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Drug Trafficker Sandra Ávila Beltrán Avoids Extradition; Growing Number of Women Involved in Organized Crime

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A federal court rejected a second attempt by President Felipe Calderón's administration to extradite high-profile drug trafficker Sandra Ávila Beltrán to the US. Ávila Beltrán, known as La Reina del Pacífico (Queen of the Pacific), is among a growing number of women who have taken a leadership role in the drug-trafficking trade. The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) reported in October 2011 that 46 women who play an important role in drug-trafficking activities in Mexico have been arrested during the current administration. And, in a separate report in January, the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) said nearly 1,500 hundred women have been taken into custody on charges of drug trafficking and other crimes during the past five years.

Ávila Beltrán was a close confidant of Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, considered a top leader in the Sinaloa cartel along with Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. She is said to have played an important role in developing links between Colombia's Norte del Valle cartel, led by Juan Diego Espinoza Ramírez, and the Sinaloa cartel ([SourceMex, April 2, 2008](#)).

Authorities initially arrested Ávila Beltrán at a diner in Mexico City in 2007, linking her to the seizure of a huge shipment of cocaine in the port of Manzanillo in 2001. In December 2010, federal Judge Fernando Córdova del Valle acquitted Ávila of charges related to the Manzanillo drug bust. The judge ruled that the federal authorities had not presented the necessary evidence to prove that Ávila Beltrán had violated Mexico's laws on drug trafficking. The government appealed Córdova del Valle's verdict, but a federal appeals court upheld the ruling in August 2011.

Mexican authorities attempted to reclassify the charges against Ávila Beltrán to ease the extradition to the US, but Judge Jesús Alberto Chávez Hernández ruled in January that the charges were not substantially changed. In denying the extradition request, Chávez pointed out that the defendant was protected from facing double jeopardy. He said Ávila Beltrán would be facing the same charges in the US on which she was acquitted in Mexico.

The US government, which has sought to bring Ávila Beltrán to trial since November 2007, has indicted her on two conspiracy charges to import and distribute cocaine.

"It is impossible to say the actions related to the more than nine tons of cocaine discovered in the vessel would not be subject of the foreign trial for which US officials seek the defendant," Chávez said.

Ávila Beltrán remains in custody in El Rincón federal penitentiary in Nayarit state, pending trial on a separate money-laundering charge.

But the battle might not be over, as Mexican law allows the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) and the PGR to appeal Chávez's ruling. There was no word as of mid-January whether an appeal was forthcoming.

Women lead efforts for major cartels

The Queen of the Pacific is just one of many women who have become deeply involved in drug-trafficking organizations. Last October, the PGR released a list of 46 women arrested during Calderón's term in office who are considered among the most important leaders in organized crime.

The PGR said the group is only a small percentage of the hundreds of women who have been taken into custody in the past five years on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, arms trafficking, homicide, and other related crimes.

The nearly four dozen women leaders—which the PGR has labeled "dangerous" criminals—were affiliated with the major trafficking organizations, including the Zetas, La Familia Michoacana, and the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels.

The women included in the PGR report are not household names, but they played important roles in major criminal activity. For example, Jualiana López Aguirre of the Beltrán Leyva cartel was a key intermediary with Colombian cartels. She is thought to have brokered shipments totaling 150,000 tons of cocaine through Mexico. Authorities twice detained López Aguirre.

The Zetas had strong representation on the list, including Paulette Monserrat Barragán Sevilla, who was in charge of key operations for the cartel in Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche. As a chief aide to Zetas leader Heriberto Lazcano, she was given the task of managing real estate for the cartel, namely finding properties that could be used as safe houses. The PGR said she also played a role in recruiting people to sell drugs from their homes or on the streets.

Dora Luz Enrique Sánchez was in charge of protection payments for the Zetas and the Gulf cartel when the two organizations were allies. Two other women associated with the Zetas are Alejandra Gallardo Román and Lani Anahí Cortéz Vargas, both accused of carrying out murders on behalf of the cartel. Gallardo, who was in charge of operations in Aguascalientes state, is charged with having carried out the execution of businessman Rosario Díaz in the central Mexican state in 2009.

The PGR said Cortéz Vargas participated in several murders in Hidalgo state. She had a direct connection with Zeta leader Comandante Armadillo, who managed a vast cocaine-distribution operation in the city of Tulancingo.

María Marisela Canales Aguilar, a leader with La Familia Michoacana, specialized in automobile thefts in Mexico City, México state, and Puebla. She was said to own several chop shops where the stolen vehicles were stripped and parts sold. The proceeds were used to fund the cartel's operations. She also took charge of paying bribes to municipal and state police in exchange for protection.

Some women were not directly linked to a cartel but were important players in major criminal activities. For example, Ana María Morales Arreola founded a kidnapping organization that operated primarily in México state. Morales Arreola personally took charge of selecting the kidnap victims and watching the safe house where they were kept while a ransom was being sought. She is said to have ordered violence against some of the victims, including several mutilations. There were some cases where limbs were left out in public in the streets of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl.

There is also Cristina Hernández Suárez, who led a human-trafficking organization. She recruited young women from rural areas in Puebla, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Morelos, and Tabasco states for

prostitution. Some of those women were smuggled into the US and ended up in places like Atlanta, said the PGR.

While these are only a few of the prominent women involved in organized crime, the number of participants appears to be growing. In a report published in early January, SEDENA said almost 1,500 women have been detained during the current administration for participating in organized-crime activities, but almost half of these arrests took place in 2011. A total of 695 women were taken into custody for drug trafficking or similar crimes in the first eleven months of last year. But the number of arrests has varied from year to year, rising gradually from 123 in 2007, to 246 in 2008 and 314 in 2009, but plunging to 111 in 2010 before rebounding significantly to 695 in 2011. SEDENA did not offer an explanation for the discrepancies between 2009 and 2010.

The defense ministry said the majority of the arrests took place in the border cities of Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana. More than half the arrests in 2011 took place in Tijuana, but Juárez recorded the largest number of arrests between 2007 and 2009, the report noted.

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