

U.S. Officials Laud Transfer Of Mexican Drug Suspects

Attorney General Calls Friday's Extraditions 'Unprecedented'

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MEXICO CITY, Jan. 20 -- The extradition to the United States of four major drug traffickers, including Osiel Cardenas Guillen, head of the powerful Gulf cartel, was hailed Saturday by U.S. officials as a signal of a new era of cooperation.

U.S. Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales called the extraditions "unprecedented," and the U.S. ambassador to [Mexico](#), Antonio O. Garza Jr., proclaimed the transfer "a monumental moment in our two nations' battle with the vicious drug traffickers and criminals who threaten our very way of life."

For years, U.S. officials have criticized Mexico as a sometimes-difficult partner in the war against drugs because of its reluctance to extradite top drug lords to the United States. Mexico has long refused to extradite suspects who might face the death penalty. In 2001, Mexico's Supreme Court also barred extraditions of suspects facing possible life sentences, which were considered "cruel and unusual punishment" here. But the court reversed itself in November 2005, clearing the way for higher-profile extraditions. The ruling did not affect death penalty cases.

Cardenas, who was suspected of running his drug empire from his prison cell, was one of 15 people extradited late Friday. A swaggering figure, he is known for his gold-plated rifle and for currying favor with the poor by lavishing children with thousands of dollars' worth of toys, cakes and milk.

Cardenas faces drug distribution charges in southern Texas and is also charged with assaulting and threatening to kill agents of the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as a sheriff's deputy. Two brothers, Ismael and Gilberto Higuera Guerrero -- both former high-ranking members of the Arellano Felix drug cartel -- face drug trafficking and money laundering charges in Southern California. Hector "El Guero" Palma Salazar, a former top figure in the Chapo Guzman-Guero Palma cartel, also faces drug distribution charges in Southern California.

Mexico extradited a record 63 suspects to the United States in 2006. But the administration of President Vicente Fox, who left office Dec. 1, was criticized for failing to turn over large numbers of high-ranking drug lords.

The latest extraditions coincide with a major crackdown on drug gangs in Mexico by the administration of President Felipe Calderon, who has been using the military to swarm regions of the country plagued by brazen violence, including beheadings. In the hours before the extraditions were announced, Calderon dispatched more than 7,000 soldiers to Acapulco, where drug violence threatens the lucrative tourist market. The offensive is the third ordered by Calderon, who also has sent troops to Tijuana and the state of Michoacan.

"Calderon is sending a message that he is going to be firm in combating the drug cartels. But on the other hand, the extraditions also allow him to get rid of hot potatoes from the Mexican penal system," said Jorge Chabat, an expert in Mexican criminal justice.

Mexico's prisons, which are notoriously corrupt, have struggled to handle drug kingpins. Mexico's most powerful drug lord, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, escaped from prison in 2001 and remains at large despite a U.S. government reward for information leading to his arrest.

Mexican drug cartels have become some of the most powerful and violent in the world. Between 70 and 90 percent of cocaine destined for the United States passes through Mexico, according to the U.S. State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Drug gangs are suspected in more than 2,000 killings in Mexico last year, including dozens of police officers and local political officials. Chabat said the cartels would probably respond to the extraditions with more killings.