

# Mexico pledges to extradite drug lords

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**NEW YORK** - President Vicente Fox said Tuesday that Mexico is willing to extradite any drug lord in its custody wanted by the United States.

Fox said Mexico currently has 16 "big leaders" of drug gangs in jail along with 75,000 lower level members of various cartels.

"We are fighting hard and attaining very important results," Fox said of Mexico's fight against drug dealers. He was speaking at a news conference in New York where he was attending the United Nations General Assembly.

The U.S. is believed to have requested the extradition of at least three suspected drug kingpins: Benjamin Arellano Felix of the Arellano Felix smuggling syndicate; Osiel Cardenas, reputed head of the Gulf Cartel; and Hector "El Guero" Palma, a reputed leader of the Sinaloa drug cartel.

"We will extradite all of those who have pending matters with U.S. justice," Fox said.

It was the first time Mexico's president had made such a sweeping commitment to send wanted drug lords to face charges in the U.S.

Mexico extradited its first major drug lord - accused kingpin Francisco Rafael Arellano Felix - to the United States over the weekend. Before that, Mexico had often balked at sending drug kingpins, arguing they should face justice in Mexico and refusing to send anyone to the U.S. who would face the death penalty.

Mexico's extradition of the man who once ran the Arellano Felix drug clan was a victory for U.S. officials who have been pushing Mexico to send them more drug lords.

After serving a 10-year sentence in Mexico, Arellano Felix was loaded into a helicopter to the Mexican border town of Matamoros, then flown across and handed over to Texas officials in Brownsville. He will be taken to California to face trial on charges stemming from a 1980 case in which he allegedly sold cocaine to an undercover police officer in the United States.

U.S. authorities requested Arellano Felix's extradition on June 2, 2003. A federal judge approved that request in 2004, but it took two years for the Foreign Relations Department approve the extradition.

Mexico has fought many extraditions in the past, arguing that suspects must face justice here first. It also has refused to extradite suspects who face the death penalty in other countries.

Capital punishment is illegal here, and a 1978 extradition treaty with the United States allows Mexico to deny extradition if a person faces the death penalty in another country.

In November, Mexico's Supreme Court removed an obstacle that had prevented many of the country's most notorious criminals from facing U.S. justice when it overturned a 4-year ban on the extradition of suspects facing life in prison.

Mexico last year extradited 41 suspected criminals to the United States, up from 34 in 2004; 31 in 2003; 25 in 2002; 17 in 2001; and 12 in 2000, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

