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LADB Staff

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Quintana Roo Governor Under Investigation for Alleged Ties to Drug Cartels

by LADB Staff

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Mexican drug-enforcement authorities are investigating Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid for alleged connections to drug traffickers. In early December, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar said the government's drug-enforcement agency (Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion de los Delitos contra la Salud, FEADS) has focused its investigation on reports that Villanueva has provided protection for drug traffickers to operate freely in Quintana Roo in exchange for bribes.

Reports of Villanueva's alleged link to drug traffickers surfaced with news that the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) had seized 33 properties in the resort of Cancun from alleged members of the Juarez drug cartel. The properties included four luxury hotels, three restaurants, four yachts, and 26 luxury estates, condominiums, and other properties. Villanueva, who will complete his four-year term in April 1999, has denied any links to drug traffickers and has welcomed the PGR's investigation. "I feel I am clean, without any problems," Villanueva said in late November.

While the PGR has yet to file any charges against Villanueva, one Mexican intelligence report describes the Quintana Roo governor as being "implicated in the criminal organization" that has turned the state into one of the most important conduits for cocaine being shipped to the US. Villanueva's alleged connections to the drug traffic are signs of the growing strategic importance of Quintana Roo, particularly the state's famous resorts of Cancun and Cozumel, to the drug traffic between Colombia and Mexico.

The influence of drug cartels is so prevalent in Cancun, Cozumel, and nearby areas that one US official recently described Quintana Roo as "the first narco-state in Mexico." In a single month during the summer of 1998, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) recorded 64 boats believed to have been ferrying cocaine from Colombia to Quintana Roo.

Similarly, the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma recently reported that nearly one-third of all drugs passing through the Caribbean to the US make a stop near Cancun. According to the report, the majority of ships, some with a capacity of 300 metric tons, unload their cargo onto speedboats that ferry drugs to or near Cancun. "Allow us to inform you that great quantities of drugs, including cocaine, are being smuggled through Quintana Roo, approximately four tons a week," said a report produced by FEADS officer Lt. Col. Edgardo Cedillo Gonzalez.

The New York Times obtained a copy of the report from an opponent of Villanueva. US and Mexican officials say that state police as well as military troops assigned to Quintana Roo routinely allow passage of drug shipments overland from Guatemala and Belize, or by boat or on small

airstrips. In November 1998, federal authorities dismissed the entire private security force at Cancun's international airport for allegedly allowing transport of cocaine shipments from South America.

Reports link Juarez cartel to drug trafficking in state

The PGR has connected the Juarez cartel to drug- trafficking operations in Quintana Roo. The cartel is believed to be under the direction of Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, brother of Amado Carrillo. Amado Carrillo died in July 1997 following complications from plastic surgery (see SourceMex, 07/16/97).

Since Amado Carrillo's death, several of his lieutenants have either moved to Cancun or appear to be spending a lot of time there, US and Mexican authorities said. Vicente Carrillo and alleged drug lord Eduardo Gonzalez Quirarte have moved to Cancun to join Ramon Alcides Magana, who authorities say is the Juarez cartel's man in the region. Alcides Magana, a former federal police officer and Mexican army officer, has served as a liaison between police and military forces and the drug cartel. Alcides, who began working for the cartel as a bodyguard for Amado Carrillo, was given control of the Cancun region as a reward for saving his boss in a much-publicized assassination attempt in a Mexico City restaurant several years ago, according to US authorities.

Officials now say Alcides has a finger in almost every level of government in Quintana Roo. "Everyone there is bought and paid for," said one US official. "The state police guard the drugs and put it into trucks filled with chemicals or acid that is hard to check. It is protected by the highway patrol and the military all the way up." US and Mexican officials have failed in their attempts to gather evidence linking Alcides to the Villanueva administration. Some evidence against Villanueva was lost when some associates of Alcides broke into an anti-narcotics intelligence office in June and destroyed documents linking the government to drug trafficking. Included in those documents, according to officials, was proof that Gov. Villanueva is protecting the cartel and drug shipments throughout Quintana Roo.

A member of the anti-narcotics intelligence unit, who had been following Alcides, was kidnapped and tortured on the same day as the break-in, according to US and Mexican law- enforcement officers. The agent was released only after armored vehicles, sent by the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), surrounded the home of the alleged drug trafficker's wife in Mexico City and threatened to open fire unless the lieutenant was freed. "What is worrisome is that after the... [kidnapped lieutenant] was released, enforcement against Alcides Magana virtually ceased," said a US agent.

Meanwhile, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is urging President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to take stronger steps to fight drug trafficking in Quintana Roo beyond seizing properties of alleged drug traffickers. DEA agents worry that the seizure of property was a token gesture to ensure that the US recertifies Mexico as a cooperative partner in the fight against drugs. US President Bill Clinton's administration is scheduled to announce the certification in March. But Mexico has criticized the certification process as counterproductive to US-Mexico cooperation to fight drug trafficking.

In an interview in Mexico City in mid-December, Zedillo said any move by the US to decertify Mexico could affect US-Mexican relations. "We would evidently have to revise the terms of that cooperation," Zedillo said. (Sources: Reuters, 08/10/98; Los Angeles Times, 08/27/98; Novedades, 10/26/98, 10/27/98; Excelsior, 10/16/98, 11/06/98; Associated Press, 11/26/98; The New York Times, 11/26/98, 11/27/98; Spanish news service EFE, 12/08/98; La Jornada, 11/27/98, 12/09/98; El Universal, 10/27/98, 12/09/98; Novedades, 12/09/98; The Washington Post, 12/13/98; The News, 10/27/98, 12/15/98)

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