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Family of Murdered Doctor Seeks to Stall Noriega’s Extradition to Panama

by Louisa Reynolds

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Panama’s former dictator Manuel Noriega (1983-1989) might not be extradited to his home country to face charges of human rights violations after relatives of murdered guerrilla fighter Hugo Spadafora demanded that he should serve his sentence in Italy.

Noriega is serving a seven-year prison sentence in France, where he was convicted last year of laundering US$3 million into French bank accounts and property during the 1980s. On July 29, he was notified of Panama’s extradition request. His defense team did not appeal the decision.

Spadafora, whom Italian daily newspaper refers to as "an Italian Che Guevara," was a second-generation Italian whose family migrated to Panama from Cosenza in the impoverished southern province of Calabria.

Spadafora was born in Chitre, Panama, in 1940 and returned to Italy to study medicine at the University of Bologna. He then served as a combat doctor with the independence guerrilla of Guinea Bissau and later returned to Panama to serve as vice minister of health during the regime led by Omar Torrijos (1968-1981).

In 1978, Spadafora organized a group of Panamanian fighters, the Victoriano Lorenzo Brigade, to fight against the Anastasio Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. He later joined the anti-Sandinista Frente Revolucionaria Sandinista (FRS) and denounced Noriega’s involvement in drug trafficking.

In September 1985, Noriega's forces detained Spadafora when he tried to enter Panama from the Costa Rican border, and his decapitated body was later found with signs of severe torture. The autopsy found his stomach full of the blood he had ingested during the slow severing of his head, his thigh muscles had been sliced so that he could not close his legs, his rectum had been torn apart, his testicles were swollen as the result of prolonged garroting, his ribs were broken, and his head had been sawed off with a butcher’s knife while he was still alive.

During the administration of President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994), Noriega was found guilty (in absentia) of conspiracy to murder Spadafora (NotiCen, March 5, 1993).

Acting on behalf of the murdered doctor’s five brothers and sisters—Alina, Guido, Rita, Carmenza, and Stella—lawyer Alejandro Tirelli has demanded that Italy’s Attorney General’s Office begin legal proceedings against Noriega, based on the fact that Spadafora was an Italian national at the time of his murder. Their fears stem from statements made by Noriega’s defense team about the need to guarantee the aging 77-year-old former dictator humanitarian treatment when he returns to his home country.

The Panamanian government has stated that Noriega will serve his sentence in El Renacer, a prison on the banks of the Panama Canal, but his lawyers argue that he should be given house arrest because of his age and ill health.
"We don’t trust Panamanian justice, and we do not want him to walk free," says Carmenza Spadafora. "We’re worried that some people are saying that Noriega is a sick old man and that he should be given house arrest instead of a prison sentence, even though the law forbids granting such measures in his case because he committed crimes against humanity, torture, and murder".

**Should he be tried in Italy or Panama?**

Noriega’s lawyer Julio Berríos says that it is too late for the former CIA informant and strongman to be tried in Italy as France has already approved Panama’s extradition request. However, the Spadafora family insists that, if the Italian government has the political will to issue a warrant for Noriega’s arrest, there is still time to halt the extradition process.

Italian law professor Fausto Pocar, who served as a judge for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), says that it is feasible for Noriega to face trial in Italy for Spadafora’s murder even though he was already tried in absentia in Panama for that crime as the principle that forbids a retrial for the same crime does not apply since the trial occurred in another country outside the European Union (EU).

But Noriega’s defense team is not the only one arguing that the former dictator should return to Panama. Human rights activist Patria Portugal, the daughter of student Heliodoro Portugal, who was disappeared and murdered in 1970 by Noriega’s regime, firmly believes that he should serve his sentence in his home country. "He ought to speak. I would ask him to clear his conscience, to die in peace, to tell us what happened to all those who were disappeared and murdered, to tell us the truth," she told the Panamanian newspaper.

Noriega became Panama’s de facto ruler in 1983 and was on the CIA’s payroll for many years. The 1989 invasion of Panama by the US brought his regime to an end. He was captured as a prisoner of war and flown to the US to be tried on eight counts of drug trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering in 1992. His prison sentence ended in April 2007 (NotiCen, July 26, 2007), and last year he was extradited to France, where he is held at La Santé prison, where he was not granted the prisoner-of-war status that he enjoyed in the US (NotiCen, Jan. 31, 1990).

Noriega is accused of the murder of Major Moisés Giroldi and nine other soldiers who rebelled against his regime, the "Albrook massacre," during a failed military coup.

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