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THREE COLOMBIANS PLEAD GUILTY TO CONSPIRING TO SUPPORT THE FARC AND ALIEN SMUGGLING CHARGES

Ten Convictions Result from ICE Sting Operation

WASHINGTON – Three Colombian nationals have pleaded guilty to charges of conspiring to provide material support to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a designated foreign terrorist organization, and alien smuggling, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division announced today.

Victor Daniel Salamanca (Salamanca), 64, Carmen Maria Ponton Caro (Ponton), 38, and Edizon Ramirez Gamboa (Ramirez), 40, all from Bogota, Colombia, pleaded guilty this week in Miami before U.S. District Judge Joan A. Lenard. Salamanca and Ponton entered their pleas today for conspiring to provide material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization. Ramirez, a former immigration inspector with Colombia's Department of Administrative Security (DAS), pleaded guilty Wednesday to conspiracy to commit alien smuggling and bringing an alien to the United States for private financial gain.

The three were arrested along with seven co-defendants in Colombia in January and February of 2006, after working with undercover U.S. government informants. As part of an ICE sting operation, the informants posed as FARC operatives seeking illicit travel to Miami for the purpose of laundering FARC drug money from the United States to Colombia in order to finance additional drug and arms purchases for the FARC.

Salamanca admitted that between May 25, 2005, and January 2, 2006, he furnished a variety of criminal services to 4 undercover informants he believed to be FARC operatives on a mission to travel to the United States to launder FARC drug money. To help smuggle these individuals to the United States, Salamanca bought airline tickets on their behalf; assisted in changing names to conceal criminal histories by altering records at the Colombian national identity registry; provided a fraudulently obtained Colombian identity card and Colombian passport; provided false Spanish identity cards, Spanish driver's licenses, and Spanish passports, which did not require a U.S. visa for entry into the United States; and agreed to smuggle the informants through immigration at Bogota's El Dorado International Airport and Panama's Tocumen International Airport. Salamanca charged more than \$10,000 for these arrangements.

In addition to these travel services, Salamanca offered to broker the sale of fifty .50-caliber guns, 700 infra-red equipped AK-74 rifles, and two helicopters to the FARC. He offered services of his contacts at DAS and the Colombian federal prosecutor's office that could erase someone's criminal record. Additionally, he offered to introduce the informants to a medical doctor capable of disguising a person's fingerprints through surgical procedures.

Finally, Salamanca introduced the informants to his money laundering contact, co-defendant Julio Cesar Lopez. Through a series of meetings, Salamanca and Lopez agreed to launder \$4-5 million dollars of purported FARC drug proceeds from Miami to Bogota. As a test, Lopez, in coordination with Salamanca, directed a believed FARC operative to make a \$30,000 money drop in Miami and to make two \$9,000 deposits into a private Miami bank account. Then, Salamanca and Lopez arranged for the money, minus commissions and expenses, to be delivered to the FARC operative's associates in Bogota.

Ponton admitted that her principal role in the conspiracy to support the FARC was smuggling three informants she believed were FARC guerillas through the Bogota International Airport. In November 2005, she coordinated with her associates, co-defendants Jalal Sadat Moheisen, Jorge de los Reyes Bautista Martinez, and Nicolas Ricardo Tapasco Romero (Tapasco), to arrange for a DAS immigration inspector (co-defendant Ramirez) to shepherd the informants around immigration controls at the Bogota International Airport. After the informants were able to dodge outgoing immigration inspection in Bogota, they used their fraudulent Spanish passports that Salamanca provided as identification to board flights to the United States and successfully arrived in Miami. The airport smuggling fee was \$4,000 per person.

In pleading guilty, Ramirez admitted that he profited by using his official position as a DAS immigration official and helped smuggle an undercover informant through the immigration inspection area at the Bogota International Airport, enabling the informant to travel unchecked to the United States with a fraudulent Spanish passport.

On the day the informant was smuggled in to the United States, Tapasco relayed identifying information of the informant to Ramirez through his co-worker. Once the informant entered the immigration inspection area at the Bogota airport, security cameras captured Ramirez stepping out to meet the informant and escorting him around all immigration checkpoints. The traveler then passed through a security checkpoint and proceeded to board a U.S.-bound commercial flight. Following a brief stopover in Panama, the undercover informant arrived in the United States at the Miami International Airport holding his fake Spanish passport.

Salamanca, Ponton, and Ramirez are three of 10 individuals indicted by a Miami federal grand jury on Jan. 3, 2006, on terrorism, alien smuggling, and money laundering charges. The indictments resulted from an ICE investigation dubbed "Operation Pipeline." All 10 defendants have been convicted.

Salamanca and Ponton face up to 15 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. Ramirez faces 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. Ramirez is scheduled to be sentenced on Feb. 15, 2008. Sentencing for Salamanca and Ponton has been set for Feb. 25, 2008.

The case was investigated by the Office of the ICE Attache in Bogota, Colombia, with assistance from Colombian authorities. Trial Attorney Brian Skaret of the Domestic Security Section (DSS) of the Department of Justice prosecuted the case. Vital support was provided by the Department's Office of International Affairs and DSS Program Analyst Dawn Cauragh. Assistant United States Attorney William White of the Southern District of Florida served as local counsel.

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