

8-15-2012

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Former Quintana Roo Governor Villanueva, Sinaloa Cartel's 'Queen of the Pacific' Appear in U.S. Courts to Answer to Drug-Related Charges." (2012). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5913>

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Former Quintana Roo Governor Villanueva, Sinaloa Cartel's 'Queen of the Pacific' Appear in U.S. Courts to Answer to Drug-Related Charges

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2012-08-15

Two high-profile Mexicans accused of drug-trafficking offenses had court dates in the US in early August. On Aug. 2, former Quintana Roo governor Mario Villanueva Madrid pleaded guilty in a US Federal District Court in New York to charges that he conspired to launder millions of dollars of drug profits in the US. A week later, Sandra Ávila Beltrán, a high-ranking lieutenant in the Sinaloa cartel, appeared in a US Federal Court in Miami after her extradition to the US. Ávila Beltrán, commonly known as the Reina del Pacífico (Queen of the Pacific), was scheduled to be arraigned on drug-trafficking charges, after allegedly controlling cocaine traffic from Colombia to the western US for years.

Villanueva, who is the highest-profile politician to face drug charges in the US, was extradited in 2010 ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)) after serving a six-year sentence in Mexico on money-laundering charges ([SourceMex, May 30, 2001](#)). The Mexican federal government had been investigating Villanueva while he was governor but was unable to move against him because he had immunity as an elected official. He eluded arrest after leaving office and went into hiding for several months ([SourceMex, April 14, 1999](#)).

Villanueva pleads guilty to laundering drug profits

In his plea before US District Judge Victor Marrero in Manhattan, Villanueva readily acknowledged that he participated in a conspiracy from 1993 to 2001 to conceal the origin of funds obtained from drug trafficking. Prosecutors said Villanueva transferred illicit profits to and from a series of third-party accounts and offshore corporations, ultimately ending up in accounts at Lehman Brothers. At Lehman Brothers, the ex-governor worked with Consuelo Marquez, an investment representative who pleaded guilty to money-laundering charges in 2005.

"The defendant received those proceeds and laundered them through various financial transactions," federal prosecutor Jason Smith said at the plea proceeding at the New York Federal Court. "They were drug-trafficking proceeds."

As part of his agreement with prosecutors, Villanueva pleaded guilty to just one count of money-laundering conspiracy, which carries a potential maximum of 20 years in prison. Marrero set a sentencing date for October. "Without an agreement, Villanueva could have been subject to a series of 20-year sentences for various crimes," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

Publicity surrounding Villanueva's admission that he participated in laundering drug profits does little to help the efforts of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to dispel the widespread notion that the party has readily collaborated with drug-trafficking organizations. This is because some high-profile elected officials have been accused of colluding with drug capos ([SourceMex, July](#)

22, 1998, [April 9, 2008](#), and [Nov. 16, 2011](#)). In Villanueva's case, the ex-governor was said to have accepted millions of dollars in bribes from the Juárez cartel in exchange for allowing Quintana Roo state, including the resort of Cancún, to be an entry point for cocaine shipments from Colombia.

Following Villanueva's plea, some party officials immediately distanced themselves from the ex-governor. Pedro Flota Alcocer, president of the PRI in Quintana Roo state, issued a statement calling Villanueva's actions "regrettable." Flota said Villanueva's actions hurt the reputation of Quintana Roo and other parts of southern Mexico. "He is going to have to assume the consequences of his actions," said Flota.

But the collusion with drug traffickers in Mexico runs across party lines. Former Cancún mayor Gregorio Sánchez was arrested on drug-trafficking charges while preparing to represent the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the 2010 gubernatorial elections ([SourceMex, June 2, 2010](#)). And politicians from the PRD in Zacatecas ([SourceMex, May 27, 2009](#)) and the Partido Acción Nacional in Morelos ([SourceMex, April 21, 2004](#)) have been accused of cooperating with drug traffickers. The arrest of several mayors in Michoacán state in 2009 on these same charges involved members of all three major parties ([SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009](#)).

Villanueva's attorney in Mexico insists that the ex-governor should not have to face double jeopardy because a court in Mexico already cleared him of the same charges he is facing in the US. "What we expect is that those who make the final judgment in the US will consider that he was already processed and exonerated in Mexico," said lawyer Gabriela Guzmán Rivera.

Guzmán Rivera said the decision to plead guilty in a US court is a bargaining chip by Villanueva's legal team to convince US prosecutors to allow the ex-governor to count the time he has already served in a Mexican jail as part of his US sentence, which would bring him home much sooner than the maximum of 20 years.

Sinaloa cartel leader finally extradited to US

Mexico's decision to allow the extradition of Ávila Beltrán to the US is a victory for US prosecutors, who tried for more than two years to bring the Sinaloa cartel leader to the US. Mexican authorities turned Ávila Beltrán over to the US Marshals Service (USMS) at the Toluca International Airport.

"Sandra Ávila Beltrán engaged in a prolonged process that lasted two-and-a-half years to prevent her extradition to the US," the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) said in a statement.

The move became possible when a panel of judges agreed in June to comply with the US request under certain conditions. The panel, comprising three federal appellate judges, said Ávila Beltrán could only be tried in the US on one of two charges presented to a grand jury in 2004. The stipulation is that she cannot be tried for the seizure of more than nine tons of cocaine from a vessel in the port of Manzanillo because a Mexican judge acquitted her in that case in December 2010. An appeals court upheld the verdict in August 2011. Because of the acquittal, a judge denied the Mexican government's request to be allowed to extradite Ávila Beltrán ([SourceMex, Jan. 18, 2012](#)).

But the PGR filed an amended request for her extradition, asking that Ávila Beltrán be extradited on the second set of charges, which stem from several drug seizures in Chicago in 2001 that amounted to 100 kg of cocaine.

On Aug. 10, Ávila Beltrán appeared before Federal District Judge John O'Sullivan to hear the charges against her, and her arraignment was scheduled for Aug. 14. She could face a sentence

of life in prison, but security experts say she could receive a reduced sentence if she agrees to cooperate with authorities.

Several prominent drug traffickers are in custody in the US, including Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who headed the once powerful Gulf cartel ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)), and former Tijuana cartel leader Benjamín Arellano Félix ([SourceMex, May 16, 2007](#)). Without Cárdenas Guillén's leadership, the Gulf cartel has lost much of its hold on northeast Mexico, primarily to the Zetas ([SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012](#)).

Ávila Beltrán comes from a notorious drug-trafficking family. Her uncle is Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, founder of the now defunct Guadalajara cartel, who is now serving a 40-year sentence in Mexico for drug trafficking and the murder of US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena in 1985 ([NotiSur, April 13, 1989](#)).

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](#)).

Mexican authorities arrested Ávila Beltrán and Espinoza Ramírez in 2007. US authorities requested extradition shortly after that, but her legal team successfully fought the effort for more than two years.

Ávila Beltrán received the nickname "queen" in a narcocorrido, a genre of songs in Mexico that celebrates the drug cartels. The song, performed by the group Los Tucanes de Tijuana, glorifies the rise of Ávila Beltrán through the ranks of a top drug-trafficking organization.

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