

Mexican judge orders ex-gov's release

The Miami Herald
Jun. 21, 2007

MEXICO CITY --

A Mexican judge has ordered the release of a former state governor wanted in the United States on drug trafficking charges, ruling that a money laundering sentence has been satisfied by time already served.

In 2002, a federal court in New York asked Mexico to extradite Mario Villanueva on charges he helped smuggle 200 tons of cocaine into the United States. Prosecutors said Villanueva received \$500,000 for each of several shipments he aided.

But it was unclear whether Villanueva - who laundered alleged drug money through Swiss banks while serving as governor of the Caribbean coast state of Quintana Roo, where Cancun is located - would actually be set free or held pending extradition.

The Federal Judicial Council announced Wednesday that the judge in the case found Villanueva not guilty of charges of drug trafficking and organized crime.

The judge sentenced Villanueva to six years in prison in the Tuesday ruling, but because Villanueva has been in jail since May, 2001, he ruled the former governor had already served the sentence. Villanueva is being held at the high-security Altiplano prison west of Mexico City.

Mexican police sometimes wait until a suspect steps out of the gates of a prison before serving him with another warrant and re-arresting him.

Prosecutors originally accused Villanueva of allowing a branch of the Juarez drug cartel to operate in his state and assigned police officers to protect traffickers; Villanueva denied those accusations, saying they were motivated by political rivalries.

But knowing he would be arrested, Villanueva disappeared two weeks before his term ended in 1999, and spent two years in hiding before he was caught in Cancun in 2001.

In 2005, a former investment manager at Lehman Brothers Inc. pleaded guilty to helping Villanueva launder \$11 million in drug money.