

## The Colombian Coke Sub

# Former Drug Smuggler Tells His Story

By Alexander Bühler

**The South American drug-smuggling business is becoming increasingly sophisticated as Colombian gangs use home-made submarines to get cocaine to Mexico. The crews have to put up with incredible heat, insanitary conditions and a lack of space. One former submersible captain told SPIEGEL about his experiences.**

The day Gustavo Alonso's life as a drug courier ended began with the muffled roar of a helicopter. It was flying directly overhead, and Alonso could hear it approaching rapidly. Suddenly the helicopter came to a stop and began hovering in the air above.

Alonso, three other crew members and a guard from the Colombian drug mafia were crammed together in a space of about 15 square meters (161 square feet) in the hold of a semi-submersible 600 nautical miles off the Mexican coast. The vessel was also carrying 3.5 tons of cocaine, with a wholesale price of about \$8 million (€6.1 million), worth more than \$60 million on the streets of Miami or Washington.

The Mexican contacts who were supposed to take delivery of the cocaine were already four days late. They had reported that their ship was having engine problems. The crew had already been traveling for 12 days in the small submarine, with barely enough space to stand up or walk around. Waves constantly washed over the glass dome which provided their only visual contact with the outside world. The men had to continually squeeze past each other and spent most of their time playing cards or dozing.

At about 10 a.m., they suddenly heard a muffled bang. The helicopter gunner had shot a steel net at the vessel. It wrapped itself around the propellers and prevented the submersible from moving forward.

They heard someone talking through a megaphone. They knew that heavy weapons were pointed at them and that they didn't stand a chance. They shut off the engines, went outside and surrendered to the US Coast Guard.

### Escaping the Narcos

"At first I wanted to kill myself," says Alonso, "but then I realized that now I could finally escape the narcos, the drug dealers." If he were in a US prison, they would no longer have any power over him and wouldn't be able to pick him up for the next transport, as they had been doing for years.

Alonso was convicted of drug trafficking and spent years in prison, the first two of them in solitary confinement. He returned to his hometown after his release, but he has since left his old life behind. The people with whom he used to interact in the drug trade are now either dead or behind bars.

Alonso, 53, a short, stocky man, is standing on the terrace of the Hotel Estación in the Colombian port city of Buenaventura. He is looking out at the bay in front of him, a labyrinth of islands, twisted mangrove forests and estuaries.

Alonso isn't his real name. The drug mafia doesn't like it when former employees start talking. And here in Buenaventura, the hub for drug dealers on the Pacific coast, talking is especially dangerous. For years, drug gangs like the Rastrojos and the Aguilas Negras have been waging a war in the city for control of the transport routes.

The drug gangs do their recruiting in the poor neighborhoods of Buenaventura, where people live in shabby wooden huts. In those neighborhoods, there is little work and only sporadic electricity and running water. The drug mafia controls such areas and finds its foot soldiers there.

A woman was murdered there a few weeks ago, and two others disappeared without a trace -- an act of revenge committed by the narcos after a botched transport. The crew of a smuggling boat had thrown some of its cargo overboard while fleeing from the coast guard. A few days later, the police proudly displayed the confiscated cargo. For the narcos, the incident was an act of betrayal, which has to be

followed by retaliation.

## **Unable to Say No**

There are two ways to get into the drug trade, Alfonso explains. Some do it to make fast money, the coup of a lifetime, enough money to pay for a house or the children's education. Others do it because they are blackmailed after previously receiving help from the drug mafia, as in Alonso's case.

Alonso, a licensed sea captain, worked for years on large fishing ships before piloting the cocaine boats through the ocean. He was living in Buenaventura with his wife and their three daughters when his wife got seriously ill. "The doctors said that she urgently needed surgery, but the operation was going to cost \$40,000 (€30,500)," he recalls.

He didn't have the money. He says that an acquaintance assured him that everything would be taken care of and that he had nothing to worry about. After the operation, the supposed friend approached Alonso and asked him for a favor in return. Alonso agreed to help the man, even though he sensed what the request would be. Could he have said no? "If I had, I wouldn't be standing here today," he says.

He began a two-year career as a drug smuggler, during which he completed a total of four trips. He made the first trip in a cutter provided by the drug dealers, with five tons of cocaine hidden under a load of fish. Alonso, a well-known captain, made his way past the coast guard without incident. He turned over the drugs at an arranged meeting point off the Mexican coast and returned home.

## **Picked Up at Night**

He still hoped that the narcos would leave him alone. But they were already waiting for him when he arrived in the harbor. "They never leave you alone, unless the police get you or you're killed during a transport." They pressed some money into his hands and took him home. Then they told him to wait for the next mission, and not to leave the house. For weeks, he was afraid to go outside.

He felt almost relieved when he was picked up one night. At dawn, after traveling for several hours by car and motorboat, the group reached its destination: an island in the coastal mangrove thicket. From the boat, Alonso could see one of the shipyards people had always gossiped about in Buenaventura, where submersibles are built out of fiberglass in the jungle, out in the open, to be used for transporting cocaine.

The narcos had developed a reliable system. The boats are almost invisible from the water, and they don't appear on radar. The only way to reliably locate the vessels is through thermal imaging performed by air surveillance crews. But the drug gangs quickly found a way to overcome this problem. They attached thick pipes to the hulls of the submersibles, allowing exhaust gases to be fed into the water, which cools the gases. A third of the cocaine bound for the US market is now transported with submersibles.

"I was afraid when they showed me the boat," says Alonso. He knew his way around ships. On a ship, you could always go on deck and look at the sea. But now he was looking at a tiny, fragile submersible, and he could see how tight it would be inside. Ten tons of fuel, canned food and water in canisters were already stored in the hull -- and three-and-a-half tons of pure cocaine. The entire crew was ordered to get on board at nightfall.

## **'You Constantly Feel like You're Suffocating'**

The boat was divided into three sections. A hatch in the bow led to the cargo hold, which was barely a meter (3 feet) high. The crew had to crawl through the cargo hold on hands and knees, passing the packages of drugs, to reach the control station and the sleeping berths. Alonso positioned himself at the wheel, next to a GPS device for navigation and a radio. The diesel tanks were underneath the berths. The engine room, containing two turbo diesel engines, was behind Alonso. There was no light, there were no toilets, and there was barely enough room to stand up or lie down to sleep.

At around 8 p.m., the tide was high and the night sufficiently dark as the ocean water tugged at the submersible. A speedboat pulled the vessel out to sea, where the crew started the engines. They accelerated to 12 knots and set off on a 270-degree course heading west, toward the open ocean. The guard provided by the drug mafia for each transport, armed with a revolver and an assault rifle, stood at the door to the engine room. It was incredibly hot in the submersible, where the engines remove oxygen from the air and enrich it with carbon monoxide, despite ventilation pipes. "You constantly feel like

you're suffocating," says Alonso. "Every four hours, we reduced the speed from 12 to six knots. Then we opened the hatch in the front for exactly one minute, let some fresh air in and accelerated again."

The four-man team worked in shifts, while Alonso kept monitoring the route. Once they were in the open ocean, the man with the assault rifle gave him a piece of paper showing the target position. Their instructions were to arrive there on a specific day and at a specific time.

Each of the men tried to sleep after his shift, but the stench and the noise on board made this impossible. They had to drink copious amounts of water to make up for the buckets of sweat constantly running off their bodies. Their main source of nourishment was condensed milk, the Peruvian "Leche Gloria" brand. The stench from fecal matter, which couldn't be disposed of during the trip, soon became almost unbearable.

### **A Dangerous Mission**

The Colombian drug mafia has had hundreds of similar boats built in the last few years. The police have only managed to capture 53 of them, 20 in the last year alone. The drug transport business is extremely lucrative. It costs about half a million dollars to build a submersible, but the market value of the cargo can be more than 100 times that. The drug smugglers often sink their boats once the delivery has been made. Dozens of the one-way vessels are believed to be lying on the sea floor off the Mexican coast.

Authorities are now imposing steep fines on anyone caught building or using the boats. If the coast guard also finds drugs on board, the smugglers can expect to spend eight to 14 years in prison. Nevertheless, it isn't difficult to find smugglers to work on the boats.

Those who do so are signing up for a dangerous mission. The tiniest design flaw can be deadly in a boat that spends much of its journey 1,500 kilometers away from the coast. If the thin hull breaks, it's all over, says Alonso. He has heard of several crews of drug couriers that drowned. "Even if you make it through the hatch to the surface, you're out in the middle of the ocean, without a life vest or a rescue boat."

Alonso's first trip in a submersible lasted 10 days, and he reached the destination without incident, slipping under the Colombian coast guard's radar and past its sonar. Alonso knew where to find the gaps in surveillance. They reached the destination off the Mexican coast, where they transmitted code words on a prearranged frequency. When the Mexican narcos' yacht arrived, the crew opened the hatch and jumped into the water to rid themselves of the stench of the last few days.

### **Huge Sums Involved**

They spent four hours loading the cocaine packets, each weighing 20 to 40 kilograms, onto the other boat. In return, they received 20 packages of banknotes, for a total of \$8 million in \$20 bills, money they had to turn over to their Colombian bosses.

The normal rate for the voyage ranges between \$30,000 and \$100,000. Alonso was paid much less, because the drug gangs were still deducting his old debts. For him, the transports were never lucrative.

Money is what drives this business, a lot of money. A kilo of cocaine costs about \$2,500 in Colombia, but in Europe it sells for \$30,000. A few months ago, authorities found sums of \$29 million and €17 million when they searched only one of the locations where the drug boss "El Loco" Barrera had been hiding his money.

An estimated 5 million Colombians are believed to be directly or indirectly involved in the drug trade. This is why the government is fighting on such a broad front against the FARC rebels, who are not just the government's political adversaries, but are also the country's biggest drug suppliers. The fight includes the use of police helicopters that burn down cocaine laboratories in the jungle, as well as aircraft that spray the herbicide glyphosate in blue clouds over the coca fields. With this method, the Colombians have already destroyed 7,500 hectares (18,525 acres) of coca fields in a FARC-controlled area since November 2009.

For years, the government has cooperated with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). In return, the Americans have provided the country with billions in administrative and financial aid. Immense progress has been made in the fight against the drug trade in Colombia, says one high-ranking DEA official. In fact, he says, the Colombians have become so effective that the drug mafia will probably shift its production to Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador soon. "The authorities in those countries don't have enough

experience yet with the drug smugglers' methods, technical equipment and level of sophistication," the official says.

### **Taking It to the Next Level**

A recent raid in neighboring Ecuador confirmed the official's predictions. In July, the Ecuadorian police found a real submarine near the Colombian border. It was 30 meters long, equipped with a periscope and electric motors and apparently capable of diving to a depth of 20 meters. Unlike the submersibles Alonso had used, this vessel was built by engineers and could only be piloted by experienced submarine captains. The estimated construction cost was \$4 million.

He has lost everything, his entire existence, because of drug smuggling, Alonso says today. Now he survives on the pension of his 80-year-old father. The roof trusses in his house in Buenaventura are rotten and need to be replaced, but Alonso can't afford it. He is making nets now and wants to become a fisherman. It would be his third life, following his careers as a captain and then as an underwater drug courier.

He has no faith in the supposed successes of his country's anti-drug units. "As long as someone consumes it, there will be someone who produces cocaine, someone who transports it, and someone who sells it," he says. "And idiots like me, who are stupid enough to do this."

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*

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