

Ex-Mexico governor re-arrested for drugs

The Miami Herald
Jun. 21, 2007

MEXICO CITY --

A former Mexican governor freed after six years behind bars was immediately re-arrested Thursday on a U.S. extradition request in which he is accused of helping smuggle 200 tons of cocaine into the United States, federal prosecutors said.

It was the latest chapter in the saga of Mario Villanueva, the former governor of the Caribbean state of Quintana Roo. Villanueva went into hiding in 1999 two weeks before the end of his six-year term and was hunted for two years until he was captured, sporting a beard and ponytail, in Cancun, the state's largest city.

A Mexican judge on Tuesday ordered Villanueva's release after he served six years on charges he laundered alleged drug money through Swiss banks while serving as governor. Villanueva was cleared of drug trafficking and organized crime charges.

But any hopes of liberty that Villanueva had quickly evaporated in the pre-dawn hours of Thursday. Federal police showed up at a prison west of Mexico City, where he was to have been released, and took him to a maximum-security lockup in the capital pending extradition, according to a statement from the attorney general's office.

In 2002, a federal court in New York asked Mexico to extradite 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.

Based on past cases, it could take months, if not years, for Villanueva to be extradited. His lawyers have vowed to fight any extradition.

President Felipe Calderon has shown greater willingness to extradite drug suspects to the U.S. since taking office in December. Before, few drug lords were sent north of the border because Mexican argued they should face justice first at home.

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

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