

US seeks alleged drug leader in Mexico

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MEXICO CITY --

The United States has formally filed a request for the extradition of a reputed drug cartel leader called "The Queen of the Pacific," a U.S. official and the Mexican government said Friday.

In a news statement, Mexico's attorney general's office said the U.S. wants Sandra Avila Beltran on drug and organized crime charges, but did not say whether she would be sent north before facing charges pending against her in Mexico.

A U.S. official who has knowledge of the extradition request alleged that Avila Beltran, who was arrested in late September in an upscale Mexico City neighborhood, arranged cocaine shipments for the Sinaloa cartel, handled millions of dollars in payments and even commanded a team of enforcers to punish gang members and rivals.

"She was making decisions, serious decisions, setting up shipments, approving payoffs for the shipments, transfers of millions of dollars to Colombian suppliers," the official said on condition of anonymity. The official was not authorized to speak on the record.

Avila Beltran projected refined manners and an elegant style, but the U.S. alleges that she was in fact a senior decision-maker for the cartel who also played a role in calling gang members and rivals to account for lost loads, the official said.

"People were brought in talk to her about lost loads and debts owed," the official said. "She had enforcers. ... She kept a gaggle of enforcers."

The extradition request is related to the seizure of more than 9 tons of cocaine aboard a fishing vessel in 2001 near the Mexican Pacific coast port of Manzanillo. The drugs were allegedly headed for the U.S. market.

A "temporary extradition" arrangement with the United States allows suspects convicted in Mexico to be sent north for trial before serving their sentences here, but it was unclear whether that agreement would be applied in Avila Beltran's case.

Avila Beltran, whose uncle is a legendary cartel leader, claims she made her money selling clothes and renting houses.

Her Colombian boyfriend, reputed drug lord Juan Diego Espinoza Ramirez, was also arrested and is wanted on a U.S. extradition request.