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## Former Guatemala Interior Minister Accused of Receiving Money from Los Zetas

by Louisa Reynolds

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Guatemala's former interior minister, Mauricio López Bonilla, who was decorated as a hero during the country's 36-year-long civil war and was regarded a staunch ally of the US government, is facing three counts of corruption charges as well as an extradition request from the US Department of Justice to face drug trafficking charges.

López Bonilla and former Vice President Roxana Baldetti ([NotiCen, July 14, 2016](#), and [July 13, 2017](#)) were each indicted on the criminal charge of conspiracy to distribute five kilograms of cocaine within the US in the US District Court for the District of Columbia on Feb. 22. The Guatemalan Attorney General's Office received the request for Baldetti's extradition on June 7, followed on June 23 by the request for López Bonilla's extradition, both from the US Department of Justice.

López Bonilla was head of the Interior Ministry during the administration of former President Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015) and Baldetti, both of the Partido Patriota. He had one of the biggest budgets in the Guatemalan cabinet—larger than the armed forces' budget—and was in charge of overseeing the police as well as the prison service.

According to the US Department of Justice, from 2010 to 2015, López Bonilla received money from various drug cartels, including Los Zetas, in exchange for the cartels' freedom to operate freely across Guatemalan territory.

The extradition request is based on the testimony of three individuals identified as witnesses 1, 2 and 3, who claim López Bonilla was known as "El Pato" (The Duck), "El M", "El Arquitecto" (The Architect) or "El Hombre" (The Man). Witness 1 testified that in 2013, he paid López Bonilla US\$1 million so that he could enter several thousand kgs of cocaine into Guatemala without interference from the security forces. Those drug shipments were allegedly handed over to Mexican cartels, which smuggled them into the US.

Witness 1 added that he paid López Bonilla US\$300,000 in order to avoid being arrested by the police. The payment was allegedly given to the former minister by Witness 2.

Witnesses 2 and 3 also testified that they gave López Bonilla an additional US\$200,000 in exchange for information about police operations that were underway involving members of Los Zetas. López Bonilla allegedly assigned police agents to safeguard cocaine shipments and took bribes in exchange for appointing corrupt police officers to high-level positions.

Héctor Silva Ávalos, a researcher for the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University and for Insight Crime, said that if proven in court, these allegations would demonstrate that "local drug cartels grew thanks to the political protection they received from top level government officials."

Edgar Gutiérrez, former director of a research institute at the University of San Carlos (Instituto de Problemas Nacionales, IPNUSAC), said that political protection was not just afforded to Los Zetas.

“The fact that the Partido Patriota had control over the Guatemalan security forces and most of the country’s territory allowed it to set the rules of the game and establish ties to various drug cartels,” Gutiérrez said.

### *String of corruption allegations*

Before López Bonilla can be extradited, he must face three counts of corruption in Guatemala. In the first case, known as “Caso Patrullas” (Patrol Vehicles Case), López Bonilla is accused of embezzling US\$518,000 of the US\$1.6 million assigned by the Interior Ministry for the maintenance of police vehicles.

The second case is known as “Blindado” (Bullet-Proof) and involves a contract to hire 47 bullet-proof vehicles for high-level public officials, prosecutors, and witnesses in high-impact cases; the contract was granted without a public tender, which is forbidden under Guatemalan law.

The third case, known as “Caso Cooptación del Estado” (Co-optation of the State) also involves former Vice President Baldetti. According to prosecutors, a network of top-level government officials led by Baldetti received bribes for granting contracts to companies that funded the 2011 election campaign of the Partido Patriota.

López Bonilla, in particular, is accused of receiving bribes in exchange for granting a contract to Escorpión, a private security company, to safeguard the headquarters of the Registro Nacional de las Personas (National Registry, RENAPER). López Bonilla allegedly used part of the kickbacks to buy lavish gifts for former President Pérez Molina, who also faces several counts of corruption ([NotiCen, Sept 3, 2015](#)).

### *Close relationship with Pérez Molina*

López Bonilla’s close relationship with Pérez Molina dates back to the 1980s, when they both served in the Guatemalan armed forces at the height of the civil war. López Bonilla took on the nom de guerre “Don Damián” and was known for his daring actions, such as leading an operation in 1981 in which members of the special forces disguised as guerrilla combatants attacked a guerrilla camp. The operation, in which 28 guerrilla combatants died, was a heavy blow for one of the main rebel organizations.

A year later, López Bonilla served as a cabinet member under the dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), who was found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013, although the verdict was later annulled based on a technicality.

López Bonilla has always preferred to play down the importance of his combat role and highlight the role he played as an intermediary between civil society groups and the private sector when Guatemala returned to civilian rule and began peace talks with the guerrilla organizations. While Pérez Molina was the public face of the armed forces, López Bonilla was the behind-the-scenes negotiator.

The disgraced former interior minister retired from the armed forces in 1997, a year after the peace accords were signed. According to a study by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) titled “Hidden Powers: Illegal Armed Groups in Post-Conflict Guatemala and the Forces Behind Them,” López Bonilla went on to forge a lifelong relationship with Pérez Molina and other members of the armed forces who used their knowledge of military intelligence to engage in drug trafficking,

the illicit arms trade, and people trafficking. The UN-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG) was created precisely to dismantle this type of criminal organization, known as “illegal groups and clandestine security bodies” ([NotiCen, May 28, 2015](#)).

After retiring, López Bonilla obtained licenses to operate X-ray machines in ports and airports and also worked as a private consultant who specialized in security and risk assessment. He didn't return to public life until he was appointed interior minister after the 2011 elections.

Silva Ávalos said López Bonilla's transformation from a staunch ally of the US government to an alleged drug trafficker facing an extradition request is hardly surprising.

“The US knows very well who it chooses as allies,” he said. “Those alliances between the US and these shady military and police figures affords them impunity, as occurred with [former President Manuel] Noriega in Panama [1983-1989]. It doesn't matter whether they're corrupt or drug traffickers, as long as they serve US interests.”

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