

Former Mexican military chief pleads not guilty to US drug trafficking charges

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Retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, the Mexican defense secretary from 2012 to 2018, appeared in a US federal court in Brooklyn last Thursday, following his Oct. 15 arrest at Los Angeles International Airport.

Cienfuegos, referred to as “The Godfather” in the indictment, pleaded “not guilty” to charges of conspiracy, drug trafficking to the United States and money laundering. Between December 2015 and February 2017, according to the court filing, “in exchange for bribe payments, he permitted the H-2 Cartel—a cartel that routinely engaged in wholesale violence, including torture and murder—to operate with impunity in Mexico.”

The prosecutors claim to have thousands of incriminating BlackBerry Messenger exchanges with the H-2 Cartel, a remnant of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, they obtained through US phone-tapping operations against Cienfuegos and cartel members. One message allegedly indicates that he provided assistance for far longer to another organization, which is widely believed to be the Sinaloa Cartel.

The trial of Cienfuegos is the latest in a string of cases pursued by the Eastern District of New York in Brooklyn since it handed down a life sentence against Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquín “Chapo” Guzmán last year.

Currently, the two main overseers of the so-called “war on drugs” during the administration of Mexico’s President Enrique Peña Nieto are being charged for working with the drug cartels. Genaro García Luna, former secretary of public security, arrested last year in Texas, has also pleaded not guilty to charges of receiving millions to protect the Sinaloa Cartel. The case also involves charges against his closest underlings Luis Cárdenas Palomino and Ramón Pequeño García.

The Cienfuegos arrest sent shockwaves through the Mexican ruling elite, with nervous press commentaries calling it “irresponsible” and warning that it “shatters trust in Mexico’s armed forces.”

Cienfuegos was not under any investigation in Mexico, raising suspicions about the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who claims to be leading a campaign

against corruption. He has responded to the charges in the US by claiming that “We won’t cover for anybody,” while refusing to remove any of the officials appointed by Cienfuegos, or even those in his circle of confidence like the current chief officer of the secretary of defense, Agustín Radilla.

“I don’t see anyone in the Army happy about this detention,” wrote Mexican reporter Eunice Rendón, who added, “They are the same then and now under [López Obrador’s] ‘Fourth Transformation.’”

The recent cases have gravely tarnished all institutions involved in the “war on drugs,” from the presidencies of Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) and Peña Nieto (2012–2018), to the military and police leaderships, as well as the US administrations that backed the war through the \$3.1 billion Merida Initiative since 2007.

As in other countries in the region, chiefly Colombia, drug trafficking has long been exploited by US governments to further Washington’s influence over the region’s security forces and, through this, over domestic politics. “Prior to FY2008,” explains a 2020 report by the US Congress Research Service, “Mexico did not receive large amounts of U.S. security assistance, partially due to Mexican sensitivity about U.S. involvement in the country’s internal affairs.”

The corporate media has largely avoided commenting on the questions the cases raise about the role of the US government itself. García Luna, especially, played a key role in setting up and selling the Merida Initiative to the US and Mexican public.

A December 2007 diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks indicates that then Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte was a personal handler of García Luna, helping him “fill in the blanks in preparation for future questioning regarding the Merida Initiative.”

García Luna was also allowed to personally “vet” officials in the Mexican police, a cover used by US agencies to assuage fears of corruption in the Mexican state. An April 2008 cable explains that “unprecedented cooperation ... would not be possible without our ability to work with

vetted units [by García Luna] supported by USG agencies including DEA and ICE.”

After the killing of several of García Luna’s officials by rival drug cartels in 2008—officials eulogized by the US embassy for their “outstanding work” and “highest professional standards”—an embassy cable expressed “concerns about García Luna’s ability to manage his subordinates.” Nonetheless, in October 2009, the US ambassador said García Luna, who had just quintupled the size of the federal police with the help of US aid, would be a “key player” in reaching “new levels of practical cooperation in two of the country’s most important institutions.”

After the war claimed more than 300,000 lives, left 73,000 missing—including numerous extrajudicial massacres by the military—and cost Mexican taxpayers \$120 billion, the promises to end the war and the Merida Initiative by Andrés Manuel López Obrador were central to his 2018 election as president.

Shortly after the 2018 election, an Internal Security Law approved by Peña Nieto and requested by Cienfuegos—allowing troops to carry out police functions and granting greater autonomy to the military to select targets, wage operations and collect intelligence—was declared unconstitutional.

As soon as he came to power, however, López Obrador and his Morena party changed the Constitution to permit the domestic deployment of the military and created a National Guard as a new cover for the discredited military.

Meanwhile, the US Congress, with bipartisan approval, has granted AMLO nearly \$300 million under the Merida Initiative.

Commenting on the Cienfuegos arrest, the renowned journalist and expert on Mexican drug cartels, Anabel Hernández, stressed that, “The same system remains embedded in his own political party Morena.” She explained that Morena’s security chief in Mexico City, Omar García Harfuch, rose through the ranks under the patronage of García Luna and Cárdenas Palomino, and cites federal police documents confirming Harfuch’s talks with organized crime.

A December 2009 cable published by WikiLeaks shows that the US State Department vetted Harfuch when he was working for the federal police under García Luna so that Harfuch could complete programs with the FBI, DEA and Harvard University.

Additionally, a DEA agent told *Proceso* in December 2012 that they had long known about García Luna’s ties to the Sinaloa Cartel, but kept quiet “out of respect for Mexican institutions and because he was the direct contact with the United States.”

In the case of Cienfuegos, several cables note his constant collaboration with the United States, with the Pentagon awarding him an award for excellence two years ago.

The US legal cases against the Sinaloa Cartel and their partners in the previous governments can only be understood in the context of the new buildup of the Mexican military encouraged by the United States. Its main target, amid a resurgence of the class struggle across North America and internationally, is the working class.

While carrying out widespread austerity measures amid the pandemic crisis, including the elimination of \$3 billion for science, culture and victim protection, the Morena administration granted \$1.5 billion for military equipment and subsidies for the families of the chiefs of staff and proposed a 20 percent budget increase for defense.

This context explains why the US case against Cienfuegos ignores the widespread human rights abuses carried out by the military under the general’s term, including countless extrajudicial executions.

Last September, soldiers were first arrested in Mexico for their involvement in the killing of the 43 Mexican teaching students from Ayotzinapa in 2014. Cienfuegos lied repeatedly about the involvement of the military, which collaborated in the killings with Guerreros Unidos, another splinter of the Beltrán Leyva cartel.

From 2005 to 2007, Cienfuegos headed the IX military region of Guerrero, the state where Ayotzinapa is located, at a time when the Beltrán Leyva cartel prospered out of their base in Acapulco, the state’s largest city. Cienfuegos would then lead the first military region of Mexico City from 2007 to 2009, which was then a stronghold for the Sinaloa Cartel.

In 2012, Sergio Villarreal, a leader of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel known as “El Grande,” testified after his arrest that in 2007 and subsequently, he and his then partners of the Sinaloa Cartel had “bought” the commanders of the security forces in Guerrero and Mexico City.



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