

Why Abrams agreed to arrest drug lord Matta Ballesteros now

by D.E. Pettingell

In a long-awaited coup against the cocaine-running Medellín Cartel, Ramón Matta Ballesteros, one of the world's top drug lords, was captured in his native Honduras and immediately sent to the United States. He arrived April 6, after formal arrest by U.S. Marshals in Puerto Rico. Matta is wanted as the "intellectual author" of the 1985 murder of Drug Enforcement Administration Special Agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico. He is also under indictment in California and Arizona. U.S. officials think Matta was the source of a shipment of more than 8,000 pounds of cocaine seized last year in Florida; it had a street value of \$1.4 billion.

"I think he far surpassed Lehder in terms of the volume and value of the cocaine he moved," U.S. Marshals' spokesman Steve Boyle stated. "If he isn't the number-one, I don't know who is." Carlos Lehder is a notorious member of the Medellín Cartel currently facing trial on drug charges in Florida.

Matta settled in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, in 1986 after bribing his way out of a Colombian jail. He was described as living like a billionaire, very much in the public eye. Since 1986, years before the U.S. media decided to expose the fact that the drug lord was enjoying life under the benevolent eyes of the Honduran authorities, *EIR* denounced the phoniness the Reagan administration's war on drugs. The United States was attacking the national institutions of Panama, Mexico, and Colombia, allegedly wanting them to "do more" against drugs, while the administration itself was supporting the drug-running mercenaries called the "Contras" and, for example, refusing to use its almost unlimited leverage over the Honduran government to force it to arrest Matta. But then, Honduras was very "cooperative" in the Contra policy. Why harass them with the Matta "detail"?

Matta's detention April 6 corresponds more to a political decision by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams than to any administration "commitment" to join other nations in fighting the drug mafia. Abrams opted to "sacrifice" Matta to cover up his own responsibility for the drug connections of the Contras. In early February, when the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, chaired by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), was holding hearings on Gen. Manuel Noriega's

alleged drug ties, and was blaming the administration for looking the other way to preserve Noriega as an "intelligence asset," Abrams pushed through Noriega's indictment Feb. 5.

Matta's arrest took place on the second day of Kerry's hearings into the Contras and drugs. It is an act of desperation by Abrams, an attempt to calm his critics on Capitol Hill. If not, why wasn't he arrested before? "Elliott called me twice last night to give me the good news," Kerry told reporters the morning after.

By ordering Matta's detention, Abrams is also attempting to set a precedent for kidnaping General Noriega. The difference is that Noriega is the popular military leader of Panama, and any U.S.-sponsored attempt to take him by force would unleash a civil war inside Panama and send the whole region up in flames.

Relying on thugs and money launderers

While exposing the criminal activities of the Contras and their U.S. sponsors is a good idea, Kerry isn't up to any good. His hearings are, by design, helping the Medellín Cartel against anti-drug efforts in Ibero-American nations; Kerry and Sen. Alfonse D'Amato's (R-N.Y.) goal is to put up the propaganda screen required to give the Panama treatment to other Ibero-American countries who have not totally supported the administration's policies in the region.

"You have lost the war on drugs," convicted money launderer Ramón Milián Rodríguez told Kerry with a grin. "Foreign governments, the armed forces, are totally coopted" by the mob. Those who are not are "dead."

Senator D'Amato agreed with the money-launderer. "The nations may be weak, may be precarious, but it is not difficult to see how they enjoy the situation." Whatever is said against any national government is taken at face value, reported in newspapers, and aired on national television the same evening. No one bothers to cross-check the information, much less to question it.

Convicted drug trafficker Michael Vogel, whose sentence was reduced from 45 to 12 years for collaborating with law enforcement officials, told the subcommittee April 5 that he had a meeting in 1979 with then-Col. Manuel Noriega and

then-President Gen. Omar Torrijos, to discuss smuggling drugs from Panama to the United States. Vogel claimed he rejected the Panamanians' offer because he thought Torrijos and Noriega were "extremely greedy" when they demanded \$100,000 per trip.

A complete fairy tale! Would a military leader of the stature of Omar Torrijos, even were he interested in running drugs, take the risk of personally meeting with an obscure American drug-pusher? On the other hand, during the U.S.-Panama negotiations on the Canal Treaties of 1978, Torrijos was subjected to close scrutiny by U.S. law enforcement agencies and Congress. Both concluded that he was not guilty of any of the wrongdoings his enemies were then charging.

Vogel wove a similar incredible yarn on a "Mexican general" who he claimed offered him the use of an airstrip in Oaxaca for drug smuggling in return for \$50,000 per trip. Vogel said he rejected the "offer" after he learned that the "general" was torturing two jailed American drug-pushers by forcing them to inhale Coca-Cola with jalapeño pepper—a rather mild pepper by Mexican standards!

The only documented piece of information that Kerry's hearings have generated is copies of the contract signed by the State Department's Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office, supervised by Abrams, with Vortex, Inc., a small Miami air freight company run by pilot Michael Palmer, another self-confessed drug-runner. The "contract" shows that the State Department paid \$100,000 to the drug-pusher.

Palmer told the subcommittee that in early 1986, before his company was chosen by the State Department out of the "yellow pages" to fly nonlethal supplies to the Contras, he had been indicted on drug charges in Detroit. He claims the indictment was dropped after the U.S. Attorney learned that he had become a "documented informant" for U.S. Customs and DEA. Vogel, however, who was Palmer's drug partner for years, says that Palmer was not prosecuted because he ran supplies for the Contras.

Vogel's account is coherent with Abrams's policy of forgiving anyone who helps the "Contra cause." Former U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Frank McNeil, who took the witness stand April 4, and who quit in 1987 after a confrontation with Abrams over the Contra issue, told the subcommittee that in 1984, Abrams interceded on behalf of Honduran General José Bueso Rosa, when Bueso was indicted on drug charges and conspiracy to assassinate the President of Honduras.

McNeil explained that the general had a "past usefulness to the Contra program"—and he also probably had in his possession evidence on Contra connections to drugs. As a result, Bueso got a lighter sentence. McNeil took the opportunity to criticize the Honduran military for failing to do anything about Matta Ballesteros, "a satrap of the cartel."

Mexico next

Senator D'Amato stated that he hopes that Matta will give "evidence" on Mexican law enforcement officials' al-

leged complicity in the assassination of Camarena. "I'm tired of the Mexican rhetoric," D'Amato said.

As the April 15 deadline approaches for the vote in Congress to "decertify" Mexico and other countries for not cooperating with U.S. anti-narcotics efforts, the "get Mexico" campaign is escalating. Sen. Pete Wilson (R-Calif.) called Mexico's "pervasive corruption that allows drug smugglers to establish a 'government within a government'" a danger to its stability and a source of "acute tension" between the United States and Mexico.

"Along with other countries, like Bolivia, Peru, Colombia . . . Mexico harbors a new form of international terrorist—the kind who does his dirty work with a needle instead of a bomb," Wilson stated March 17.

A longstanding enemy of Mexico, William Von Raab, U.S. Customs Commissioner, recently told a House committee that he had personally directed that all collaboration with Mexico be cut off because Mexico's law enforcement agencies have been taken over by the drug mafia.

Von Raab's wild exaggeration provoked a bitter diplomatic protest by the Mexican government. In a letter addressed to Secretary of State George Shultz March 21, Mexican Ambassador to the United States Jorge Espinosa de los Reyes said that Von Raab's testimony does not reflect Mexico's perception that the United States desires to collaborate with Mexico in the war on drugs. "It is inadmissible for my government that an official of the U.S. administration . . . formulates unfounded public accusations against the government of Mexico," the note reads.

In hearings before the House Select Committee on Narcotics March 29, Abrams threatened Mexico. "Our ability to deal with Mexico constructively on the problem of narcotics will affect our ability to deal with Mexico on a whole range of other important issues. We are concerned that some officials of the Mexican government have been corrupted by the narco-traffickers," he said.

Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.) revealed that Abrams had given the green light to release to the media the tape-recording of Enrique Camarena's torture and assassination. Sources told this news service that Abrams was "furious" because of Mexico's condemnation of U.S. intervention in Panama and that the Camarena tape was meant to teach Mexico a "lesson." According to Dornan, in the tape, Camarena begs his captors to allow him to live so he can raise his children. Dornan said that if the tape is played on national television, Abrams fears that the reaction of the American public against the Mexican government may be too strong to control.

Self-confessed liars like Abrams may speak all they wish of "corrupt officials" in other countries. Ibero-Americans, however, may be more concerned about the growing evidence that the Washington-backed Contras have been running drugs. On April 7, it emerged that Oliver North knew about the Contras' cocaine shipments. It may well soon come out that Elliott Abrams also knew and condoned them, along with George Bush.