

Life in Jail - former Honduran congressman Tony Hernández, brother & drug-trafficking partner of President of Juan Orlando Hernandez

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/life-in-jail-for-tony-herndez>

"The defendant is a uniquely bad character, who along with his brother [President Juan Orlando Hernandez], is at the center of years of state-sponsored drug trafficking."
(US prosecutor Matthew Laroche)



Please take the time to slowly read these reports:

- Press release, US Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York
- Univision News article

This is not a script for a Hollywood movie. Honduras' repressive, military-backed, drug-trafficking government is US & Canadian policy at work. Little of what is set out here would have happened,

- but for US and Canadian support for the June 28, 2009 military coup;
- but for the past 12 years of full economic, military and political relations that the US, Canada, Spain, the World Bank and IMF –and a host of global companies– have maintained with the drug-trafficking, military-backed regime in power today, considered a “democratic ally” of the US and Canada.

As you read this, thousands more Hondurans are desperately trying to flee home and country, to walk through Guatemala and Mexico, and try and get to exile and some sort of ‘safety’ in the US.

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Former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández Sentenced To Life In Prison

Press Release, March 30, 2021, Dept. of Justice, US Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-honduran-congressman-tony-hern-ndez-sentenced-life-prison-and-ordered-forfeit>

Audrey Strauss, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, and Wendy C. Woolcock, the Special Agent in Charge of the Special Operations Division of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (“DEA”), announced today that JUAN ANTONIO HERNÁNDEZ ALVARADO, a/k/a “Tony Hernández” (“HERNÁNDEZ”) was sentenced to life in prison for cocaine-importation, weapons, and false-statements offenses.

HERNÁNDEZ is a former Honduran congressman and the brother of Juan Orlando Hernández, the current president of Honduras. HERNÁNDEZ was convicted on October 18, 2019, following a jury trial before U.S. District Judge P. Kevin Castel, who also imposed today's sentence.

Manhattan U.S. Attorney Audrey Strauss said: “Former Honduran congressman Juan Antonio Hernández Alvarado was involved in all stages of the trafficking through Honduras of multi-ton loads of cocaine destined for the U.S. Hernández bribed law enforcement officials to protect drug shipments, arranged for heavily armed security for cocaine shipments, and brokered large bribes from major drug traffickers to powerful political figures, including the former and current presidents of Honduras. Hernández was complicit in at least two murders. Today, Tony Hernández was rightly sentenced to life in prison.”

Special Agent in Charge Wendy C. Woolcock said: “Exploiting a high-ranking position in government to wield the power of the state to support drug trafficking is as nefarious as it comes. The conviction and sentencing of Tony Hernandez is a reminder there is no position powerful enough to shield you from facing justice when you violate U.S. drug laws by sending tons of cocaine to our country.”

“As important as this conviction is to the people of the United States, it is also important to the citizens of Honduras who Hernandez purposely put in harm's way for his own personal gain. Today's sentencing is a victory for the rule of law and we are grateful to our federal and international partners who made this possible.”

As reflected in the Superseding Indictment, other filings in Manhattan federal court, evidence at trial, and statements made in court proceedings:

Hernández's Drug Trafficking Conduct

HERNÁNDEZ played a leadership role in a violent, state-sponsored drug trafficking conspiracy. Over a 15-year period, HERNÁNDEZ manufactured and distributed at least 185,000 kilograms of cocaine that was imported into the United States. HERNÁNDEZ commanded heavily armed

members of the Honduran military and Honduran National Police; he sold machineguns and ammunition to drug traffickers, some of which he obtained from the Honduran military; he controlled cocaine laboratories in Colombia and Honduras; he secured millions of dollars of drug proceeds for Honduras's National Party campaigns in connection with presidential elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017; and he helped cause at least two murders.

HERNÁNDEZ made at least \$138.5 million through his drug trafficking activities, money he was ordered to forfeit in connection with today's sentencing.

HERNÁNDEZ's drug trafficking career started in about 2004 when he began providing sensitive law enforcement and military information to major Honduran drug traffickers Victor Hugo Diaz Morales, a/k/a "El Rojo," and Hector Emilio Fernandez Rosa, a/k/a "Don H."

HERNÁNDEZ provided Diaz Morales with information about, among other things, operations of the Honduran Navy; efforts by the United States to train Honduran Air Force pilots to fly at night to conduct anti-narcotics operations; military radar capabilities so that cocaine plane shipments could avoid detection; and interdiction efforts by certain Honduran National Police officials. Over the course of their relationship, HERNÁNDEZ helped Fernandez Rosa and Diaz Morales distribute approximately 140,000 kilograms of cocaine.

By 2008, HERNÁNDEZ's narcotics trafficking had expanded, and he was also manufacturing his own cocaine in a laboratory he controlled near El Aceitico, Colombia. HERNÁNDEZ told his co-conspirators that some of the cocaine manufactured at his laboratory was stamped with his initials "TH," and a photograph of a kilogram of "TH" stamped cocaine was intercepted during the course of the investigation. HERNÁNDEZ supplied his co-conspirators with tons of cocaine that was produced at his laboratory.

Beginning in about 2008, HERNÁNDEZ partnered with Amilcar Alexander Ardon Soriano, a former Honduran drug trafficker and mayor, under the protection of members of the National Party leadership. Testimony at trial established that HERNÁNDEZ and Ardon Soriano secured protection from investigation, arrest, and extradition through massive bribes paid to high-ranking politicians, including, among others, [former President] Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa and [current President] Juan Orlando Hernández.



[Honduras' two drug-trafficking presidents, Juan Orlando Hernandez & Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, both brought to power after the US and Canadian backed military coup of 2009, both consider strong "democratic allies" of the US and Canada from 2009 through to today.]

In connection with the 2009 national elections [of Porfirio Lobo], drug proceeds bribes paid in exchange for protection included: (i) Ardon Soriano paying \$2 million to support Lobo Sosa's campaign for presidency and Juan Orlando Hernández's reelection campaign for a position in the Honduran congress; (ii) Diaz Morales paying \$100,000 to HERNÁNDEZ to support National Party campaigns; and (iii) Ardon Soriano bribing three congressmen at the direction of Juan Orlando Hernández so that the congressmen would support Juan Orlando Hernández's efforts to become president of the congress.

Juan Orlando Hernandez was named president of the congress in early 2010. HERNÁNDEZ, Ardon Soriano, and their co-conspirators, including co-defendant Mario Jose Calix Hernández, a Honduran deputy mayor, and codefendant Mauricio Hernández Pineda, a then-member of the Honduran National Police and HERNÁNDEZ's cousin, took advantage of National Party protection to continue transporting huge quantities of cocaine. Once or twice a month in 2010, HERNÁNDEZ sent Ardon Soriano cocaine shipments consisting of approximately 300 kilograms; and once a month in 2011 and 2012, HERNÁNDEZ sent Ardon Soriano maritime cocaine shipments ranging in size from 700 to 1,600 kilograms.

In 2013, HERNÁNDEZ was campaigning to become a congressman and Juan Orlando Hernández was campaigning to become president. Around this time, according to testimony at trial, Juan Orlando Hernández solicited \$1.6 million in drug proceeds from Ardon Soriano to support himself and National Party campaigns.

Also during the 2013 campaign, HERNÁNDEZ accepted \$1 million from former Sinaloa [Mexico] Cartel leader Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, a/k/a "El Chapo," to support Juan Orlando Hernández's presidential campaign. During meetings with El Chapo in Honduras, HERNÁNDEZ promised to provide protection for members of their conspiracy and their cocaine shipments through Honduran territory if Juan Orlando Hernández was elected president.

In November 2013, HERNÁNDEZ was elected to the Honduran congress and Juan Orlando Hernández was elected president. Between 2015 and 2017, per trial testimony, HERNÁNDEZ

and Juan Orlando Hernández continued to secure large sums of drug proceeds for National Party campaigns in exchange for protecting drug traffickers.

For example, there was testimony at trial that approximately six months before the November 2017 national elections, HERNÁNDEZ and Juan Orlando Hernández met with Ardon Soriano in Copán, Honduras. During that meeting, HERNÁNDEZ and Juan Orlando Hernández solicited \$500,000 and 1.6 million Lempira in drug proceeds from Ardon Soriano to “finance” the National Party’s campaign in the Copán and Lempira Departments.

In 2018, HERNÁNDEZ continued to engage in large cocaine shipments with Nery López Sanabria, another significant Honduran drug trafficker. Honduran authorities arrested and detained López Sanabria in connection with a traffic incident and recovered, among other things, several drug ledgers in a secret compartment of his car. One of the ledgers was labeled “Hard Work” 2018, and reflected a 650-kilogram cocaine shipment with HERNÁNDEZ. At least one of the other ledgers seized by Honduran law enforcement in 2018 contained references to “JOH,” initials used by Juan Orlando Hernández.

López Sanabria was murdered in a Honduran prison, as described below, shortly after his drug ledgers were introduced at HERNÁNDEZ’s trial.

Hernández’s Weapons Possession and Acts of Violence

HERNÁNDEZ used firearms throughout his drug trafficking. HERNÁNDEZ’s personal weapons included a modified AR-15, an Uzi inscribed with the name of Juan Orlando Hernández, “Presidente de la República,” and an M60 belt-fed machinegun.

HERNÁNDEZ also sold machineguns and ammunition to drug traffickers. In 2010, Diaz Morales obtained between 4,000 and 6,000 rounds of assault rifle ammunition from a member of the Honduran National Police who told Diaz Morales he obtained the ammunition from HERNÁNDEZ. In 2012, HERNÁNDEZ supplied 40 M16s to another drug trafficker.

HERNÁNDEZ also coordinated at least two drug-related murders. In 2011, HERNÁNDEZ and Ardon Soriano caused the murder of a rival drug trafficker named Franklin Arita in the Copán Department. HERNÁNDEZ directed Juan Carlos “Tigre” Bonilla Valladares, the regional Honduran National Police chief responsible for the Copán Department at the time, to arrange for Arita’s murder, which was executed by assassins using two 40-millimeter grenade launchers, M16s, and Israeli-made Galil assault rifles.

In 2013, HERNÁNDEZ worked with other drug traffickers, including Ardon Soriano, to murder a drug trafficker named Chino because HERNÁNDEZ was concerned that Chino might cooperate with law enforcement.

Hernández’s Obstruction and Other Efforts –Including Murders- to Influence the Investigation

HERNÁNDEZ made false statements to law enforcement and the Court during the course of this investigation and prosecution, and he obstructed justice. HERNÁNDEZ (i) traveled to the United

States in 2016 and made false statements to law enforcement about his drug trafficking activities; (ii) made false statements about his assets during a January 2019 bail hearing; (iii) caused sensitive witness information to be disclosed in Honduras in violation of a protective order in October 2019; and (iv) made false statements about his assets during an application for appointed counsel in February 2020.

Eight days after the jury found HERNÁNDEZ guilty, on October 26, 2019, López Sanabria – the drug trafficker from whom were seized the ledgers bearing HERNÁNDEZ’s name and Juan Orlando Hernández’s initials – was murdered at a maximum security prison in Honduras.

López Sanabria’s attorneys confirmed to the media that: one of HERNÁNDEZ’s family members and an investigator hired by HERNÁNDEZ’s family had made unauthorized visits to López Sanabria prior to HERNÁNDEZ’s trial; López Sanabria had rejected their efforts to obtain information about whether he was cooperating with the DEA; and López Sanabria had planned to cooperate with the DEA against Juan Orlando Hernández and HERNÁNDEZ.

Leaked surveillance video of the murder shows López Sanabria talking to the warden of the facility, Pedro Ildefonso Armas, while a masked man walks past and unlocks a nearby door. Several individuals who are believed to be prisoners then storm through the door and shoot and stab López Sanabria to death.

On December 9, 2019, a group of unknown assailants murdered Jose Luis Pinto, a lawyer who represented López Sanabria.

Three days later, on December 12, 2019, a group of unknown gunmen on motorcycles murdered Ildefonso Armas, the warden of the facility in which López Sanabria was murdered, in Tegucigalpa.

Hernández’s Co-Conspirators

On August 8, 2019, Fernandez Rosa was sentenced in this District to life in prison for, among other things, his participation in HERNÁNDEZ’s cocaine importation conspiracy and for committing 18 murders.

Several of HERNÁNDEZ’s other co-conspirators, including, among others, Hernández Pineda, Calix Hernández, Bonilla Valladares, Arnaldo Urbina Soto, Carlos Fernando Urbina Soto, and Miguel Angel Urbina Soto, are also charged in this District with firearms and drug trafficking offenses based on, among other things, their participation in HERNÁNDEZ’s cocaine importation conspiracy.

On February 12, 2020, Hernández Pineda surrendered in this District and he is awaiting trial. On March 22, 2021, HERNÁNDEZ’s co-defendant and co-conspirator Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez was convicted at trial in this District of drug trafficking and weapons offenses. Fuentes Ramirez’s sentencing is scheduled for June 22, 2021.

In addition to the prison term, HERNÁNDEZ, 42, was sentenced to five years of supervised release.

Ms. Strauss praised the outstanding efforts of the DEA's Special Operations Division Bilateral Investigations Unit, OCDETF New York Strike Force, and Tegucigalpa Country Office, as well as the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs.

This effort is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.

This case is being handled by the Office's Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Amanda L. Houle, Matthew Laroche, and Jason A. Richman are in charge of the prosecution.

Honduran president's brother sentenced to life in prison for drug trafficking

By Jeff Ernest & David Adams, 30 March, 2021

<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/tony-hernandez-brother-of-honduran-president-sentenced-to-life-for-drug-trafficking>

Former Honduran congressman Juan Antonio 'Tony' Hernandez, was sentenced to life plus 30 years in prison in New York federal court on Tuesday almost 18 months after he was convicted in the same court on drug trafficking and related weapons charges.

"Based upon Juan Antonio's free choice to engage in a life of drug trafficking over a 12-year period ... a sentence of life imprisonment is richly deserved," said Judge Kevin Castel. The judge also sentenced Hernandez to pay \$138.5 million dollars in forfeiture for trafficking an estimated 185,000 kilos of cocaine.

In a room near the courtroom where members of the public watched the proceedings on a TV monitor, applause broke out among a group of Hondurans gathered there.

When he was allowed to speak before his sentence was announced, Hernandez, 41, expressed no remorse. Instead, he complained to the judge about his lawyer who he said had failed to represent him properly. He said they had only been able to meet in person twice, with half a dozen phone calls. "I feel betrayed ... I feel my rights have been violated," Hernandez said.

But the judge admonished Hernandez saying there was "not an iota of evidence" that his rights had been in any way infringed upon, "not even an insinuation."

When it was his turn, prosecutor Matthew Laroche, told the court that he was shocked by Hernandez's arrogance and lack of remorse. "It is stunning. It speaks exactly to who this person is," he said. "He has shown no remorse to this day. He doesn't care, clearly, how his crimes have affected his country," he added, citing the extreme poverty and lawlessness in Honduras.

Laroche said Hernandez used his privileged upbringing and political connections to "conspire with the most powerful individuals" in Honduras, including his brother, president Juan Orlando Hernandez. "He smothered Honduras with corruption in order to achieve astonishing crimes," Laroche said.

"The defendant is a uniquely bad character, who along with his brother, is at the center of years of state-sponsored drug trafficking," he added.

In announcing the reasoning behind his decision to impose a life sentence, judge Castel said he was influenced by the fact that Hernandez was born into a life of privilege, earned a degree as a lawyer and was a member of Congress. He "could have used his considerable talents for good. But Juan Antonio elected to go in a very different direction," he said.

He calculated that the 185,000 kilos trafficked by Tony Hernandez was the equivalent of 1.5 billion doses of cocaine.

The sentence punctuates a trial that implicated President Juan Orlando Hernández as an unindicted co-conspirator accused of receiving millions in bribes from drug traffickers.

"Without corrupt politicians, the kind of drug trafficking at issue in this case is difficult if not impossible," wrote prosecutors in a court filing earlier this month, citing the need for a deterrent and requesting a life sentence.

In response, an attorney for Tony Hernández, Peter E. Brill, affirmed his client's innocence and pleaded for leniency, calling the trial politically motivated. "This case is yet another in a long line of misadventures in foreign policy intervention undertaken by the United States government this time in pursuit of regime change at the highest levels in Honduras," wrote Brill in the defense's sentencing submission.

The case revealed the depths of drug traffickers' success in capturing the Honduran state as well as the complicated relations between the U.S. and President Hernández, who was once considered a staunch ally in the war on drugs as well as stemming the tide of Central American migrants.

President Hernández has denied all accusations of links to drug traffickers, saying recently that they have found a "magic key" to reduce their prison sentences by telling lies against him.

Hernandez tweeted on Tuesday morning that the news from New York "will be painful" for his family.

The DEA began investigating Hernández and others in 2013. Mounting allegations since the trial, including the conviction earlier this month of another Honduran drug trafficker accused of bribing the president, have made clear that the investigation is ongoing.

Early Days

According to prosecutors, Tony Hernández started working with drug traffickers around 2004, providing information on police checkpoints and air traffic radars. At the time, Juan Orlando Hernández was serving his second term in Congress.

By the time a 2009 [US and Canadian-backed] coup led to a shift in control of the government to Hernández's National Party, Tony Hernández had become a cocaine supplier, with a lab in Colombia that apparently stamped some of the kilos with his initials – TH.

An intercepted image of a kilo stamped with the TH initials was key evidence at the trial. Several cooperating witnesses testified having seen the stamp on kilos of cocaine purchased from Tony Hernández. Prosecutors said it was a sign that he operated without fear of prosecution.

Meanwhile, Tony Hernández also facilitated increasingly large bribes from drug traffickers to his brother's presidential campaign in 2013, including \$1 million from the former head of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

A former National Party mayor and confessed drug trafficker, Alexander Ardon, testified that he witnessed Tony Hernández receive that bribe and that he had also paid millions to Juan Orlando Hernández and other politicians.

The Fall

In January 2014, Juan Orlando Hernández was inaugurated as president and Tony Hernández became a legislator. The family had never been more powerful, yet things slowly began to unravel.

That same month, a cocaine lab was raided for a second time in the family's home department. Tony Hernández, a lawyer by trade, represented the two men captured and allegedly helped them evade justice. The circumstances raised suspicion and rumors of Tony Hernández's involvement in drug trafficking circulated publicly for the first time.

In 2016, new allegations were made public, including by a military intelligence officer who revealed that he'd intercepted a helicopter carrying cocaine in 2014 that sources told him belonged to Tony Hernández and the minister of defense.

In an effort to clear his name, Tony Hernández traveled to the U.S. in October of that year to meet with the DEA and federal prosecutors. During that interview, he admitted to knowing several drug traffickers while denying that he had met with the head of the powerful Cachiros drug clan, Devis Leonel Rivera, despite being shown images from the encounter.

A secretly recorded video of the meeting, held at a Denny's restaurant in Tegucigalpa in February 2014, was presented at trial, and Tony Hernández was charged with lying to a federal agent.

In November 2017, Juan Orlando Hernández claimed victory in an election marred by allegations of fraud. A year later, Tony Hernández, apparently confident that his last name provided immunity, traveled to Miami, where he was arrested at the airport.

In June of 2019, Honduran authorities captured a drug trafficker whose ledgers named Tony Hernández and implicated him in multiple large-scale cocaine shipments.

The Aftermath

About a week after Tony was convicted, the author of the ledgers, Nery Orlando Lopez Sanabria, was brutally murdered inside a maximum-security prison in Honduras. A Univision investigation revealed that Lopez had been in contact with the DEA through his lawyers and wished to cooperate.

Since then, prosecutors have made plain their intentions to pursue other co-conspirators in the case. Three of them, including a former police officer and cousin of Tony and Juan Orlando Hernández, have turned themselves over to U.S. authorities and another two were indicted.

President Hernández was named as a co-conspirator in the case against former national police chief Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla and businessman Geovanny Fuentes, who was convicted of drug trafficking and weapons charges by a New York jury earlier this month.

A witness in that trial testified that he saw Fuentes pay bribes to President Hernández during the 2013 presidential campaign.

Tony Hernández is expected to appeal his conviction. To reduce his sentence, he could also choose someday to cooperate with prosecutors. That possibility, however, seems unlikely, because he would potentially have to share incriminating information about his brother.

"Such cooperation must be complete; in other words, you can't pick and choose who you are going to cooperate against, you have to tell the prosecutors everything," said Rebecca Monck Ricigliano, a former prosecutor and chief of the Narcotics Unit for the Southern District of New York. "So that would require information about the president of Honduras, assuming he has any."

Background

Drug money, coup d'états & global corporations in Honduras

NACLA Report on Americas, by Karen Spring, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/drug-money-coup-detats-global-corporations-in-honduras>

“Shithole countries”

The US government promises pathway to citizenship for 11 million people, but will the US, Canada and “international community” continue to treat Honduras and Guatemala like “shithole countries”, creating ever more forced migrants and refugees?

By Grahame Russell, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/us-government-promises-pathway-to-citizenship-for-11-million-people>

More information

- Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network: spring.kj@gmail.com, <https://www.aquiabajo.com/blog>, <https://twitter.com/hondurassol>
- Gabriela Amador & Christiam Sánchez, Pro-Honduras Network: prohondurasnetwork@gmail.com, www.prohondurasnetwork.com, www.facebook.com/PROHNN/

To receive updates about political and human rights issues in Honduras:

https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/honduras_daily

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