

Panama's Noriega set to be released

Panama's ex-leader, Manuel Noriega, may leave a South Miami-Dade prison where he's been since 1990 on Sept. 9.

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TOPPLED: Former Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega raises his arm as a sign of victory Oct. 4, 1989, in Panama, left. Months later, Noriega was arrested on Jan. 4, 1990, in Miami, right.

Former Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega, imprisoned in South Miami-Dade on drug-trafficking and racketeering convictions since 1990, will be released on Sept. 9 -- due in part to good behavior and other credits.

Noriega, the military ruler toppled by a massive U.S. invasion of his country in late 1989, was automatically eligible for parole after serving close to two-thirds of his 30-year federal sentence.

"There is no turning back," said Noriega's attorney, Frank Rubino. "The order is obligatory, and nobody can stop it. He's in good health and he wants to go home. He has no intention of remaining here."

The federal judge who sentenced the former general agreed he has paid his debt.

"I think under the circumstances, he has served a sufficient sentence," Senior U.S. District Judge William Hoeveler said Tuesday night.

When Noriega steps out of his specially built, apartment-like cell at the Federal Correctional Institution in Southwest Miami-Dade, he probably won't be free. Noriega -- reportedly 68 or 72, depending on conflicting birth records -- is wanted in Panama and in France.

The U.S. attorney's office in Miami is expected to file a request for his extradition on behalf of the French later this year, authorities said.

Panama's foreign minister, Samuel Lewis Navarro, recently told the daily La Prensa newspaper that his government has already filed a petition for Noriega's extradition but has not received a response from U.S. officials.

"As much as Noriega may be celebrating his early release, the truth is it's a celebration for naught," said former U.S. Attorney Guy Lewis, who tried his case along with prosecutors Richard Gregorie and Michael "Pat" Sullivan. "He's been convicted in absentia on murder charges in Panama, and he's been convicted in absentia on money-laundering charges in France."

"The real question is not whether he will be released from custody," said Lewis. "The real question is will he be turned over to the Panamanians or the French to continue his prison sentence?"

Rubino said Noriega wants to go home and will deal with the charges in Panama.

An opinion poll conducted by La Prensa showed that 62 percent of 859 respondents believed Noriega must be sent to Panama.

Some say the presence of Noriega followers in the current government might mean he won't pay for his crimes, the newspaper said.

The president is Martin Torrijos, son of Gen. Omar Torrijos, for whom Noriega professed great loyalty. Gen. Torrijos led Panama from 1965 to 1981, when he died in a plane crash.

Noriega eventually seized power, ruling Panama until the U.S. invasion, Operation Just Cause, in December 1989. Noriega took sanctuary in the Vatican Embassy in Panama City but surrendered to U.S. troops a few weeks later. While he was there, the U.S. military played rock music, including Guns 'n' Roses -- at top volume. The music stopped after the Vatican complained of harassment.

The general was whisked to Miami, where he would later stand trial. It took until 1992 for the U.S. attorney's office to convict him.

The case posed legal and political problems, primarily because Noriega was a head of state. "It was the big one," said Tom Raffanello, who headed the team of 22 DEA agents.

Raffanello, his agents and prosecutors convinced imprisoned Medellín cartel figurehead Carlos Lehder to testify against Noriega, who allowed Panama to be used as a transshipment point for tons of U.S.-bound cocaine.

After his conviction and sentencing, Hoeweler declared him "a prisoner of war" who should be accorded special privileges, including the apartment-like cell -- complete with phone, color TV and exercise bike -- at the low-security Southwest Miami-Dade federal prison.

Noriega sought early release four times, starting in 2000. He was denied at every turn.

In March 2000, Noriega lost his bid because former President George H.W. Bush said he feared Noriega would try to assassinate him if he were released early, Rubino said -- calling Bush's involvement in Noriega's request "outrageous."

"It is a low blow, a cheap shot," Rubino said at the time.

In February 2004, Hoeweler recommended Noriega's early release in a letter to the U.S. Parole Commission -- the first time in 27 years he had done so for a defendant convicted in his court.

"Among other things, which I take seriously myself, he has converted to the Baptist faith," Hoeweler wrote. "It has been reported to me that while incarcerated, General Noriega has frequently received the pastor who baptized him."

But the next month, a parole commissioner rejected the former general's request.

With good behavior and other prison credits, Noriega became automatically eligible to serve about two-thirds of his 30-year sentence.

Noriega had spoken well of Hoeveller in the past.

Before the 1991-92 trial began, Noriega said in open court: "The one shining light through this legal nightmare has been your honor. You have acted as honest and fair as anyone could hope for."

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