

Mexican General Cienfuegos walks free after US drops drug charges

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On Wednesday, a federal judge in New York's Eastern District acceded to an unprecedented request by the US Department of Justice to drop all charges, including drug trafficking and money laundering, against retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, Defense Secretary of Mexico from 2012 to 2018.

The release and backstage maneuvers highlight, above all, the submissive relationship between the Mexican government and US imperialism, as well as the grave dangers this raises for the native and immigrant workers and youth in both countries.

The request was announced in a joint statement by US Attorney General William Barr and his Mexican counterpart, Alejandro Gertz Manero, who explain that the case is being handed over to Mexico "in the interests of demonstrating our united front against all forms of criminality."

Cienfuegos "may be investigated and, if appropriate, charged, under Mexican law," reads the statement.

On November 11, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) handed Mexican authorities a 743-page package of evidence against Cienfuegos. The US indictment, now closed, claimed that prosecutors had thousands of incriminating BlackBerry Messenger communications between Cienfuegos and the H-2 Cartel.

These exchanges allegedly show that Cienfuegos received bribes to locate ocean freight for drug shipments, introduce cartel leaders to other Mexican officials, and attack rival organizations. This helped the H-2 drug cartel expand its reach to Mazatlán and the entire state of Sinaloa.

Nonetheless, after a US government airplane dropped him off in Mexico on Wednesday, Cienfuegos was given a medical test and allowed to walk out of the Toluca Airport as a free citizen, under no travel restraints.

The General Prosecutor's Office (FGR) in Mexico issued a statement indicating that "the agent of the Public Ministry of the Federation notified Gen. Cienfuegos formally of an existing investigation involving him," based on the information received from the US government.

However, his lawyer in Mexico, Rafael Heredia, explained to CNN on Thursday evening that Cienfuegos has not been informed of any investigation "against him" and that he is not facing any charges in Mexico.

During his last court hearing before being released, Cienfuegos brazenly said he was not worried about getting prosecuted in Mexico. In the Mexican media, several legal experts have indicated that the evidence in the US case gathered through phone tapping operations will be considered illegal and invalid in Mexican courts.

Cienfuegos is widely expected to enjoy his retirement as an immensely wealthy four-star general.

On Thursday morning, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, held a press conference to deny claims that Mexico pressured Washington in any way to release Cienfuegos. Ebrard claimed the US simply made the decision to acknowledge that it had violated a 1992 information-sharing agreement.

While the indictment was issued by a Brooklyn grand jury on August 14, 2019, US officials have said they feared the Mexican Army would cover for Cienfuegos, and that an extradition request would die in the Mexican bureaucracy. For all practical purposes, this was the ultimate result.

The initial response of López Obrador to the arrest of Cienfuegos at the Los Angeles Airport on October 15 was generally supportive, promising to not "cover for

anyone” as part of the central pretense of his administration of combating corruption.

Then he met his current Secretary of Defense, Gen. Luis Cresencio Sandoval, who reportedly described a brewing rebellion in the high command of the Army, who considered the arrest an affront against them. *La Política Online* reported at the time a growing “anti-US climate” within the Mexican military brass as well as discussions about suspending cooperation with the DEA.

Two days after the arrest, López Obrador changed his tone and began airing his displeasure. He denounced the DEA for “being entirely entangled with the Navy Secretariat” when the alleged crimes were perpetrated.

“The DEA should be open about its own participation in all of these cases, because they undoubtedly cohabited with [Genaro] García Luna and the Gen. Defense Secretary [Cienfuegos] during the last administration,” he explained, referring to former Secretary of Public Security García Luna, who remains under US custody, accused of protecting the Sinaloa Cartel.

Yet, López Obrador immediately added: “I thank President Donald Trump because, whenever we have had difficult issues, he has called to offer help. ... Of course, he doesn’t do it to interfere in Mexico, to rule over Mexico, he does it to help, cooperate, but it’s important to say that Mexico is an independent, sovereign country.”

López Obrador then instructed Foreign Secretary Ebrard to send a protest note to the US State Department. Ebrard also held repeated conversations with Barr, reportedly to express that “trust” had been breached, and that Mexico was considering retaliatory measures regarding national security cooperation.

The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *Vice* all reported anonymous claims by US officials that attribute the release of Cienfuegos chiefly to threats by Mexico to expel DEA officials. Such claims, however, must be taken with a grain of salt, especially amid efforts to appease widespread discontent reported within the DEA and other agencies over the decision.

Reuters writes that Mike Vigil, a former DEA chief of international operations, “expressed skepticism Mexico would prosecute Cienfuegos, and suggested the dismissal was a ‘gift’ from U.S. President Donald Trump to reward López Obrador for not recognizing

Joe Biden as U.S. president elect.”

Acting US Attorney Seth DuCharme told the federal judge Carol B. Amon at the hearing Wednesday that “the broader interest in maintaining that relationship in a cooperative way outweighed the department’s interest in pursuing this particular case.”

The Cienfuegos case has not only increased suspicions toward the López Obrador administration and the Mexican military, whose leadership is still largely composed of generals appointed by or close to Cienfuegos. The cases of García Luna and Cienfuegos, as well as the latter’s release, have also further exposed the utilization by consecutive US administrations of Mexico’s catastrophic drug war for bolstering its neocolonial control over Mexico and building up the country’s repressive apparatus.

Throughout the Cienfuegos affair, López Obrador displayed the extent of his deference to the military, upon which the Mexican ruling class and US imperialism are increasingly relying for enforcing social austerity and the “herd immunity” coronavirus policy.

The release of Cienfuegos foreshadows a new escalation in the repression of Mexican workers and youth, as well as migrants escaping state and gang violence, catastrophic storms and economic devastation wrought by the pandemic in Central America.

While López Obrador offers nothing but subservience, Trump has insulted Mexicans repeatedly, made threats to impose debilitating tariffs and invade Mexico with US troops, and elevated fascist forces within the United States that are violently hostile to immigrants as part of his drive to establish a presidential dictatorship.

In the face of this reality, López Obrador boasted on Wednesday that the release of Cienfuegos meant: “No more meddling violating our sovereignty ever again. Of course, [we’ll have] cooperation, and I say this again, this has been understood very well under the Donald Trump administration.”



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