

6-7-2001

## Self-confessed Spy Deported from Mexico

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Self-confessed Spy Deported from Mexico." (2001). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8850>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Self-confessed Spy Deported from Mexico

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2001-06-07

A former Cuban intelligence officer who claimed to have spied for Cuba on Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations in Mexico has been tried and sentenced in a Cuban military court. The case has raised questions about the US response to his request for political asylum in Mexico and why Mexican immigration authorities deported a spy who might have names of Mexican officials who worked for him.

During his trial in May, Pedro Riera Escalante pleaded guilty to charges of falsifying documents, illegal departure from Cuba, and bribery. He was sentenced in early June to a six-year prison term. Four other defendants were sentenced earlier as accomplices. Immigration officer Pedro Lossy received a 12-year sentence. Fredesvinda Sanchez received an eight-year sentence. Lester Lopez Benitez, an employee at the Jose Marti International Airport in Havana, was sentenced to four years of house arrest, and immigration employee Suleika Villalon Rivera received a one-and-a-half-year sentence of house arrest.

Riera wrote to Mexican President Vicente Fox Quesada in mid-May asking him to intercede on his behalf with the Cuban government and asserting that his rights had been violated. He also said Cuban authorities had threatened him with death if he made statements against the Cuban government. Riera is a former major in the Cuban intelligence service (Direccion General de Inteligencia de Cuba) who worked out of the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City between 1986 and 1991 posing as a consular official. In 1991, Riera ended his assignment in Mexico when the US government-funded TV Marti identified him as a Cuban agent. He said he decided to defect to Mexico after a series of disappointments with the Cuban regime beginning with President Fidel Castro's denunciation and imprisonment of his uncle, Anibal Escalante, in 1962.

In 1989, the Cuban intelligence service began investigating Riera for his political views. In the same year, Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa and senior intelligence officer Antonio de la Guardia were convicted on narcotics charges and executed, setting off what Riera said was a deterioration in the intelligence service (see NotiSur, 1992-08-04, EcoCentral, 1997-10-02). Riera left Cuba illegally in September 2000 to seek political asylum in Mexico. After a meeting with a New York Times correspondent, Riera, along with Radio Marti journalist Edelmiro Castellanos, met with a Mexican national security official to discuss his asylum request.

On Oct. 3, 2000, Riera was detained outside a Mexico City restaurant and deported the next day. Riera claimed he was kidnapped by Mexican authorities and returned to Cuba illegally. Mexican immigration officials acknowledged that he had talked about asylum with an official in the Foreign Relations Secretariat who referred him to the Interior Secretariat. However, there was some ambiguity in government statements regarding whether Riera had ever formally asked for asylum. An Interior official said he had no knowledge of Riera or of any asylum request.

The official reason given for Riera's deportation was that he had no Mexican visa. However, the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma reported that Riera, who is married to a Mexican national, was eligible for an immigrant visa and permanent residence status. In the New York Times account, human rights activist Rafael Alvarez of the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro (PRODH) said that the Mexican government's action violated international law. Oscar González, president of the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos, agreed that the deportation violated international law relating to political asylum and the repatriation of persons threatened with harm in their home country.

Riera Escalante said he spied on CIA. Riera told Reforma that he had spied on CIA operatives in Mexico and had recruited as many as 150 Mexican informants including leftists, business executives, members of Mexican security forces, politicians, and journalists. Riera said he was responsible for a highly successful operation called Magnifying Glass (Operación Lupa) by which he gained access to CIA correspondence at the US Embassy in Mexico City. In another operation, code-named Moncada, he worked with former CIA agent Philip Agee to recruit a CIA officer in Mexico. Riera also said he assisted Agee in preparing his 1975 book on the CIA, *Inside the Company*.

Agee denied having ever met Riera and denied Riera had anything to do with writing his book. "Who knows if the deportation was the result of months of evaluation and not a precipitous decision....It's clear that this man tried to pass himself off as someone important," Agee said.

Mario Rodríguez, Cuban ambassador in Mexico City, denied that there were any Cuban spies in Mexico or the US. US showed little interest in spy. Questions have been raised about the US role in the case because of Alvarez's assertion that Riera had met with US Embassy officials during the period in which he was seeking asylum. Despite Riera's claim that he had detailed knowledge of Mexican informants and of CIA activities in Mexico, the US State Department showed little interest in him or in his desire to defect.

During a press briefing, a reporter asked State Department spokesman Richard Boucher why the US did not help Riera before he was deported. "Mexican authorities say that this is a surprise for them, that you offer a lot of protection to baseball players and other guys who request protection by the United States, [but] not to a diplomat who has been in contact with the American officials talking about security matters," said the questioner. Boucher said that it was up to Mexico to evaluate Riera's asylum request, and "that is why we think we need an explanation from the Mexican government. First and foremost, that's where the obligation lies in cases of individuals that have a fear of persecution."

Mexico's reasons for deporting Riera have also been questioned. Some observers have suggested that then President Ernesto Zedillo wanted to prevent disclosure of the names of Riera's informants, some of whom may have been members of Zedillo's governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) or even government officials. A day after the deportation, the US asked the Mexican government to take steps to ensure Riera's safety in Cuba. A statement issued by the embassy said, "We are very concerned about the human rights implications raised by this action and we have asked for a full explanation."

Mexican Interior Minister Diodoro Carrasco told The Miami Herald that Mexico was "following up on the case" and seeking information from Cuba on the legal proceedings against Riera. But a Mexican immigration official said Mexico was not obliged to explain anything to the US.

-- End --