

Pablo Escobar's ex-lover flees Colombia

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BOGOTA, Colombia - A former lover of slain drug kingpin Pablo Escobar fled to the United States on Tuesday after revealing information Colombian prosecutors had hoped would help convict a former justice minister in the 1989 assassination of a presidential candidate.

The U.S. Embassy said "for safety and security reasons," it had escorted former television news anchor Virginia Vallejo to the United States, where her help is sought in ongoing drug investigations.

The abrupt departure by Vallejo, whose leggy ads for a brand of stockings seduced the nation in the 1980s and won her the heart of Escobar, came two days after she broke a decade of silence to tell the Miami newspaper El Nuevo Herald that she witnessed former Justice Minister Alberto Santofimio urging her lover to kill Luis Carlos Galan.

Santofimio is on trial on charges he ordered a hit squad to kill Galan during the 1990 election campaign in order to boost his own presidential candidacy and prevent Escobar's extradition to the United States. It was unclear how Vallejo's departure would affect the trial and prosecutors' strategy.

Vallejo's surprise interview included details of her long affair with and the pudgy, unkempt Escobar - a love she confessed to "paying for with 20 years of tears."

Vallejo said she was present on three occasions when Santofimio, considered Escobar's political godfather, urged him to "neutralize Galan," calling him a threat to their plans to "convert Colombia into a narco-state."

After learning of Vallejo's revelations, prosecutors hoped her sworn testimony would provide the final evidence to convict Santofimio, who was a senator and justice minister in the 1970s. Santofimio, 62, faces up to 40 years in prison.

Even though Vallejo was not slated to take the witness stand and open-court proceedings ended 10 days ago, prosecutors on Monday formally asked Judge Jesus Antonio Lozano to make an exception and allow her last-minute testimony.

"The judge should make an independent evaluation of this new piece of evidence and make a ruling accordingly," Attorney General Edgardo Maya told the Colombian daily newspaper El Tiempo.

It was unclear whether Vallejo would return to Colombia for testimony or would provide evidence in writing.

Before he was killed by authorities in 1993, Escobar's Medellin drug cartel waged a bloody campaign of killings, bombings and kidnappings to intimidate judges, police, journalists, Cabinet ministers and an attorney general to prevent their boss' extradition. Hundreds more died in Medellin and the capital of Bogota.