

Drug cartel kingpin escapes

BOGOTA, Colombia — One of the top three leaders of the world's biggest drug gang escaped Thursday from a maximum-security prison in Bogota.

Jose Santacruz Londono, a kingpin in the Cali cartel, removed a one-way mirror from an interrogation room and slipped through the opening, apparently with the help of accomplices, said Norberto Pelaez, head of the national prison system.

He then drove out of the La Picota prison in a getaway car disguised as a prosecutor's car, officials said. Prosecutors' cars are not checked when they enter or leave the prison.

RCN radio said his absence was noticed during a 4 p.m. head count.

President Ernesto Samper called an emergency meeting of his ministers Thursday evening to discuss the escape.

The assistant chief of police led a team of officers, including an elite squad known as the Search Block, to recapture the drug lord. Police set up roadblocks in some areas and stepped up security at Bogota airports.

The national police chief offered a \$2 million reward for information leading to Santacruz's recapture, RCN radio reported.

"We're shocked by his escape, but if he was captured once, we can capture him a second time," said Justice Minister Carlos Medellin, who was sworn in Thursday.

The escape also is likely to irk U.S. officials, who believe Colombia's justice system is too lenient on drug traffickers. The United States has indicted cartel kingpins, but Colombia's 1991 constitution forbids extradition of its citizens.

Santacruz, 53, was arrested last July 4 in a plush Bogota steak house. He was awaiting trial on charges of illicit enrichment, conspiracy and the murder of a state governor.

During a three-month period starting last June, police put six of the seven leaders of the Cali cartel behind bars, including brothers Miguel and Gilberto Rodriguez Orejuela, the cartel's other top leaders.

The remaining five were all accounted for in jail on Thursday, said Miller Rubio, spokesman for the na-

tional prison system. The other drug kingpin at large is Helmer Herrera, who is believed to head the cartel's military wing.

Santacruz, known as "Chepe," was believed responsible for consolidating the cartel's distribution network in New York years ago. He has also been linked to the New York murder of journalist Manuel de Dios Unanue, who was investigating cartel operations in the city.

Santacruz was involved with the Rodriguez brothers in the late 1960s in a gang accused of kidnapping two Swiss citizens for ransom. They were later released.

Known in those days as "the Student" because he had studied engineering, Santacruz went into the construction business and is said to own thousands of apartments in Cali and hundreds of rural properties.

In the 1980s, Santacruz used his immense wealth to build a full-size replica of an elite Cali social club after its members refused to admit him.

The Cali cartel is responsible for most of the cocaine distributed in the world.

Clinton suggests delaying Medicare fix until fall

WASHINGTON — President Clinton outlined a possible split verdict Thursday for budget talks with Republicans, suggesting the two sides settle on an overall plan for erasing deficits while submitting major policy decisions on Medicare and Medicaid to the voters next fall.

"We should not make the perfect the enemy of the good," Clinton told reporters at a full-dress news conference, his first of the 1996 campaign year.

"We should agree on everything we can," he added.

Clinton repeatedly expressed optimism that an overall balanced-budget accord was within reach after 50 hours of face-to-face talks with Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The next session is scheduled for Wednesday at the White House.

"... I know we have come too far to let this opportunity slip away," he said.

"Whether Medicaid should be a block grant instead of a guarantee from the nation to our poor and disabled children and to seniors in nursing homes, that's something I think could be deferred to the election."

"I know we have come too far to let this opportunity slip away."

BILL CLINTON
President

Gingrich did not reply directly to Clinton's suggestion when he held a rebuttal news conference a few moments later in Seattle, Wash. Instead, he sharply criticized the president for accusing the GOP of seeking deep cuts in Medicare and Medicaid.

"I found it a disappointing press conference, a press conference that I think did not help get to a balanced budget at all," he said, although he added he expected the talks to resume as scheduled next week.

Using an easel and oversized paper to illustrate his points, the Georgia Republican said spending on Medicare and Medicaid would each rise substantially over seven years in the most recent Republican budget offer.

Manatees still dying off despite group efforts

RIVIERA BEACH, Fla. — Just off U.S. 1, in a run-down neighborhood dominated by the smokestacks and humming blue coils of a power plant, Reade Gilbert presses his face against a chain-link fence and points at Florida's primeval past.

"There he is!" cries Reade, 6, as a manatee comes up for air. "Look at his nose, his nose!"

In the winter, manatee-watching is a popular pastime around Florida's power plants and mineral springs.

Despite federal, state and local efforts, the beasts are dying off at a high rate.

Statistics released last week showed that 9 percent of the known population, or 201 manatees, died in 1995, the second-highest number of deaths since the state began counting the animals in 1974.

At least 42 of the deaths were attributed to boats, which gash the animals with their propellers or drown them by colliding with them.



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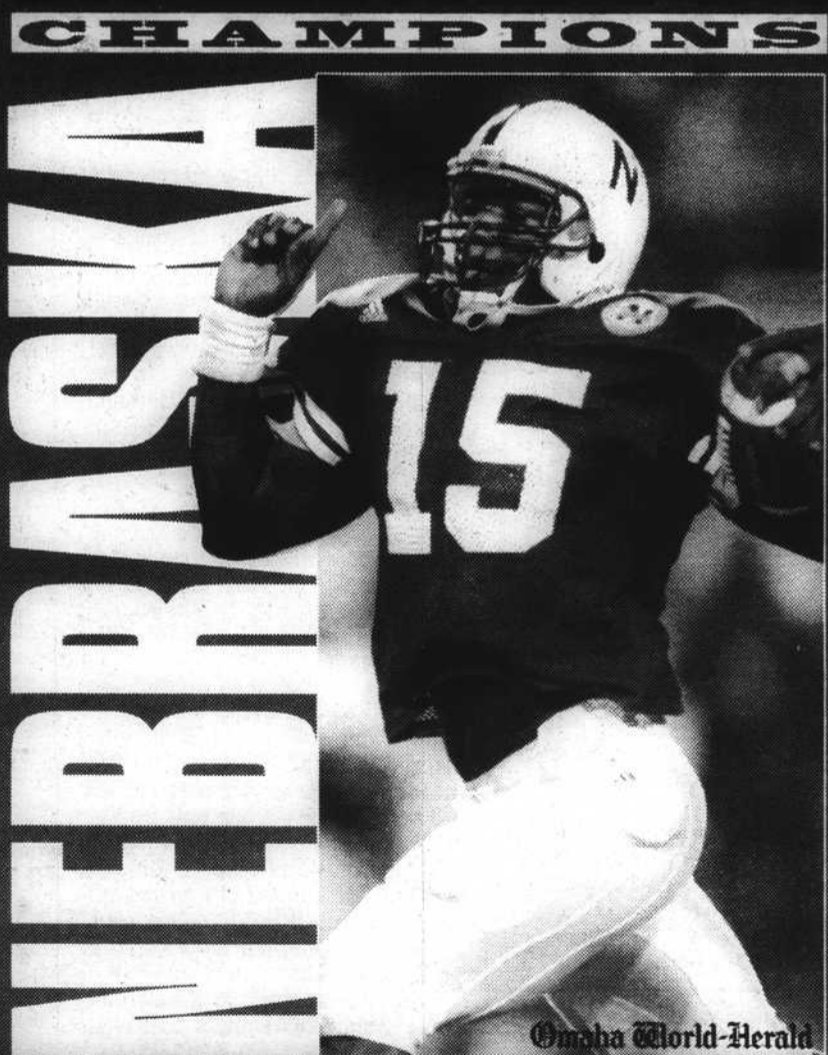
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