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Colombian drug cartel founders sentenced to 30 years

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The Colombian kingpins who revolutionized the global cocaine trade appeared as mere mortals in Miami federal court on Tuesday in pleading guilty to smuggling-conspiracy charges and apologizing for their life of crime.

Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela stood in dark business suits before U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno as he sentenced the Cali cartel founders to 30 years in prison and ordered them to forfeit \$2.1 billion in assets from their once-powerful empire.

"I am willingly submitting myself to American justice," Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, 67, who was shackled at the ankles, told the judge.

Said Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, 63, who was also cuffed: "I want to apologize to my family and ask for forgiveness for any suffering I may have caused them. . . . I'm doing this fully convinced it will bring something better."

So significant was the case of the Colombian brothers -- once responsible for 80 percent of the cocaine sold in the United States in the 1990s -- that U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and South Florida's U.S. Attorney R. Alexander Acosta took the rare opportunity to hold a news conference in Washington on Tuesday afternoon.

"The brothers' guilty pleas effectively signal the final, fatal blow to the powerful Cali Cartel," Gonzales said. "There are always other traffickers and thus continuing challenges for law enforcement, but this is a day of pride for the people of Colombia and for international law enforcement."

Indeed, last March, Gonzales publicized a crackdown on another Colombian narco-network that controls a big chunk of the cocaine trade from South America through Mexico to the United States. He announced the indictment of the entire top leadership and dozens of other commanders of Colombia's FARC guerrillas on charges of running a \$25 billion drug operation responsible for 60 percent of the cocaine on U.S. streets.

On Tuesday, the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers pleaded guilty to conspiring to smuggle tons of cocaine into the United States. The brothers also agreed to plead guilty to a separate indictment filed in New York that charged them with conspiring to launder their drug profits.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Matt Axelrod estimated that the figure was "over 200,000 kilograms" -- imported to South Florida and other parts of the country from 1990 to July 2002. The brothers packed the white powder in concrete posts, frozen vegetables, coffee and ceramic tile, among other creative ways.

The brothers faced up to 30 years in prison because they conspired to import more than 150 kilos of cocaine -- even after they were arrested by Colombian authorities in 1995 and were incarcerated in Bogotá until their extraditions to Miami in 2004-05.

The judge, known for his wit, drew laughs from the packed courtroom when he responded to Axelrod's smuggling estimate: "I think that would probably meet the threshold."

Their plea deal in Miami came with some benefits: The brothers don't have to worry about the fate of other family members who were allegedly linked to their narcotics enterprise.

As part of their plea deal, 28 family members -- including sons, daughters and cousins -- signed a separate agreement that removes them from a U.S. Treasury Department list that designated them as part of the illicit Cali operation, according to their attorney, Marc Seitles. Of those, six Rodríguez Orejuela family members won't be prosecuted on drug-related charges of obstruction of justice or money laundering.

The agreement allows the brothers' family members to keep some of their wealth that was untainted by drug profits, such as real estate in Spain. "The best chess players understand that every now and then you must sacrifice some important pieces for the safety and security of the entire board," said Miami lawyer David O. Markus, who represented Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, while attorney Roy Kahn represented the brother Miguel.

"Gilberto and Miguel fell on their swords and accepted responsibility so that their entire family could be saved -- both from prosecution and from economic disaster," Markus said.

The brothers' syndicate reached its zenith in the early 1990s, when they allegedly exported more than 4,000 kilos of cocaine per month to the United States.

Despite their incarceration, prosecutors said Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela's son, William Rodríguez Abadia, a Colombian-trained lawyer,

continued the family narcotics business through 2000. The son, who pleaded guilty in March, agreed to testify against his father and uncle at a trial scheduled for November.

Their prosecution capped an investigation that began almost two decades ago by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent Ed Kacerosky and assistant U.S. Attorney Ed Ryan. Prosecutor Dick Gregorie and Drug Enforcement Administration agents assisted the investigative team. Upward of 100 Cali cartel members were convicted as part of Operation Cornerstone in the United States and Colombia.