

Venezuela: Cisneros & Co. in the sights

According to a story filed by reporter Ricardo Guanipa of the Caracas daily *El Nacional*, writing from Miami on June 9, one of the fugitive bankers wanted by Venezuelan justice, financier Orlando Castro Llanes, had used the services of one of the lawyers named as a Cali Cartel agent in the June 5 U.S. Justice Department indictment, Joel Rosenthal, a former Assistant U.S. Attorney in New York and Miami, who pled guilty to drug-money-laundering charges.

Castro is a business associate of Venezuelan magnate Gustavo Cisneros Rendiles, whose brother Ricardo is now, like Castro, a fugitive from Venezuelan justice. Ricardo fled after the Cisneros family's Banco Latino went bankrupt in 1994, as a result, in large part, of the bank's illicit financial operations. Readers of this magazine will remember Gustavo Cisneros as the person who in 1985 got a corrupt judge to ban circulation in Venezuela of *EIR's* book *Dope, Inc.*, because it documented his connections to financial interests involved in drug money laundering. Will the Cisneroses now try to prohibit coverage of the U.S. indictment of the lawyers for the Cali Cartel, to protect their friends?

Rosenthal and Ramírez

Rosenthal established his Venezuelan connections by at least 1989-90, when he helped prosecute the famous drug-money-laundering investigation known as Operation Polar Cap. Among those named in that case were two Venezuelans, Nelson Ramírez Torres and his partner, Sergio Martínez, who had been lawyers for the wife of a drug-trafficker named Florentino Fernández. Ramírez and Martínez were paid a half-million dollars for their services, money which the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) determined came from drug trafficking. That charge, however, could not be proven in court, and the lawyers were exonerated.

What the case did appear to firmly establish, however, were ties between prosecutor Rosenthal and defendant Ramírez.

In 1991, Ramírez turned up as the lawyer for Orlando Castro, after Venezuelan Congressman Guillermo Hernández accused him of laundering money for the Medellín Cartel, at the point that Castro had teamed up with banker José Alvarez Stelling and various Cisneros family retainers, to take the Banco de Venezuela. At the time, the Caracas press published the news that Ramírez Torres himself had been investigated by the U.S. DEA for drug-money laundering.

Reenter Rosenthal. In 1992-93, Rosenthal served as the prosecutor seeking indictment in Miami of Gen. Ramón Guillen Dávila, former commander of the anti-drug division of the Venezuelan National Guard—in which the principal accuser against Dávila was none other than Nelson Ramírez, brother of the former governor of Caracas, Adolfo Ramírez, whom General Dávila had jailed as part of a drug-running network operating among the United States, Venezuela, and Switzerland.

Once in private practice, according to *El Nacional's* June 9 report, Rosenthal served as legal counsel to Orlando Castro, as well as various Venezuelan politicians. Rosenthal defended Castro in a suit brought against him in Miami in 1994, by former Presidential Anti-Drug Commissioner Thor Hallvorsen. Castro had accused Hallvorsen of being the mastermind of the car-bomb which exploded in a Caracas shopping mall in 1993. (Earlier, Castro had accused Hallvorsen of being responsible for Congressman Hernández's charges against him.) After Venezuelan courts found him innocent of the car bombing charge, Hallvorsen filed suit against Castro in Miami. Castro was found innocent, and then tried to get a grand jury to indict Hallvorsen, but failed.

By 1994, when Castro hired Rosenthal to defend him, Rosenthal had been working for Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela for years. His job wasn't just money laundering; as detailed in the June indictment of the cartel, Rosenthal also delivered death threats for the cartel. That job he did in 1991, to try and keep the lid on a cartel factory in Venezuela, TRANCA, which manufactured concrete posts in which cocaine could be hidden. The factory was discovered after a joint U.S.-Venezuelan operation seized a single shipment of 12.25 tons of cocaine hidden inside posts. Some 50 tons of cocaine were shipped into the United States from TRANCA in 1990 and 1991, in lots of 5-8 tons apiece.

The 12.25-ton load was shipped aboard a Danish boat, the *Mercadian Continent*, the same boat which in December 1988 carried a 175-kilo shipment of cocaine to a Miami-based company, Celere, Inc. The Caracas daily *El Globo* reported on Sept. 19, 1991 that Celere was owned by Gustavo Cisneros. Although this was never proven, the owner of Celere was Rogelio Ugarte Bresselau, a top security adviser to both the Banco Latino and former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, now being tried for corruption. Ugarte, like Pérez, has extensive ties to the Cisneroses.

So, too, does Orlando Castro. Castro served as a frontman for Gustavo Cisneros in his 1991 hostile takeover of the Televen television network. Joining Castro in that operation were various Cisneros frontmen, the most conspicuous being Ignacio Andrade Arcaya, now also a fugitive, as he was a director of the bankrupt Banco Latino. When Castro and Alvarez Stelling took over the Banco de Venezuela in 1992, they placed on its board of directors Beatrice Rangel Mantilla, an employee of Gustavo Cisneros.