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Guatemala's Top Cops Fired On Suspicion Of Complicity In Disappearance Of Confiscated Cocaine

by LADB Staff

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It will be *deja vu* in infinite regress for long-time students of police matters in Guatemala, but more recent arrivals to the genre might be interested to learn that some of the highest-ranking officers of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) have been fired for suspected involvement in drug trafficking. It all started with some good news on the anti-drug front. On Aug. 7, authorities announced the capture of more than a ton of cocaine in two separate operations. In the first, police observed three suspects unloading a truck in Guatemala City while a fourth stood lookout. Further inquiry led to the discovery of 830 kg of the substance in the truck. Unfortunately, the inquiry was conducted in such manner as to cause the suspects to flee, successfully. In apparent distrust of police, prosecutors alerted the Army, which scrambled two helicopters in an attempt to locate the fugitives from above, but to no avail. The drugs, however, remained in police custody. In the second operation, this one in Puerto Quetzal on the Pacific Coast, police confiscated suitcases containing a total of 210 kg of the drug from a container hailing from Callao, Peru. These two busts followed closely upon an apparently unrelated interruption in the trajectory of 750 kg of that same substance in Esquintla at the end of July. But when the hauls were weighed, it turned out that the 1-ton shipment was light by about 117 kg, according to Interior Minister Raul Velazquez, who did not elaborate on how the original weight was established. At that point, PNC spokesman Donald Gonzalez announced that, in connection with the alleged loss of product, PNC director general Porfirio Perez, assistant director Rolando Mendoza, operations chief Victor Lopez, and another deputy chief, Hector Castellanos, had been fired for possible involvement. It is germane to mention that Perez was, at the time of his dismissal, already under investigation in the disappearance of some US\$300,000 in cash seized in yet another operation. Additionally, in connection with the case, an arrest warrant has been ordered for the capture of Orlando Villatoro, chief of operations for the Division Especializada en Investigacion Criminal (DEIC). During the last five years, said a story in the national daily *Prensa Libre*, the fired four have been accused of various crimes, including threats, frauds, abuse of authority, disobedience, and coercion. Until proven guilty Prosecutor Leonel Ruiz issued a caveat, saying, "We cannot affirm that the former police chiefs are involved; we can only say that we are investigating them." But in the same breath, Ruiz affirmed that his office had taken the precaution of issuing an arraigo, an order to prevent the chiefs from leaving the country, for the duration of the period of inquiry. They have not been jailed. The arraigo is, however, a better deal than what befell 23 other, low-ranking, police officers also under suspicion in the disappearance of the cocaine. They have been suspended and are being "concentrated under guard," while the facts are in process of being ascertained. Velazquez emphasized that the concentration does not amount to actual detainment. President Alvaro Colom took to the media to explain that drug traffickers have corrupted the PNC by virtue of having "the capacity to pay more than the monthly salaries that they receive." He went on to aver that these people have made a mess of things. "I have no fear of organized crime," he said. "Guatemala has become the warehouse of narcotraffic. Fully 41% of violent death owe to disputes over drug distribution." Colom said that, in response to this state of affairs, investigative units are being strengthened, officers are being added to the force, and a school

for officers is going to be created. The fired chiefs have shown no sign of taking their treatment lying down. Two of them have already denied culpability. Attorney Elio Lopez Samayoa has filed a brief on behalf of Castellanos to that effect and has told the media his client had nothing to do with the drug disappearance. He said he plans to file a similar document on behalf of Perez, who also maintains his innocence.

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