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Noriega returns to Panama after 22 years

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Panama
Published: 2012-01-26


Since 2010, Noriega had been in France, where he was convicted of laundering US$3 million into French bank accounts and property during the 1980s. He had previously spent two decades in an US prison for drug trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering.

Noriega, 77, was flown from France to Tocumen International Airport and later boarded a helicopter bound for the Renacer prison, a former US facility, 40 km north of Panama City on the Panama Canal embankment.

In November last year, a French court authorized the former dictator’s extradition, after he was convicted in absentia for a number of human rights violations that include the disappearance of two people and ordering several high-profile killings (NotiCen, Dec. 8, 2011). Among them is the murder of Hugo Spadafora, an Italian national who served as vice minister of health, who became involved with a guerrilla group and was tortured and decapitated by Noriega’s regime in 1985.

Fearing that the Panamanian justice system would allow Noriega to walk free, the Spadafora family demanded that Italy’s Attorney General’s Office begin legal proceedings against the former dictator so that he could be extradited to Italy and not Panama (NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2011). However, their efforts were unable to stall Noriega’s return to his home country.

Noriega is also accused of the murder of military commander Moisés Giroldi, who staged a failed coup against him in 1989 (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 1989). There is evidence to suggest that Noriega pulled the trigger.

"He’s coming to serve his sentences, and that’s important for the families of the victims," said former Panamanian attorney general Rogelio Cruz. "His presence here is important because he'll satisfy the demands of justice for his criminal convictions and the trials that he still has to face."

Noriega’s future

At the Renacer prison facility, local and foreign journalists eagerly photographed what appeared to be the aging former dictator being taken out of a vehicle in a wheelchair and into the building, only to discover that this was a decoy carefully planned by the Panamanian authorities. Minutes later, Noriega was rushed in, shielded from view.

This sparked off a huge media outcry, with constitutional expert Miguel Antonio Bernal labeling the authorities’ actions as "an insult to Panamanian citizens as well as the national and international media." Bernal added that these actions had turned Panama into "a laughing stock in the eyes of the world" and went so far as to say that those who took part in the ploy ought to resign.

Interior Minister Roxana Méndez replied that a decoy had been used to ensure Noriega’s safety and to respect Noriega’s wish to be "kept away from the media circus."
However, following the media backlash, prison authorities briefly paraded Noriega in front of the cameras from a distance. Prison director Ángel Calderón said Noriega has declined interviews and close-up pictures.

Doctor Jorge Yerwood, who examined Noriega on his arrival at El Renacer, said that he has lost mobility since suffering a stroke several years ago and cannot be handcuffed. However, Méndez has repeatedly stated that Noriega will receive no special treatment and has been confined to an ordinary cell under the same conditions as all other prisoners.

Noriega's age and medical condition will be used by his defense as the main argument in favor of swapping his 60-year prison sentence for house arrest, while human rights groups representing those who were disappeared and murdered under his regime insist that house arrest on compassionate grounds cannot be granted to those accused of crimes against humanity.

However, Julio Berríos, one of Noriega's lawyers, emphasizes that Noriega has been charged with participating in three murders, not for crimes against humanity, and that such crimes were recognized by Panamanian law after the crimes for which Noriega was tried and convicted occurred. He has also complained that he was denied access to his client during his transfer to Panama, thus breaching the former dictator's constitutional rights.

In defiance of a ban on people congregating outside the Renacer prison facility, a small group of demonstrators met Noriega on his arrival. Human rights organizations believe that his return to Panama could shed light on hundreds of extrajudicial killings and disappearances, and the Spadafora family continues to demand that he disclose the whereabouts of the murdered Italian's skull.

But, generally speaking, his return was largely met with indifference, which is hardly surprising given that three-quarters of Panamanians were children when Noriega was seized and whisked off in a US military plane to Florida to face trial.

Milton Henríquez, leader of the Partido Popular (PP), a center-left opposition party, said that Noriega's arrival was undoubtedly an important event of international significance but that the issue should not be used to bury present-day scandals faced by the Martinelli administration, such as the murder of TV journalist and former governor Darío Fernández Jaén in November 2011.

Fernández belonged to the opposition Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), formerly part of a center-left coalition that also included the PP, and had exposed the sale of state-owned beaches in Juan Hombrón, in the province of Coclé, to private investors.

"We have serious problems regarding social equality, transparency, and government efficiency," said Henríquez, who believes that the Noriega case is history and "should only serve as a reminder of what should never happen again".

-- End --