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Former Mexican Drug Prosecutor Mario Ruiz Massieu Commits Suicide in U.S.

by LADB Staff

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Mario Ruiz Massieu, a deputy attorney general in former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration, took his life two days before his scheduled US arraignment on charges of money laundering. US authorities said Ruiz Massieu, who was once in charge of Mexico's anti-drug programs for the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), died from an apparent overdose of anti-depressants.

Death precedes arraignment on money-laundering charges

Ruiz Massieu was scheduled to be arraigned in Houston on Sept. 17 on a 25-count indictment charging him with laundering US\$9.9 million in bribes from drug traffickers through US banks while serving in the PGR in June-November 1994. The indictment by a federal grand jury overturned the verdict of a civil trial in Houston in 1997, which found Ruiz Massieu guilty of depositing drug profits in Texas banks but dismissed all charges of money laundering.

US authorities arrested the former Mexican prosecutor in March 1995 at Newark International Airport as he attempted to leave the US without declaring US\$45,000 in his possession. Ruiz Massieu was then placed under house arrest, where he remained for most of the ensuing four and a half years. At the time of his arrest, Ruiz Massieu was fleeing Mexico after accusing prominent members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) of blocking his investigations into the assassinations of key figures, including his brother Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, a top PRI official.

Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu was gunned down on a Mexico City street as he emerged from a PRI fund-raising event (see SourceMex, 1994-10-05). But the Mexican government turned the tables on Mario Ruiz Massieu and accused him of deliberately mismanaging the investigation of his brother's death, perhaps in collusion with Raul Salinas de Gortari. Raul Salinas, the brother of former president Carlos Salinas, was arrested in March 1995 on charges of planning Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu's assassination. The arrest order against Raul Salinas also included a warrant against Mario Ruiz Massieu for mismanaging the murder investigation (see SourceMex, 1995-03-08).

Ruiz Massieu managed to elude Mexican authorities and was on his way to Spain when he was detained by US Customs officials in New Jersey. The Mexican government tried on four separate occasions to extradite Ruiz Massieu, but US courts turned down the requests because the US Justice Department, acting on behalf of the Mexican government, failed to provide sufficient evidence to support the petitions.

Government sources said US President Bill Clinton's administration was preparing paperwork to deport Ruiz Massieu to Mexico when he committed suicide. Some legal experts attribute the government's failure to bring Ruiz Massieu back to Mexico to procedural errors committed by then attorney general Antonio Lozano Gracia. Lozano is widely blamed for failing to present documents

at the proper time and preparing weak cases. The Mexican government did not file any charges of drug trafficking and illegal enrichment against Ruiz Massieu until July 1998. The prior extradition requests were based only on the accusation that he mismanaged the investigation of his brother's murder.

Suicide note implicates PRI officials in assassinations

In a suicide note, Ruiz Massieu accused high-level PRI officials of planning the assassinations of his brother and presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. The note said Zedillo was at least aware of the plot. "To find my brother's killers, any investigation would have to start with Zedillo," the note said. Ruiz Massieu offered no evidence to support his assertions. But Ruiz Massieu's attorney Cathy Fleming told reporters that some information that Ruiz Massieu had never disclosed would be made public "at an appropriate time."

Tom Cash, a money-laundering specialist and former official with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said Ruiz Massieu probably could have provided more information on illicit activities among high-level officials in Mexico, particularly because of his close connections with the Salinas family. "He took a great many secrets to his grave," said Cash. "He would have been an ideal witness for getting inside information on the Salinas family." At a news conference, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar dismissed Ruiz Massieu's note, calling his allegations "the voice of a psychopath who is about to take his own life."

But the daily newspaper La Jornada said Ruiz Massieu's suicide again raises the question of whether the Mexican government was involved in any cover-ups. "Authorities have failed to reveal all the relevant information regarding the assassinations of Luis Donaldo Colosio and Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu," said a newspaper editorial published Sept. 17. "At the very least, they have not had the political will to carry the respective investigations to a full conclusion." Sources said the Zedillo administration had strong political motives to ensure that Ruiz Massieu remained in tight custody while the government attempted his extradition. The daily newspaper Excelsior reported that the Mexican government was paying US\$1,000 daily to US authorities to keep Ruiz Massieu under house arrest. This did not include costs involved in the government's attempts to extradite Ruiz Massieu in 1995 and 1997, the sources told Excelsior.

Jeffrey Davidow, the US Ambassador to Mexico, said US authorities were planning to continue their investigation into Ruiz Massieu's alleged involvement with drug traffickers. The US\$9.9 million seized from Ruiz Massieu's Texas accounts would remain in the hands of US authorities for the time being and would not be released to his family, said Davidow. During the various trials, Ruiz Massieu's attorneys argued that the money the former prosecutor had deposited in the Houston-based Texas Commerce Bank and other institutions in the state came from bonuses he received from the office of the Mexican president, and not from drug traffickers. But former DEA officials said these funds still had connections to the narcotics trade, since the bonuses were part of complicated bribery arrangement financed by drug traffickers.

Conspiracy rumors abound

The news of Ruiz Massieu's death was accompanied by a number of conspiracy rumors. One rumor suggested that US authorities fabricated the death of the former prosecutor to place him

in the Federal Witness Protection Program. The rumor says US authorities took this step because Ruiz Massieu was ready to provide evidence implicating key PRI members. But Davidow quickly dismissed this rumor. "I have seen the body," Davidow told reporters in Mexico. "This is a tragedy, but one must not fall into the paranoia of thinking that this is a trick."

Sen. Francisco Molina, who was the chief drug investigator on Lozano Gracia's PGR staff, said the Mexican government should not be quick to accept Davidow's explanations and should insist that the US produce a body. "This case should not be subject to all sorts of rumors and suspicions," he said. "If US authorities have nothing to hide, they should open up their files." Raul Salinas de Gortari, who is being held in a federal prison, took the opportunity to spread his own rumor. In a letter faxed to Mexican news media, Salinas said Ruiz Massieu was assassinated because he was about to reveal evidence that would have cleared him of Jose Francisco's murder. (Sources: Copley News Service, 09/15/99; Reuters, 08/26/99, 09/15/99, 09/16/99; Associated Press, 09/15/99, 09/16/99; Los Angeles Times, San Antonio Express-News, San Diego Union-Tribune, The Miami Herald, Agence France-Presse, Notimex, 09/16/99; The New York Times, 08/28/99, 09/16/99, 09/17/99; The Dallas Morning News, 09/03/99, 09/16/99, 09/17/99; The Washington Post, 09/16/99, 09/17/99; Proceso, 09/19/99; El Universal, 08/27/99, 09/17/99, 09/21/99; The News, 09/17/99, 09/20/99, 09/21/99; El Economista, 09/17/99, 09/21/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/15/99, 09/16/99, 09/20/99, 09/22/99; Excelsior, La Jornada, 08/27/99, 09/17/99, 09/22/99; Novedades, 09/17/99, 09/22/99)

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