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Two of Guatemala's Top Drug Traffickers Captured

by Louisa Reynolds

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Two high-profile drug dealers—Juan Alberto Ortiz López, known as Chamalé, and Waldemar Lorenzana—were recently arrested in Guatemala. Both were allegedly linked to Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

In a joint operation involving the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Guatemalan authorities, Ortiz López was detained on March 30 in the neighborhood of El Maestro in the highland department of Quetzaltenango.

The US is seeking to extradite Ortiz on cocaine-trafficking charges. This drug kingpin was allegedly the link between Colombian traffickers and the Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and used maritime routes to ship huge cocaine cargoes to the US.

After a warrant for Ortiz's arrest was issued in Florida on Feb. 1 and sent to Guatemala on March 25, the local courts issued a warrant for his arrest and extradition three days later.

During the operation, two of López's closest aides—Gerson Leonardo Paz and Otto Leonel Mazariegos—were also detained.

"This is one of the most wanted criminals sought by the DEA because of his strong links to Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers. He was a big fish, and we're pleased about his arrest. This is one of our government's greatest achievements," said Interior Minister Carlos Menocal, after Ortiz's capture.

The Ministerio Público (MP) said US authorities were on Ortiz's trail since 2001. The investigation revealed that Ortiz played a pivotal role in the complex web of South American and Mexican cartels as he received cocaine shipments sent from Colombia and sold them to the Sinaloa cartel.

One of the maritime transport networks on the Pacific Coast used by Ortiz belonged to Mauro Salomón Ramírez Barrios, known as León de Mar (Sea Lion). Two weeks after a failed attempt to arrest him during a chaotic shooting in a Guatemala City shopping mall, Ramírez was captured in October 2010.

The Guatemalan courts set a 40-day deadline for the US to formally request Ortiz's extradition. Meanwhile, he was sent to the Fraijanes II maximum-security prison.

Drug trafficker or pious Christian?

Ortiz appears to have a split personality. Whereas campesinos in the northern department of San Marcos have accused him of violently evicting them from their land, a Mexican folk song by evangelical Christian artist Óscar Ovidio Ruiz depicts him in a very different light: as "a noble man, a friend with a kind hand and an honest smile."

A few days after Ortiz's arrest, around 4,000 people organized a demonstration in San Marcos calling for his release. The protestors came from various towns such as Tecún Umán, Malacatán, Catarina,

El Rodeo, El Sitio, San Rafael Pie de la Cuesta, and San Pablo, in the department of San Marcos, and Coatepeque, in the department of Quetzaltenango.

"We want the US out of here, we want him to be tried according to Guatemalan law. We want him to be freed because he's given us jobs," read some of the demonstrators' placards.

Those who attended the protest claimed that Ortiz had funded the construction of several churches because he was a devout Christian. "He supported sports and helped to build a school for deaf-mute children," said a demonstrator who asked to remain anonymous.

Juan Echeverría, another demonstrator, added, "The law is always against people who help the community. Juan Ortiz has always supported us without asking for anything in return".

These displays of support for local drug kingpins are common in Guatemala ([NotiCen, Jan. 6, 2011](#)). After León de Mar Ramírez was arrested in October 2010, his supporters travelled from Tecún Umán to Guatemala City to demand his release. US authorities are also seeking Ramírez's extradition.

Ramírez's supporters were mainly laborers who worked on his plantain farm and chicken-processing factory in Tecún Umán.

A life of luxury

Ten days after Ortiz's arrest, the DEA, the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), and the Guatemalan armed forces searched his biggest property, Finca Bethel, in San Marcos.

A PNC spokesman said documents were found that will help authorities establish who his contacts were and take further actions to dismantle the criminal networks behind him.

Interior Minister Menocal said that Ortiz's fortune totals US\$100 million and includes a stable for thoroughbred horses with 20 cedar doors worth more than US\$50,000 as well as a number of luxury cars.

One police agent who took part in the operation said that Ortiz's mansion, which had more than 20 rooms, had lavish swimming pools, gardens, and saunas.

However, the horses and riding equipment have yet to be found as eyewitnesses claim that days before the property was searched a group of heavily armed men entered the farm and took the animals.

To what extent has Ortiz's arrest dealt a deadly blow to his organization and who could succeed him? Guatemalan intelligence sources say that Ortiz's aides, which include his brother Ronny Ortiz López, could take over, or the cartel could be displaced by the deadly Mexican organization Los Zetas, which had waged a bitter turf war to eliminate Ortiz, seeking to control the vital San Marcos corridor, the gateway to Mexican territory.

Waldemar Lorenzana arrested

Ortiz's capture was followed a month later by the arrest of another high-profile drug kingpin—Waldemar Lorenzana Lima.

Lorenzana, who is wanted in the District of Columbia on international drug-trafficking charges, was apprehended in the municipality of El Jícaro, in the eastern department of El Progreso.

Lorenzana's sons Eliú Elixander, Haroldo Geremías (known as Chúa), and Waldemar Lorenzana Cordón, as well as two other members of his organization—Carlos Alvarenga and Gonzalo López—are also wanted by the US and remain at large.

The Guatemalan authorities tried to arrest Lorenzana in April 2010, but the warrant was suspended after his lawyers lodged an appeal with the Corte de Constitucionalidad (CC). After the appeal was denied, the warrant was reactivated, which enabled his capture, explained Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz. Lorenzana was also sent to Fraijanes II.

Lorenzana was eastern Guatemala's biggest trafficker. While his three sons are accused of receiving huge cocaine shipments from Colombia that were shipped to the US between 1999 and 2002, Alvarenga and López received drug cargoes smuggled into Guatemala through the border with El Salvador.

The evidence that US authorities will use against the Lorenzana family includes a series of accounting books confiscated in one of their properties in April 2003, which recorded the receipt of several kilos of cocaine as well as payments from Guatemalan kingpin Otto Herrera, arrested in Colombia in 2007.

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