

Colombian rebel leader gets U.S. prison sentence

In a cocaine case as part of U.S. efforts to fight Colombian rebels, a FARC leader was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

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WASHINGTON --

A commander in Colombia's main rebel group was sentenced to nearly 17 years in U.S. prison on cocaine charges Monday.

A separate jury was set to begin considering terrorism allegations against another of the group's leaders.

Anayibe Rojas Valderama was convicted of exporting cocaine to the United States to finance the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. She goes by the *nom de guerre* "Sonia."

The United States considers the FARC, which has been battling to topple the Colombian government for 40 years, a terrorist organization. The United States has spent billions of dollars in recent years to fight the insurgency and the Colombian cocaine industry.

Valderama's attorney, Carmen D. Hernandez, criticized the Justice Department's handling of the case and fought unsuccessfully for a new trial because she was not allowed to question key witnesses in the case.

She said she was ashamed and appalled to be part of the case, which she described as an abomination of the U.S. judicial system.

U.S. District Judge James Robertson refused to budge, saying the dispute centered around one witness and the evidence in the case far outweighed that singular issue.

While Valderama was being sentenced to 16 years and eight months in prison, prosecutors elsewhere in the Washington federal courthouse were closing their terrorism and hostage-taking case against FARC leader Ricardo Palmera. Palmera is charged with plotting to keep three Americans hostage after their plane crashed in Colombia in 2003.

Palmera, who is better known as Simon Trinidad, saw his first trial end with a hung jury last year after jurors struggled to wade through dense testimony about the history of guerrilla warfare in Latin America.

The Justice Department quickly brought the case again.

Though jurors again seemed tired at times, prosecutors hope that Palmera's own testimony -- in which he justified hostage-taking and attacking airplanes -- will persuade jurors to convict him.

"This is the *'Alice in Wonderland'* world of the FARC and the defendant is the Mad Hatter, coming up with all these justifications and rationalizations," for terrorism, prosecutor Kenneth Kohl said.

Palmera was extradited in late 2004 after his capture in Ecuador.

He faces up to 30 years in prison, the maximum allowed under the extradition treaty between Colombia and the United States.

His attorneys have stressed that, while Palmera acknowledges being in the FARC, he never saw the three American hostages and did not keep them captive.

Jurors were expected to begin deliberating that case today.