

Mexico Moves to Send Ex-Governor to U.S. on Drug Charges

The New York Times
June 22, 2007

MEXICO CITY, June 21 — [Mexico](#) took the first steps on Thursday toward extraditing the former governor of Quintana Roo to the United States, where he is wanted in New York City on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering and racketeering.

The extradition would continue a trend under President [Felipe Calderón](#), who has shipped 21 people accused as part of the drug trade, including four high-level cartel leaders, to the United States this year.

If a Mexican judge approves the extradition, the former governor, Mario Villanueva Madrid, would become the highest-ranking former elected official from Mexico to stand trial in the United States on drug-trafficking charges. It would be a major break from the longstanding tradition here of immunity for current and former politicians.

Mr. Villanueva is accused of taking millions of dollars in payoffs from the Juárez cartel during the 1990s in return for helping it ship about 200 tons of cocaine from South America through the Yucatán. He is also accused of having ordered the state police to provide protection to traffickers.

Law enforcement officials said bringing Mr. Villanueva to trial in New York would be a major achievement, because he is thought to have extensive knowledge of the cartel and might also provide evidence about it in return for a reduced sentence.

Mr. Villanueva went underground in April 1999, just before his term as governor ended and, with it, his immunity from prosecution. The federal police here finally tracked him down and arrested him in May 2001 near Cancún, the resort in his home state. Since then, he has been in a Mexican maximum security prison, serving time for a single money-laundering conviction.

But around 1 a.m. on Thursday, he finished his sentence and walked out of the Altiplano prison, just outside Mexico City. As his family looked on, a dozen masked federal agents immediately seized him again, this time at the request of the United States. Prosecutors said he was being held pending an extradition hearing.

“They are kidnapping me! Help!” the former governor said as he was seized, according to the newspaper El Universal.

According to two indictments in Manhattan Federal Court, the former governor took millions of dollars from members of the Juárez cartel, among them Alcides Ramón Magaña, from 1994 to 1999. The indictments say that the cartel paid Mr. Villanueva about \$500,000 for each shipment and that he laundered at least \$11 million with the help of an investment manager at Lehman Brothers in New York.

In return for the payoffs, the former governor let the cartel bring at least 200 tons of cocaine into Cancún by boat, then store it until it could be shipped north to the border town of Reynosa, where the cartel smuggled it into the United States and hauled it to New York and other cities, the indictments say.

State police officers escorted the shipments and worked as enforcers for the traffickers, investigators said. “At that time in Cancún, the police worked for the cartel,” said one former law enforcement official who worked on the case, but did not want to be named because it could jeopardize his career. “There was just no question about it.”

Mr. Villanueva’s deep involvement with drug traffickers underscores for many Mexicans the extent of official corruption in their country. United States drug enforcement officials estimate that the three major cartels bring more than \$10 billion in cash into the country from sales in American cities and have used that money to bribe officials at all levels of government, from police officers to governors.

President Calderón has aggressively attacked the influence of cartels, sending troops into towns and states where they had control of local governments to re-establish order.

He has also begun extraditing more and more drug cartel leaders to stand trial north of the Rio Grande, where they face stiffer sentences and find it difficult to control their networks from prison, as they do in Mexico. In January, the government sent 11 high-level drug traffickers to the United States in one night.

Yusill Scribner, a spokeswoman for the United States attorney's office in Manhattan, declined to comment on the extradition request, as did officials at the American Embassy here. A lawyer for Mr. Villanueva, Horacio García, confirmed that the United States had requested the former governor's arrest in a diplomatic note but had yet to present evidence against him.

President Calderón's aides said the Mexican government would go ahead with the extradition as soon as a judge ruled it was warranted, though they warned that the process could take weeks.