured. That same month, Aguilar surrendered to Colombian authorities and was extradited soon thereafter. The Oficina also started feuding with Daniel Rendon Herrera, alias "Don Mario," whose group would later morph into what is now known as the Urabeños while a rural wing of the Oficina, later dubbed the Paisas, also broke away. Most damaging was the bloody internal feud between a faction headed by Maximiliano Bonilla, alias "Valenciano," and Erick Vargas, alias "Sebastian." As one Colombian official observed following a massive arrest of gang members on September 5, 2009, "this criminal structure is in a death struggle and [its members] are totally broken in their loyalties."

The murder rate in Medellin doubled between 2008 and 2009 as Sebastian and Valenciano battled for control of the city. The conflict also created an opening for rival drug gang, neo-paramilitary group the Urabeños, who allied themselves with Valenciano. In 2011, Valenciano was arrested in Venezuela, however, Sebastian's victory was short-lived. Since then, the Urabeños has used its military training, weapons and considerable financial resources to move into Oficina territory, offering money and military grade weaponry to local gangs to turn them against the Oficina. The ultimate aim is to control all major entry and exit points of Medellin, and the group has gained considerable ground in a bloody

warfare played out in the city's barrios, although the Oficina has retained command of the northern and eastern districts.

Aggressive actions by the authorities further weakened the organization during 2012, with five of its top leaders captured, including Sebastian, in August. In December, several leading figures were massacred in Medellin, in an attack believed to be linked to the leadership dispute. Several factions were believed to have been taken over by Edison Rodolfo Rojas, alias "Pichi," but he was arrested in a joint operation between Panamanian and Colombian police in February 2013, leaving the Oficina's leadership structure in flux once more.

However, in mid-2013, a truce was brokered between the Urabeños and the remnants of the Oficina by the powerful group of white collar criminals that has long lurked in the background behind the Medellin mafia. The two sides declared a ceasefire and a new era of cooperation began. The deal saw the Oficina gain access to their rivals' international drug trafficking routes in exchange for allowing the Urabeños to peacefully stake its claim to profits from the Medellin underworld. The impact was an immediate and drastic drop in murder rates to mark a new era in the history of the Oficina and Medellin crime.

## **Modus Operandi**

The Oficina de Envigado used to exert hegemonic control over the combos that ran microtrafficking operations within Medellin, though this has lately been challenged by the Urabeños criminal syndicate. According to media estimates, there are up to 5,000 youths operating in 250 gangs spread throughout Medellin, into neighboring municipalities of Envigado and Itagui. In one Medellin neighborhood, Comuna 6, there are said to be 35 gangs in competition with one another, all of them made up mostly of underage members. The humanitarian non-profit organization CORPADES estimates that up to 60 percent of Medellin's criminal gangs are made up of youths between 11 and 17 years old. Underage bands from Medellin are also reportedly deployed to areas like Bajo Cauca, north of the city, fueling the violence in confrontations against the rival Urabeños.

The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has estimated that the Oficina laundered close to \$50 million dollars from 2008 to April 2009. According to police, the syndicate earns approximately \$31.4 million per year from money laundering. This is partly due to the Oficina's hold over the gambling and betting industries, including clandestine lotteries, which have long been a staple of the group's finances. One out of four slot machines in Medellin is reportedly run outside gaming commission regulations, bringing in annual profits of up to \$10.5 million. Casinos are used as money-laundering outlets, or else are required to

pay frequent quotas. The unsolved homicides of casino owners Argemiro Salazar, Ramon Restrepo, Carlos Restrepo Jaramillo and Octavio Velasquez, are allegedly related to clashes with the Oficina regarding bribe payments.

Bingo, real estate agencies, car repair shops, parking lots and mall outlets are also prime ways to conceal illegitimate funds for the Oficina, former national police chief Oscar Naranjo has signaled. Taxi companies, meat markets and shares in soccer teams have also been known to be used as cover-ups. While most captive businesses are based in Medellin, several have been unearthed operating in coastal cities such as Barranquilla and Puerto Colombia, two cities in the Atlantico department along the Caribbean Coast.

Before the 2008 dispute, most of the Oficina's Medellin operations fell under the control of Sebastian, while the international trafficking operations were handled by Valenciano, who moved cocaine shipments via the Atlantic coast to Panama, then to the United States via Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Speedboats from Guajira to Jamaica were another known transportation method for the Oficina's cocaine exports. Police also intercepted cocaine being transported via trucks from Itagui, a province just outside Medellin, towards Cartagena. There also have been reports that Valenciano cultivated an alliance with the National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional - ELN), Colombia's second largest insurgency. However, with Valenciano's arrest and defeat in the war against Sebastian, the Oficina lost control of its primary trafficking routes, many of which are now in the hands of the Urabeños.

The loss of the major international drug trafficking contacts which Valenciano had maintained, resulted in many of the combos looking for new ways to boost their income -- extra income which they then used to increase their strength and influence, evolving into "super combos." The growth of these super combos has left the Oficina increasingly struggling to assert hierarchical control.

The Oficina has infiltrated police ranks and government institutions, including the now-defunct presidential migration and security service DAS. Although the Oficina does not appear to currently focus on infiltrating political offices the way that paramilitary blocs have done in the past, current Medellin mayor Anibal Gaviria has been accused of working with high-ranking Oficina figure Alirio Rendon, alias "El Cebeollero," while their interest in exerting a strong hold over the police, judiciary and prosecutor's office is undeniable.

"The fiercest assassins in the Oficina are former police agents," one source told the Colombian newsweekly Semana. Two men detained in August 2009, thought to be Oficina assassins, were former police agents. Semana estimates that

between eight and 10 police agents currently work in the Oficina. When one member, alias "Cesarin," was arrested in December 2009, two police agents were with him, one of whom served as a commander in the Medellin police force. More recently, a captain, a sub-lieutenant and two officers were detained for linkages with the Oficina.

Given the sheer number of police captains and commanders that have already been detained for acting as moles for the Oficina, it is clear that this criminal syndicate will continue to find a supportive operational environment in Medellin until a thorough purge in police ranks is conducted. For the most part, successful captures of key Oficina members -- including El Cebollero and Cesarin -- were carried out with police agents brought in from Bogota.

Legislative efforts to limit gun sales in Medellin beginning in December 2008 have not noticeably cut down on the number of arms-related homicides. The Oficina makes frequent use of fifty-seven pistols, shotguns, M4 rifles, dynamite, hand grenades, silencer guns, 6 and 9 mm pistols and sometimes machine guns.

## Resources

- "Colombia's New Armed Groups," International Crisis Group, 10 May 2007. (pdf)
- "Los tentaculos de la mafia en Medellín," Semana, 2 May 2009.
- "Nexos entre la Oficina de Envigado y Cartel Mexicano de los Zetas," El Tiempo, 7 March 2010.

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