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Louisa Reynolds

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Retired Army Officer and Notorious Drug Trafficker Captured in Guatemala

by Louisa Reynolds

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Guatemalan authorities, working with US government agencies, have captured Marlon Francisco Monroy Meoño, known as Teniente Fantasma (the Ghost Lieutenant) or M-3, a retired Army lieutenant who became one of the country’s most notorious drug traffickers. Known for his extreme violence, Monroy Meoño, 42, was arrested on April 30 with six other suspects in the colonial city of Antigua, 25 km from Guatemala City.

Monroy Meoño, who faces extradition to the US, was trained at Guatemala’s most prestigious military academy, the Instituto Adolfo V. Hall, and during his army career (1992-2004) became a weapons expert. After leaving the armed forces, Monroy Meoño allegedly used his contacts in the military to receive cocaine transshipments from Colombia and Ecuador. The shipments entered Guatemala through the Pacific coast and were stored in the country before being moved to Guatemala’s northern border with Mexico, where Monroy Meoño’s point of contact was the Sinaloa cartel. His organization allegedly operated in the departments of Guatemala, Escuintla, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango.

Defections to organized crime
Guatemala’s long history of Army officers defecting to organized crime dates back to the 1960s, when the country was in the midst of a 36-year-long civil war (1960-1996) between the armed forces and leftist guerrillas that left an estimated 200,000 people dead or disappeared.

“In the 1960s, Cuban opponents of the Castro regime arrived in Central America and acted as the contact point for the drug transshipments that entered the US via Miami,” said Edgar Gutiérrez, director of the Instituto de Problemas Nacionales de la Universidad de San Carlos (Institute for National Problems at San Carlos University, IPNUSAC). “Their profits were used to fund efforts to topple the Castro regime. Two decades later, the same happened in the context of [US President Ronald] Reagan’s efforts to get rid of the Sandinistas. The CIA encouraged the armed forces throughout Central America to turn a blind eye to drug trafficking and actively get involved in it, as a means of funding the contras.” The contras were US-funded and US-backed right-wing rebels who opposed the leftist government of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

After peace accords were signed in the region in the late 1980s and 1990s, the Colombian cartels sought local contacts who could guarantee access through each country’s border crossings. They were usually Army officers and retired officers, Gutiérrez said, perpetuating the link between the armed forces and criminal organizations (NotiCen, Feb. 17, 1988, Sept. 18, 1992, and July 30, 2015).

While the Colombian cartels became fragmented, the Mexican cartels expanded until they were able to control the production of drugs in Colombia and the transportation of drug shipments through Central America. The capture of drug traffickers such as Monroy Meoño indicates that the involvement of former military officers in the drug trade persists to this day.
‘Armed forces have not evolved’

“The problem is that in post-conflict societies, the armed forces have not evolved and adapted to times of peace, and as the war on drugs becomes increasingly militarized, we have witnessed waves of Kaibiles (Guatemala’s special forces unit) defecting to Mexican drug cartels, while others choose to create their own small cartels,” said David Martínez-Amador, a Mexican drugs specialist (NotiCen, Oct. 25, 2007).

The first Guatemalan Army officer that the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) attempted to extradite was Carlos René Ochoa Ruíz, a retired colonel known as “Charlie.” In 1990, DEA agents infiltrated his organization, which operated from a farm in the department of Escuintla, on the Pacific coast. Ochoa Ruíz and others were seen loading a small plane, which was intercepted in Tampa, Florida, with half a ton of cocaine worth US$40 million. After the US authorities requested his extradition, Ochoa Ruíz was expelled from the Army together with two captains who were allegedly his accomplices: Leonel Pérez Franco and José María Flores Montes.

However, a military tribunal ruled there were insufficient grounds for Ochoa Ruíz to be extradited and allowed the three men to walk free. US authorities lodged an appeal with Guatemala’s Constitutional Court (CC), whose president, Epaminondas González Dubón, had a reputation for honesty. In March 1994, González Dubón overturned the military tribunal’s ruling. Days later, González Dubón was murdered. The CC overturned his ruling and Ochoa Ruíz was never extradited, although he was later given a 14-year prison sentence for selling crack cocaine in Guatemala City.

In recent months, the name Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas was in the headlines after he was arrested on Jan. 6 together with three other retired Army officers who are accused of the 1981 forced disappearance of 14-year-old Marco Antonio Molina Theissen.

Like many other Latin American Army officers accused of human rights violations, Callejas y Callejas graduated from the notorious School of the Americas in 1970, where he received training in military intelligence, battle tactics, and torture techniques.

In the early 1990s, after serving in the armed forces, Callejas y Callejas was appointed director of customs, a position he used to create a clandestine organization within the Ministry of Public Finance to detect the flow of weapons and munitions that entered the country in order to support leftist guerrilla groups. Over the years, the organization grew and managed to worm its way into various government bureaus, where it was allegedly involved in contraband, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities.

In November 2002, the US government revoked Callejas y Callejas’ visa due to his alleged involvement in drug trafficking. His bank accounts were investigated but he was never prosecuted by Guatemalan authorities. Other retired Army officers whose visas were revoked include Napoleón Rojas Méndez, Jacobo Esdras Salán Sánchez, and Luis Francisco Ortega Menaldo, who had a close relationship with Callejas y Callejas as well as former president Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), who returned to Guatemala in 2015 after serving nearly six years in Denver, Colorado, for attempting to launder US$2.5 million in US banks.