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Director of Mexican Drug Agency Arrested for Alleged Links to Juarez Cartel

by LADB Staff

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In late February, federal law enforcement authorities arrested Mexico's chief drug-enforcement officer, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, and two of his top assistants on charges of accepting bribes to protect one of Mexico's most notorious drug traffickers, Amado Carrillo Fuentes. The Attorney General's Office (PGR) also accused Gutierrez Rebollo and assistants Horacio Montenegro Diaz and Javier Garcia Hernandez of transporting cocaine and obstructing justice. Both Montenegro and Garcia have served as officers in the Mexican army.

At a press conference following the arrests, National Defense Secretary Enrique Cervantes Aguirre said Gutierrez Rebollo and his two assistants may also face military charges for compromising national security, deceiving superiors, and weakening the national effort against drug trafficking. Cervantes said authorities first became suspicious of Gutierrez Rebollo after he moved into an expensive apartment in Mexico City whose cost seemed beyond his means. Following an investigation launched in early February, authorities obtained a recording of a telephone conversation between Gutierrez Rebollo and Carrillo Fuentes.

In the conversation, the two men allegedly discuss payments to be made to Gutierrez Rebollo in exchange for his cooperation. According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Carrillo Fuentes who heads the powerful Juarez cartel earns a gross US\$200 million per week from his drug-trafficking operations. He is commonly known as the "Lord of the Skies" (Senor de los Cielos) because of his use of Boeing 727 aircraft to transport large shipments of cocaine from Colombia to distribution points in northern Mexico, from where the drugs are sent to the US. Gutierrez Rebollo was chosen last December to head the national drug enforcement agency (Instituto Nacional para el Combate a las Drogas, INCD) because of his reputation for honesty and incorruptibility.

Indeed, US Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who heads US drug-enforcement efforts, earlier praised Gutierrez Rebollo as an "honest man," following a meeting where US and Mexican officials discussed joint efforts to combat the flow of narcotics into the US. After Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest, however, McCaffrey canceled a scheduled release of a joint US-Mexico white paper analyzing the mutual threat of drug trafficking. "The US is extremely disappointed that corruption may have reached such a level in Mexico," McCaffrey said in a statement. "We will follow the developments of this investigation carefully."

US President Bill Clinton's administration is concerned that Gutierrez Rebollo may have passed on sensitive intelligence to Carrillo and other major drug traffickers. According to the Washington Post, US officials have ordered a sweeping review to determine what intelligence Gutierrez Rebollo obtained from both US sources and within the Mexican government. Arrest may affect US drug certification of Mexico. Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest also came less than two weeks before the March 1 deadline for President Clinton to recommend whether Congress should certify Mexico as a reliable

ally in the war on drugs. Countries that are not certified are subject to economic sanctions, including a pledge by the US government to oppose their loan applications at the World Bank and other international lending institutions.

In a press conference shortly after Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed the ambivalence now prevalent in the Clinton administration regarding Mexico's certification. Albright told reporters that the administration's decision comes down to "determining whether the glass is half full or half empty." Albright said President Clinton was pleased that Mexico took decisive actions in arresting Gen. Gutierrez Rebollo. On the other hand, she noted that the case also exposed the very serious problems existing in the Mexican law-enforcement structures.

Still, in testimony before Congress on Feb. 25, senior Clinton administration officials hinted they would recommend that Mexico's anti-drug efforts be certified. "Mexico is one of our most important allies in the international struggle against organized crime and drug trafficking," said Robert Gelbard, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics matters. "We need each other, and we are determined to make this partnership work." On the other hand, the administration's inclination to certify Mexico may face a difficult battle in the US Congress because of the Gutierrez Rebollo case. According to Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), the Clinton administration should use this opportunity to "send a strong signal to Mexico and the world" that the US will not tolerate lack of cooperation in the fight against narcotics. Feinstein led an unsuccessful effort to decertify Mexico in 1996.

Feinstein and Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-NY) released a list of 10 steps that Mexico must follow to "restore American confidence in its commitment to the drug-fighting effort." Among other things, Feinstein and D'Amato recommended that Mexico comply with all outstanding extradition requests, enact stricter money-laundering laws, and arrest the known leaders of the Mexican drug cartels. Some White House sources raised the possibility of a compromise between congressional leaders and the administration, whereby the US would withhold decertification for Mexico but invoke a "national-security waiver" to suspend the sanctions that usually result from that judgment.

Meanwhile, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration has hinted that any move to decertify Mexico would be unacceptable, even if sanctions are not actually imposed. Foreign Relations Secretary Jose Angel Gurria Trevino warned that decertification of Mexico could foster resentment against the US among Mexicans, which, in turn, could jeopardize joint US-Mexican efforts to fight drug trafficking. "The Mexican people would question the whole concept of cooperation," said Gurria. Zedillo adamantly dismissed the allegations that Mexico has not shown enough commitment to combating the drug trade. "We unilaterally dismiss the absurd claims that Mexico is inevitably a corrupt country full of criminals," Zedillo said during an address before the national manufacturing industry chamber (Camara Nacional de la Industria de Transformacion, CANCEMEX).

Nevertheless, in a column published in late February, Mexican political analyst Sergio Sarmiento said that the Gutierrez Rebollo case cast more of a negative than a positive light on the Zedillo administration. "Mexico is losing the war against drugs," said Sarmiento. But Sarmiento also pointed out that the case exposed the failure of US efforts to control drug trafficking, consumption, and other criminal activities within its own borders. Role of military in drug trafficking under

investigation Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest has led Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar to investigate the Mexican military's involvement in drug trafficking and other crimes.

According to a recent report in the Washington Post, the Mexican army has long been involved in drug trafficking. According to allegations cited by the newspaper, former defense secretary Juan Arevalo Gardoqui helped plan the torture and murder of US DEA agent Enrique Camarena in Jalisco state in 1985. Additionally, the Washington Post cited a 1991 case in which Mexican army soldiers who were refueling a Colombian plane loaded with cocaine shot and killed several Mexican police officers who had landed their own plane and tried to seize the drug-laden craft. The Zedillo administration's decisive move to investigate the Gutierrez Rebollo case received praise from members of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and legislators from the opposition National Action Party (PAN) and Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

Still, one PRD legislator, Deputy Pedro Etienne Llano, suggested that Gutierrez Rebollo was only one of the players in a wider conspiracy. Etienne Llano said Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest was a step in the right direction, but "the fact that corruption has infiltrated such high-level positions is cause for worry." Magazine links former president's family to drug traffickers Gutierrez Rebollo's arrest was announced only days after the Mexican weekly news magazine Proceso reported allegations that former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his family had close ties to known drug traffickers.

The Proceso report was based on testimony given in connection with a US Justice Department investigation into Mexico's former special prosecutor Mario Ruiz Massieu and his suspected involvement in drug trafficking and money laundering. According to the report, the former president's brother, Raul Salinas de Gortari, helped arrange a US\$4 million payment intended for the release of a drug trafficker detained on cocaine charges in 1993.

Furthermore, Proceso said an informant has told the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that he was present at "various social events" at a ranch owned by Raul Salinas, which were also attended by drug dealers and Carlos Salinas. The report said witnesses called on by US investigators also implicate then-PRI secretary general Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu Mario Ruiz Massieu's brother and presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, both of whom were assassinated in 1994. Raul Salinas, who remains in a federal penitentiary, was originally arrested on charges of planning Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu's assassination (see SourceMex, 03/08/95). Raul Salinas was later charged with embezzlement of public funds and illicit enrichment, after authorities discovered that the former president's brother had deposited large sums of money in European bank accounts.

Meantime, former president Salinas who remains in self-imposed exile in Ireland has denied the Proceso allegations and has threatened to file lawsuits against his accusers. Salinas's attorney said the reports were "an ambush" of the former president by "foreign agents." Members of the governing PRI also rallied to the defense of the former president. According to PRI legislators in the Chamber of Deputies, the US government has the "obligation" to "seek out the truth" regarding the allegations against the former president. On the other hand, members of the opposition PAN said the US courts are a legitimate venue to present the allegations. "Mexico has displayed a lack of will to investigate politicians involved in drug trafficking," said Gonzalo Altamirano, a PAN leader in Mexico City. (Sources: Proceso, 02/16/97; El Nacional, Reuter, 02/19/97; Associated Press, 01/29/97,

02/17/97, 02/19/97, 02/20/97; United Press International, 02/17/97, 02/20/97; El Economista, 02/19/97, 02/20/97; Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, 02/21/97; The News, 02/19/97, 02/20/97, 02/26/97; El Universal, 02/17/97, 02/19/97, 02/20/97, 02/21/97, 02/26/97; Excelsior, Novedades, La Jornada, 02/19/97, 02/20/97, 02/21/97, 02/26/97; Washington Post, 02/16/97, 02/19/97, 02/20/97, 02/21/97, 02/25/97, 02/26/97; New York Times, 02/25/97, 02/26/97; Journal of Commerce, 02/26/97)

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