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LADB Staff

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## **Guatemala Drug Czar Busted; Government Fails To Deliver On Drug-war Promises**

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala is once again in deep difficulties because of its international anti-drug performance. A promise President Oscar Berger made upon coming into office in 2004, to undo the damage of his predecessor, Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), has gone unfulfilled, if not lampooned, by the recent arrest of his anti-drug chief on drug charges. Under Portillo, the country was dropped from Washington's list of allies in its endless war on drugs. The US now says an estimated 75% of the cocaine that reaches its borders passes through Guatemala because the government has done little to stop it.

The top drug official, Adan Castillo, was arrested in the US along with his deputy, Jorge Aguilar Garcia, and another senior police official, Rubilio Orlando Palacios. They were indicted Nov. 16 on three counts, including conspiracy to import and distribute cocaine in the US. The indictments followed a four-month investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Guatemalan government, said reports.

In Guatemala City, Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann said they had gone to the US for a training course on drug trafficking in ports. This turned out to be a ruse of which Vielmann was part; there was no training course.

DEA administrator Karen Tandy said of the events, "More than corrupting the public trust, these Guatemalan police officials have been Trojan horses for the very addiction and devastation that they were entrusted to prevent." Castillo had come close to walking away from the trap set for him, but his timing was off. In October, he told reporters he planned to quit his post in December, after only six months on the job, saying he was tired of fighting a losing battle.

In an interview with the Associated Press, he said, "There are moments when you start to think, 'If there aren't other institutions that can support me, if the government itself is weak in its responses, there's nothing left to do but leave it in God's hands.'" He said his agents are no match for drug traders, describing four-engine speedboats, the most advanced technology and communications systems, and a vast network of contacts all over the isthmus. The traders' unlimited financial resources have given them access to "information sources that are absolutely excellent" within the government, "so they realize how the state is working. They monitor the state and the authorities and then do analysis on how to handle the drugs."

### ***Castillo: a fund of information prior to arrest***

In an interview before his arrest, Castillo estimated that as many as 4,000 smugglers operate within the country, moving drugs through Guatemala to the Mexican border and into the hands of Mexican operators under the direction of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, a notorious Mexican drug

lord. Guatemalan drug traffickers are also benefiting from consultation with major operators in Colombia, who, said Castillo, are currently advising four formerly rival Guatemalan organizations on how to build a more powerful cartel.

These groups are now consolidated under Guatemalan drug lord Otto Herrera, who escaped from a Mexican prison in May. The former rivals used to be at each other's throats. "Now they are forming a single cartel in Guatemala to dominate all of Central America," Castillo told the Associated Press. He said Herrera has been negotiating in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico to create a Guatemala-based supercartel of Colombian and Mexican magnitude or better. "This would give them tremendous power. It would be very serious for us," he said.

This was rather a lot of information for Castillo to have given in an interview, and it was not immediately clear why he might have given it, if he was involved as charged. As for Herrera, he has proven to be virtually untouchable. His escape from the prison in which he lived lavishly for a year was easily accomplished with the help of prison officials, many of whom were subsequently indicted. An informant told Mexican authorities Herrera walked out disguised as a guard. Guatemalan agents of the Servicio de Analisis e Informacion Antinarcotica (SAIA), the organization Castillo headed, have said Herrera has had cosmetic surgery, and they do not know what he looks like.

Seeking to make a silk purse of it, President Berger commended the arrest of his former drug czar as a major breakthrough in the war against drugs. The arrests also reveal the extent of corruption within the government and law enforcement, and there is some expectation that more senior officials will fall. Interior Minister Viemann said the names of other high officials could come up as the joint investigation continues.

SAIA is now likely to be disbanded or completely overhauled. The agency was set up in 2003 to replace the Departamento de Operaciones Antinarcoticas (DOAN), disbanded under similar circumstances (see NotiCen, 2002-10-24). SAIA was to be a smaller, cleaner, better-trained organization with US financing and personnel. Castillo's revelations came several days prior to testimony given the US House of Representatives international relations subcommittee by DEA chief Michael Braun.

Braun described the drug-trafficking situation in Central America much as did Castillo, but without the details on building the supercartel. Braun's concern was the presence of the Mexicans, the Colombians, and the depth of official corruption. The arrests also had the effect of flushing former President Portillo out of hiding in Mexico, where he fled to avoid prosecution on corruption charges in Guatemala.

Portillo emerged to lambaste the Berger government over the case. "They accuse me of everything, but nothing like what just happened to the country's anti-drugs czar ever happened to me," he told the media. Back in Guatemala, local DEA head Michael O'Brien was having his innings against the government. He said Guatemala could become a mini-Colombia because of inadequate laws and failure to make a dent against at least seven cartels working in the country. He said their influence is everywhere because of the money at their disposal.

O'Brien piled on where Portillo left off, saying the same amount of cocaine was making its way unimpeded through the country despite a better relationship with the Berger regime than the US had with Portillo. He didn't specify how much cocaine, but other US authorities have said the annual flow is about 150 tons, of which 10% stays in the country for internal consumption.

The DEA head said Guatemala lacks laws that would allow wiretaps, controlled deliveries (sting operations), and infiltration of the drug organizations, as have Mexico and Colombia. O'Brien's message was somewhat garbled, in that he was arguing that, if Guatemala did not pass laws similar to those Colombia already has in place, then Guatemala could become a mini-Colombia. The official also would like to see laws that would make it possible to use captured cash and the proceeds from sale of confiscated traffickers' property for law-enforcement activities. He is also concerned about money-laundering activities, because, he said, all the money from drug sales in the US must return through Guatemala.

The US is nevertheless continuing to invest in eradication and interdiction in Guatemala, and is, to some extent, privatizing the process. The US Embassy in Guatemala's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) is reaching out to local helicopter charter companies, according to Narco News. The news agency obtained a solicitation document looking for contractors who would provide support for NAS counternarcotic interdiction and eradication missions.

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