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Authorities Order Arrest of Ex-Quintana Roo Governor on Drug Charges

by LADB Staff

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The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) has ordered the arrest of former Quintana Roo governor Mario Villanueva Madrid on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and illicit enrichment. The government also issued arrest orders on related charges for eight other Quintana Roo officials, including the state director of the Policia Judicial Federal (PJF).

Villanueva, who disappeared a few days before completing his term as governor, has been under investigation for the past several months for protecting members of the powerful Juarez drug cartel in exchange for bribes. The Juarez cartel was reportedly using Cancun and other resorts in Quintana Roo as a primary transshipment point for cocaine going from Colombia to the US (see SourceMex, 1999-01-06).

The PGR's specialized unit on organized crime said Villanueva used his position as governor to acquire 17 properties in Mexico City, Quintana Roo, and other states. Authorities in Mexico, the US, and other countries are also investigating bank accounts linked to Villanueva. The accounts at banks in the US, Switzerland, Mexico, the Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands were opened in the name of Villanueva or family members or friends. One Swiss account in Villanueva's name is said to contain about US\$73 million.

The PGR and the federal drug enforcement agency (Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion de Delitos contra la Salud, FEADS) had delayed any criminal action against Villanueva because sitting governors are immune from prosecution unless they are first impeached by the federal Chamber of Deputies. Rather than push for a politically difficult impeachment, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration decided to wait until Villanueva completed his term. But a few days before the end of his term, Villanueva eluded the agents who were tailing him and fled to an unknown location. Villanueva's whereabouts unknown

Rumors circulating in the Mexican media placed the former governor in Panama, Cuba, the US, or somewhere in Yucatan state. Villanueva is a close friend of Yucatan Gov. Victor Cervera Pacheco, who is alleged to have aided his escape. Cervera Pacheco has denied those allegations. Another rumor suggested that Villanueva had been murdered because he knew too much about government involvement in drug trafficking. This rumor was based on reports that an unidentified man was shot 25 times and tossed onto a beach in Quintana Roo from a helicopter. Authorities said the dead man was not Villanueva.

The Mexican government has asked the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the international police agency Interpol to assist in capturing Villanueva. Federal authorities managed an interview with Villanueva before his disappearance. When the former governor refused to travel

to Mexico City to meet with Attorney General Jorge Madrazo in late March, the PGR sent FEADS director Mariano Herran Salvatti to see Villanueva in the Quintana Roo capital of Chetumal. During the 12-hour interview on March 24, Salvatti presented Villanueva with the 28 charges brought by the PGR. Villanueva denied the charges and said he would offer proof of his innocence in a meeting with the PGR the following week. "Everything is absolutely false, that was the essence of my declaration," Villanueva told a press conference. He failed to show up for the follow-up meeting. He was absent from the inauguration of his successor, Joaquin Hendricks Diaz, who like Villanueva is a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Former governor proclaims innocence in fax to newspapers

While Villanueva's whereabouts are unknown, the former governor communicated once with the Mexican news media to proclaim his innocence. In a letter faxed to Mexican newspapers from his hiding place on April 5, Villanueva said the charges were fabricated by political opponents within the Zedillo administration. "I am not a criminal," Villanueva said in the fax. "They are persecuting me for strictly political reasons."

Villanueva said he has been targeted by some PRI leaders because he is allied with party hard-liners like Manuel Bartlett Diaz who are out of favor with Zedillo. Bartlett Diaz is one of two PRI hard-liners seeking the party's nomination for the 2000 election. To support Villanueva's contention, associates of the former governor filed a complaint with the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) charging the PGR with "violating the human rights" of the former governor. His collaborators also took legal action, asking for a court injunction to halt the investigation against Villanueva, but a district judge denied this motion.

Because of his actions, Villanueva has fallen out of favor with the PRI leadership. In a statement to reporters, PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez raised the possibility that Villanueva could be expelled from the party if he is found guilty of the drug-related charges. The PRI has also threatened other PRI officials who have been linked to drug charges but has never acted on those threats. Meanwhile, legislators from the two major opposition parties have accused the Zedillo administration of pretending to search for Villanueva while allowing him to flee the country. "

An arrest of Villanueva would have uncovered other links of government insiders to drug trafficking," said Sen. Rodolfo Arteaga of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Sen. Francisco Molina Ruiz of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) criticized the Zedillo administration for failing to take appropriate precautions to prevent Villanueva from fleeing. "With 28 charges pending against Villanueva, how is it that authorities were unable to confine him and make the arrest at the most opportune time?" said Molina. Villanueva is the second former governor to face drug-related charges in Mexico.

In 1998, authorities detained former Jalisco governor Flavio Romero de Velasco on charges of laundering drug profits (see SourceMex, 1998-02-04). The charges against Romero de Velasco were later dismissed because of a lack of evidence. Other prominent Mexican officials have been accused of drug trafficking in recent years. The list includes the former director of Mexico's drug enforcement agency, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebolledo, and Raul Salinas de Gortari, brother of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

More recently, a former US Customs investigator implicated Defense Secretary Gen. Enrique Cervantes in laundering drug profits, although the Mexican official is not under investigation (see SourceMex, 1999-03-17). [Sources: Reuters, 04/02/99, 04/06/99; Agence France-Presse, 04/05/99, 04/06/99; The Dallas Morning News, 04/04/99, 04/06/99; Los Angeles Times, 04/07/99; The New York Times, 04/06/99, 04/07/99; Associated Press, 03/22/99, 03/25/99, 04/02/99, 04/07/99, 04/08/99; Spanish news service EFE, 03/25/99, 04/07/99, 04/08/99; El Diario de Yucatan, 04/08/99, 04/09/99; La Jornada, 03/24/99, 04/05/99, 04/06-08/99; The News, 04/05/99, 04/09/99; Novedades, 03/25/99, 03/26/99, 03/30/99, 03/31/99, 04/02/99, 04/05/99, 04/06/99, 04/13/99; El Economista, 04/05/99, 04/06-09/99; 04/12/99, 04/13/99; El Universal, 03/23/99, 03/31/99, 04/01/99, 04/02/99, 04/06-09/99, 04/13/99, 04/14/99; Excelsior, 03/25/99, 04/01/99, 04/06-09/99, 04/12/99, 04/14/99]

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