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Mexico Extradites Former Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva To U.S.

by LADB Staff

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President Felipe Calderón's administration has already extradited 326 Mexicans to the US to face trial, primarily on charges of drug trafficking. Many who have been extradited are high-profile figures, including several leaders of the Sinaloa, Tijuana, and Gulf cartels. The latest high-profile extradition involved Quintana Roo ex-governor Mario Villanueva Madrid, who was sent to the US on May 8. Another high-profile individual on the list is Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who in February of this year was sentenced to 25 years in prison in a highly secretive trial in Houston. Cárdenas Guillén was extradited to the US in 2007.

Another top trafficker that the US would want extradited is Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel. But he has eluded capture, and there are allegations that the Calderón government is protecting him. Calderón made extraditions a part of his efforts to combat drug trafficking (SourceMex, January 24, 2001), and this is expected to be part of his legacy. But Mexico's high court made the path to extradition easier with rulings in 2001 and in 2006 that expedited the process (SourceMex, January 24, 2001 and February 22, 2006). Villanueva's extradition became effective after a Mexican federal court (VI Tribunal Unitario) turned down the former governor's appeal. This was the last recourse for Villanueva, who for the past three years had turned to the Mexican legal system to try to avoid the extradition to the US, which the Mexican government approved in 2007 (SourceMex, July 11, 2007). The US originally requested Villanueva's extradition in 2002, charging him with accepting millions of dollars in bribes in exchange for allowing the Juárez cartel to use Quintana Roo as a launching point to smuggle cocaine from Colombia to the US (SourceMex, January 30, 2002).

Villanueva is also accused of laundering about US\$19 million in drug proceeds through accounts in New York and other cities. The extradition is significant because the ex-governor is the highest-level former official sent to the US to stand trial on drug charges. The only other former elected official brought to custody by US authorities was Rubén Gil Campos, mayor of Izucar de Matamoros in Puebla state, who was charged with drug trafficking and conspiracy. But no extradition was needed because Gil Campos was a part-time US resident, and he was detained while in US territory (SourceMex, April 09, 2008). Villanueva, who has spent nine years in prison in Mexico, was taken into custody in Mexico City by agents of the US Marshals Service (USMS), who promptly transported him to a prison in New York. He later appeared before federal court in Manhattan, where he pleaded not guilty to all charges. No trial date has been set. If convicted in the US, Villanueva could face up to life in prison on the drug charges and up to 20 years on the money-laundering counts.

As expected, reactions were varied to Villanueva's extradition. The ex-governor's attorney, Horacio García Vallejo, said he would file a complaint against the court that allowed the extradition because it violated another court's order prohibiting Villanueva's transfer to the US to face trial. The

opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Villanueva's party during his tenure as mayor of Cancún and later as governor of Quintana Roo, said the decision to send him to the US was politically motivated. Several PRI legislators accused Calderón of trying to score political points ahead of the 12 gubernatorial elections scheduled for July 4. Conversely, the US government welcomed the decision.

The Attorney General's office said the extradition "shows the close collaboration between Mexico and the government of the United States in the fight against crime, ensuring that our national territory does not become a refuge for fugitives of justice." US court sentences Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas to 25 years Less fanfare surrounded the trial of Cárdenas Guillén in Houston in February, only because US authorities made sure the proceedings remained secret. The Gulf cartel leader has been in US custody since 2007, when he was sent by the Calderón government along with other prominent drug traffickers to face trial in the US (SourceMex, May 16, 2007). Other top drug traffickers extradited to the US during Calderón's tenure include Hector "El Güero" Palma and Sandra Ávila (SourceMex, November 28, 2007) of the Sinaloa cartel; and Francisco Javier Arellano Félix, Francisco Rafael Arellano Félix, Benjamín Arellano Felix, Ismael Higuera Guerrero, and Gilberto Higuera Guerrero of the Tijuana cartel (SourceMex, November 05, 2008). Before his extradition, Cárdenas had spent four years at La Palma high-security federal prison, having been arrested in 2003 following a gunfight with the Mexican military in Tamaulipas state (SourceMex, March 26, 2003).

At a highly secretive trial in Houston, federal Judge Hilda Tagle sentenced Cárdenas Guillén to 25 years in prison and ordered the drug trafficker to forfeit US\$50 million, an insignificant amount given his total estimated earnings. Judge Tagle barred the press and the public from the proceedings, and the few details released in the aftermath of the trial came from a Department of Justice press release. At the trial, Cárdenas pleaded guilty to drug smuggling and money laundering and threatening to kill two US federal agents and a Cameron County sheriff's deputy who were working undercover in Tamaulipas. Some experts have speculated that Cárdenas' extradition might have contributed to a slight weakening of the Gulf cartel. The cartel's former enforcers, a group of Army deserters known as the Zetas, have since gone into the drug-smuggling business on their own (SourceMex, February 03, 2010).

The Zetas, along with the Sinaloa cartel, are thought to be in part responsible for an escalation of violence in Mexican communities along the US border (SourceMex, February 03, 2010). Allegations emerge that Calderón protected Sinaloa cartel Amid all the arrests and Calderón's high-profile campaign against drug traffickers, there are also allegations that the administration has conspired to somehow protect the Sinaloa cartel and its leader Joaquín Guzmán. The drug capo has eluded arrest since his bold escape from a federal prison in 2001 (SourceMex, January 24, 2001). Some of those allegations have come from members of Calderón's governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). "The government of Felipe Calderón is three years old, and in Sinaloa, we have not seen decisive action against the narcos," Deputy Manuel Clouthier, who represents Sinaloa, said in late February. "Nothing serious is being done." "I don't want to speculate," said PRI Deputy Jorge Carlos Ramírez Marín. "It is simply from statistics and from comments from PAN Deputy Manuel Clouthier that the allegations have surfaced."

The administration had generally ignored the allegations, which had circulated for several months, but Calderón felt compelled to address them in the wake of Clouthier's statements. "It is absolutely false," he told reporters. "I can assure you that this government has attacked without discrimination all criminal groups in Mexico...without taking into consideration whether it's the cartel of so-and-so or what's-his-name. We've fought them all." Still, critics say the numbers speak for themselves. Edgardo Buscaglia, an expert on organized crime at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de Monterrey (ITAM), estimated that 53,000 individuals have been arrested on drug-trafficking charges since Calderón launched his war on drugs in 2007, but fewer than 1,000 were associated with the Sinaloa cartel.

Despite the government's protests, new evidence emerged in early May that supported and perhaps explained a lack of government action against the Sinaloa cartel. Internal documents seized by the government from an associate of Joaquín Guzmán showed that the Sinaloa cartel had developed a sophisticated counterintelligence operation allowing its leaders to obtain advance knowledge about most key operations by the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP). SSP insiders as well as a large number of police officers and members of the military around the country who were on the cartel's payroll supplied much of the information. "As these documents show, it's clear that he [Guzmán] has informants at various levels of law enforcement," journalist Malcolm Beith, who is writing a book about the search for Guzmán entitled "The Last Narco," said in an interview with the New York Times. "Obviously, he has information leaked to him before any raid. He has so many levels of protection." Guzmán can afford to have a large payroll. The Sinaloa cartel leader has amassed such a large fortune from his drug operations that Forbes magazine listed him among its "new billionaires" in 2009 (SourceMex, March 18, 2009)

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