

10-14-2015

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## Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Mexico Extradites 13 Individuals Accused of Drug Trafficking, Other Crimes to the U.S." (2015).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6206>

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## Mexico Extradites 13 Individuals Accused of Drug Trafficking, Other Crimes to the U.S.

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2015-10-14

In early October, the Mexican government announced the extradition of 13 individuals wanted in the US on charges of drug trafficking and other crimes, including Édgar Valdez Villarreal of the Beltrán Leyva drug-trafficking organization and Jorge Costilla Sánchez of the Gulf cartel. Valdez Villarreal, most commonly known by his nickname La Barbie, is a US citizen who rose through the ranks of the Beltrán Leyva cartel, which operated primarily in central Mexico.

The accused were all being held in El Altiplano, the same maximum-security prison as Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, who made a bold escape from that facility in July, exposing a wide web of corruption at the prison ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). Guzmán had been held in the prison since February 2014.

US authorities had quietly requested Guzmán's extradition to the US since his high-profile arrest in Mazatlán in Sinaloa state ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)), but Mexican authorities were slow to move on the request ([SourceMex, Sept. 9, 2015](#)).

The decision to extradite the 13 individuals so soon after Chapo Guzmán's escape led to some suspicions that the move by President Enrique Peña Nieto's government was an effort to save face at a time when the administration's reputation is at an all-time low. Administration officials adamantly denied that the extraditions and Guzmán's escape were related in any way, since the process of sending the accused to the US was already underway when Chapo escaped. "This was not an effort to clear our conscience," Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong said during the swearing-in ceremony of Silvano Aureoles as governor of Michoacán state on Oct. 2

### *No connections' to Chapo Guzmán's escape*

Others suggested that there was little evidence to connect the the extraditions and Chapo's escape. "Many experts agree that there is no direct relationship between the two developments because the process of completing an extradition takes years," said the daily newspaper Excélsior. However, the same experts also agree that the timing of the extradition could be attributed to the problems of public safety that Mexico has suffered recently, including Guzmán's escape and the decision by the courts in 2013 to release Rafael Caro Quintero, one of the founders of the Guadalajara cartel, on a technicality ([SourceMex, Aug. 14, 2013](#)). Caro Quintero, who had already served 28 years of a 40-year sentence, was charged in the kidnapping, torture, and murder of US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) special agent Enrique Camarena in Guadalajara in 1985. Charges were pending in the US at the time of his release.

According to Excélsior, the one-year anniversary of the disappearance and likely murder of 43 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)) might have also influenced the administration to show that it is taking action against drug traffickers. Federal authorities contend that drug cartels, with the cooperation of local police and politicians, might have been behind the disappearance. However,

an independent investigation from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) suggested federal authorities might have known about the murders and either assisted or stood by while the students were being killed ([SourceMex, Sept. 16, 2015](#)).

Valdez Villarreal, one of the 15 men extradited to the US, is one of four drug capos credited for helping create the criminal organization Guerreros Unidos, which is accused of having carried out the murders in Guerrero.

### *New era of cooperation?*

Still, the move to extradite the cartel leaders brought accolades and statements from prosecutors on both sides of a new era of cooperation between Mexico and the US.

Tomás Zerón de Lucio, director of the Agencia de Investigación Criminal (AIC), told reporters that the extraditions were made following requests from different US federal courts "in the spirit of collaboration in the fight against organized crime" between both countries. The AIC is a unit of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR).

"Such extraditions are taking place once the requirements established by Mexican law have been met, and they are compatible with agreements signed by Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores," Zerón de Lucio told reporters.

Other officials in the prosecutor's office offered reassurances that the extraditions are in full compliance with Mexican law. José Alberto Rodríguez Calderón, an official in charge of international affairs at the PGR, said none of the 13 men who are being extradited would face the death penalty. In 2001, Mexico's high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN) ruled that the federal government has the authority to expedite extraditions to the US provided they are sentenced under Mexican guidelines, which rules out the death penalty entirely ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001](#)). The court also initially ruled that any person extradited to the US could not face a prison sentence longer than the equivalent of Mexico's life sentence of 40 to 60 years ([SourceMex, Oct. 10, 2001](#)), but the SCJN later ruled that a drug trafficker could be put in a US prison on a US life sentence ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006](#)).

US officials also lauded the Mexican government's decision. "Today's extraditions would not have been possible without the close collaboration and productive relationship the Department of Justice enjoys with officials at the highest levels of law enforcement in Mexico," US Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch said in a statement on the day the Mexican government announced its decision.

Some observers pointed out, however, that the extradition does represent a change in stance by the Peña Nieto government. This is the first time that Peña Nieto has ordered the extradition of Mexican citizens to the US without completing their sentence in Mexico. "This is a significant change, because we're resuming the policy of extraditions that were started under ex-President Felipe Calderón," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in *Excélsior*.

The prominent drug traffickers extradited during the Calderón government include Osiel Cárdenas Guillén of the Gulf cartel ([SourceMex, March 26, 2003](#)), Hector "El Güero" Palma, a key leader in the Sinaloa cartel ([SourceMex, May 16, 2007](#)), Benjamín Arellano Félix of the Tijuana cartel ([SourceMex, May 16, 2007](#)), and Sandra Ávila Beltrán of the Sinaloa cartel ([SourceMex, Aug. 15, 2012](#)). The Calderón government also extradited former Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid, who was facing drug-trafficking charges in the US ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)).

Valdez Villarreal—who was born and raised in Laredo, Texas—is one of two recognizable names on the latest list of cartel leaders extradited to the US. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the Beltrán Leyva organization and became involved in a bloody power struggle for the leadership of the cartel with Héctor Beltrán Leyva, brother of founder Arturo Beltrán Leyva, who was killed in Mexico City in 2009 ([SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010](#)). Even though La Barbie failed to wrest control of the organization from Hector Beltrán Leyva, he remain in charge of a large drug-trafficking network until his arrest in August 2010 ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)).

The other prominent individual extradited, Costilla Sánchez, also known as El Coss, is facing charges of smuggling and distribution of cocaine and marijuana in various parts of the US, as well as of money laundering. The cartel leader, who assumed the mantle as head of the Gulf cartel after Cárdenas Guillén was arrested, is on the FBI's most-wanted list.

While most of the individuals extradited are facing charges of drug trafficking, two people are accused of murdering US officials. José Manuel García Sota is charged with killing a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent and the attempted murder of another agent in Washington, DC, in 2011. Ricardo Valles de la Rosa, head of the Barrio Azteca gang, is facing charges of murdering three people at the US Consulate in Ciudad Juárez in 2010 ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)).

Another person on the list is Jean Baptiste Kingery, who was wanted in a federal court of the District of Arizona for trafficking arms from the US to Mexico.

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