

7-22-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Colombia, Ecuador Present Separate Extradition Requests For Mexican Citizen Lucia Morett." (2009).
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Colombia, Ecuador Present Separate Extradition Requests For Mexican Citizen Lucia Morett

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-07-22

July was very eventful for Lucia Morett, the Mexican college student injured in the Colombian government's raid on a rebel camp inside Ecuador in April 2008. Morett, who eventually returned to Mexico, had hoped to gain one of the at-large seats in the Mexican Congress offered by the center-left Partido del Trabajo (PT). But the PT did not win sufficient votes in the July 5 election to be able to offer Morett a position in the federal legislature. Still, Morett's troubles in July go beyond the missed opportunity to serve in Congress.

Colombian and Ecuadoran authorities each presented requests to the Mexican government asking that Morett be extradited to their countries. Colombia accused her of conspiring with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) against the Colombian government, while an Ecuadoran court charged her with actions that threatened the country's internal security. Both countries charge her with ties to FARC Morett was part of a five-member delegation from the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) that was visiting the FARC camp just inside Ecuador in April 2008 when Colombian forces launched a surprise raid (NotiSur, March 07, 2008). The attack killed four members of the UNAM delegation and severely injured Morett (SourceMex, April 02, 2008).

Morett recovered in a hospital in Ecuador and later spent some time in Nicaragua before returning to Mexico. She had been offered protection in Nicaragua and was received by President Daniel Ortega. At the time of the raid, Colombian authorities suggested that Morett and her fellow UNAM students had traveled to the FARC camp for guerrilla training. Morett emphatically denied the charge, saying their trip was merely academic. Still, Colombian authorities pledged to investigate fully.

After concluding its investigation, the Colombian government determined that Morett should stand trial and in early July of this year presented an extradition request to the Mexican government via Interpol. Morett's legal advisers criticized the request, suggesting that the Colombian government asked for her extradition to intimidate her. "Lucia is a relevant witness for bringing charges in an international court against [Colombian President Alvaro] Uribe and his government. He knows that he invaded Ecuador and killed members of the FARC and Mexican students," said attorney Hugo Rosas. There was also suspicion within some quarters in Ecuador about the UNAM delegation's visit to the FARC camp.

In July 2008, a regional prosecutor ordered the arrest of Morett and two Colombian women who were present at the camp (SourceMex, June 18, 2008). Ecuadoran judicial authorities, who took almost a year to review the regional prosecutor's request, presented their own extradition request just over a week after the Colombian request. The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said an Ecuadoran Supreme Court document stated, "The mere presence of Morett in the same

camp as [FARC] leader Raul Reyes, who died in the attack, is proof of her culpability." Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa's administration, which has supported Morett, distanced itself from the court pronouncement. "The Correa administration has simply complied with a petition from our judicial branch to present the extradition request to the Mexican government," said Marco Albuja, an adviser to Ecuador's Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.

Calderon government urged to reject requests

The news that the two South American countries had requested Morett's extradition created an uproar in Mexico, which until recent years had been reluctant to send any of its citizens to stand trial in other countries. Most recent cases have involved people accused of drug trafficking, and even those extraditions were nearly impossible until the Mexican high court intervened (SourceMex, January 24, 2001 and February 22, 2006). Most extradition requests have come from the US, which has asked that several high-profile individuals involved in the drug trade be brought to trial in the US.

In many of those cases, including that of ex-Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva, their lawyers have successfully delayed their transfer to the US (SourceMex, May 16, 2007 and July 11, 2007). Morett's case is viewed as having more political than criminal implications, and she has received widespread sympathy in Mexico. Some Mexicans wonder why President Felipe Calderon's administration has not immediately rejected the requests. "There is no political will on the part of the Mexican state to meet the obligations to its citizens who have been victimized by a criminal act overseas," said Jorge Morett, father of Lucia. Jorge Morett said the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) should reject the request immediately because there is no clear evidence that his daughter committed any crime.

The Comision Permanente approved a resolution to grant legal protection to Morett in case the Calderon government decides to proceed with the extradition. Deputy Juan Guerra, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) who served in the 2006-2009 Congress, said it is the Mexican government's moral obligation to defend Lucia Morett. "We are coming out in defense of a Mexican citizen who has not committed any crime," said Guerra.

On July 21, members of the legislative committee asked the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to ensure that Morett's rights are respected. The panel said it is prepared to grant Lucia Morett legal assistance to prevent extradition if the Calderon administration takes that course. "There is no doubt that the Congress has to show solidarity with Lucia Morett," said Sen. Mario Lopez Valdez, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "She has to have the full support of the Mexican government." The SRE said it would consider the extradition requests from Colombia and Ecuador closely but promised that any review would have to be conducted strictly in compliance with Mexican and international law. The SRE will have to consider a ruling from the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), which in October 2008 said that the government had found no evidence that Morett had any ties to the FARC (SourceMex, October 08, 2008). Morett would have had automatic immunity if she had gained a seat in the federal Chamber of Deputies for 2009-2012 as a member of the PT. Morett would have obtained an at-large slot in Congress if the PT had turned in a better performance in an election in which the center-left parties generally fared poorly (SourceMex, July 08, 2009).

The PT won three congressional districts and was allocated another 10 at-large seats, which are based on the percentage of the vote that each party received in the election. Arturo Lopez, the PT's national political coordinator, said Morett might have had a better chance at obtaining a legislative post if she had put her name on the list for at-large seats in the Mexico City legislative assembly (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) instead of the federal Congress. "It was a bad calculation on our part to think that it was better for her to participate in federal elections instead of the local race," said Lopez. Regardless of the SRE's decision, Morett might already be out of reach of Mexican authorities should they decide that extradition is warranted. Sources at the Mexican immigration agency (Instituto Nacional de Migracion, INM) said they have information that Morett might have recently left the country for Venezuela. "It is very likely that Morett is no longer in Mexico," said Jose Antonio Ortega, a lawyer who leads the Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Publica y Justicia Penal.

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