



Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, alias "Chepe Luna"

The United States -- which through its antinarcotics, judicial and police attaches was very familiar with the routes used for smuggling, and especially those used for people trafficking and understood that those traffickers are often one and the same -- greeted the new government of Elias Antonio Saca in 2004 with a proposal: take down this Chepe Luna.

As described in police profiles compiled during the administrations of President Francisco Guillermo Flores Perez (1999-2004) and President Elias Antonio Saca (2004 - 2009), Luna was a successful cattle rancher who became involved in moving contraband and smuggling people and drugs. He got his only identification card (DUI) in Santa Rosa de Lima, La Union, in eastern El Salvador, on August 16, 2003. He registered his personal details at 9:59 a.m. and 13 minutes later, he had his identification, number 2936356: Born on February 25, 1970, in the municipality of Pasaquina, La Union, the 5'4" Jose Natividad Luna Pereira is the life partner of Marlenis Sonia Cabrera.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of Chepe Luna

This was no ordinary procedure. To receive his DUI, Luna presented a birth certificate he had obtained four months earlier, on May 6, in the office of the Pasaquina mayor. Municipal employees said he already had Honduran identity; information and documents registered in his name at the mayor's office did not match those that now exist. The obstacle was not hard to overcome: six days before Chepe Luna's visit to city hall, Hector Ramirez Odir, an old neighbor of his from Santa Clarita -- a small town where both spent part of their childhoods -- had taken over as mayor, representing the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party. [1]

This is the second article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.

At the time Chepe Luna processed those documents, he was already facing charges, had arrest warrants and some judicial procedures against him had been initiated. He had also been identified as one of the most important human traffickers in Central America by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and a New York court had issued a warrant for his arrest on suspicion of drug trafficking and money laundering.

From Cheese to Cocaine

Records belonging to El Salvador's National Civil Police (PNC) certify that on March 21, 2002, Luna participated in the assault of two officers who had pursued a vehicle loaded with contraband cheese. He was later arrested for this incident. During the trial, five days later, the Attorney General's Office added charges of issuing threats, after he shouted at and accosted his accusers. Three years earlier, he had been arrested for smuggling. On both occasions, the cases fell apart due to a lack of evidence, and he walked free unscathed.

Soon, he established himself as the most powerful smuggler in eastern El Salvador, thanks to the territorial control he exercised over the wetlands bordering the Gulf of Fonseca, his access to goods in Nicaragua and Honduras, and most importantly, an extensive network of collaborators he slowly built up within the state, especially in the PNC, but also in the Attorney General's Office and the judicial system. A 2004 report prepared by the Finance Ministry said:

The smuggling of all kinds of goods increased because police chiefs began receiving gifts from the powerful structures (...) in late 2003 and the first nine months of 2004; the police favored smugglers to the extent that merchandise owners who paid bribes went untouched.

Chepe Luna's strategy was the same as that of other smugglers on the continent who ultimately became drug traffickers: territorial control; access and management of a logistics transport network capable of moving goods safely and quickly; and enough money to buy off the authorities and even bring them into the business.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of the Perrones

A press release from September 2004 highlights his modus operandi:[2] agents from the Financial Division cleared the route for the cheese smugglers in the blind passage of El Cusuco. Other agents colluded with the smugglers, and an

army captain oversaw soldiers who helped unload blocks of cheese. Everything happened just meters from a house owned by Chepe Luna in Barrancones, on the Gulf of Fonseca, near the shared sea entry by El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, through which all types of weapons and contraband passed during the Central American wars in the 1980s.

Another police report, drawn up in 2004 by an institutional committee led by the Finance Ministry to combat smuggling, includes testimony from a police intelligence group that talks about the social base the smuggler had built:

Luna coordinates speedboats and has landing docks in the gulf. There is one on Perico Island, at the entrance of the Barrancones channel, in the Goascoran River. Chepe Luna has a property on a small island there, where 25 families work for him.

The report says Chepe Luna handled similar communities on the islands of Muruhaca, El Cedro and San Juan, and in the estuaries of La Manzanilla and El Robalon.

The newspaper report also quoted an unidentified PNC source who threw air trafficking into the mix of activities: "There is also an Air Force airstrip near El Tamarindo Beach, where villagers have witnessed night flights."

Chepe Luna also had people working for him near the airstrip, the investigation said.

In mid-2004, according to the Finance Ministry's report, his influence extended far beyond bribes to agents and managers in the province of La Union:

Oscar Aguilar, alias "Cachorro," permitted the growth of these smugglers operating in the East, who later became known as the Perrones. He had direct contact with the large structures, and his underlings, agents and local chiefs, went after the small-time operators and after receiving an immediate payment, they arrested them, quickly let them go and retained their merchandise, which is how the judicial system benefited. Cachorro was the head of the Financial Division.

In 2010, the Inspector General's Office opened a file on Cachorro for his favorable treatment of Chepe Luna. In 2012, he was appointed head of the Police Intelligence Center (CIP), the PNC unit that is supposed to collect and analyze all information related to organized crime.

The Art of Escape

In late 2004, under the DEA's watch, the administration of President Antonio Saca had formed a working group to profile Chepe Luna and prepare an operation to capture him. In addition to a US delegation, the PNC, the Attorney General's Office, the Security Ministry and the special investigations unit of the Finance Ministry's General Internal Revenue Directorate all participated in the group.

"The idea that the US sold us was that we should, as the new government, demonstrate our commitment in the fight against organized crime, which was something that seemed feasible in those early days. And they suggested doing so through complicated operations that involved monitoring crimes such as evasion, or smuggling. That is to say, the investigation was focused on the financial side," one of the ministers who participated in the group said in 2009.

The group decided to begin a relentless pursuit of Chepe Luna. Capturing him would mean demonstrating that the PNC had not been infiltrated, that the Technical Secretariat of the Presidency was really working to control smuggling as part of its fiscal policy, and that El Salvador was serious about the war on drugs. But the mission failed in these goals because the first premise was false: the PNC had for years been infiltrated by smugglers from the east.

The researchers began by gathering intelligence reports and court records, including those open against Chepe Luna in New York. They also called on the National Registry of Natural Persons and the Finance Ministry to develop a complete profile of him. During Semana Santa (a week-long Easter celebration) in 2005, in an international operation that included the assistance of the Nicaraguan police, they made their first attempt to capture Luna.

One of the ministers who knew about the operation had gone to his beach property on Ash Wednesday. In San Salvador, in the eastern region of the country, and in northwest Nicaragua, teams were about to be deployed to implement the plan that he, the PNC, and other senior US officials had planned over and over again during lengthy meetings in the sitting rooms of the ministry, in embassy offices and even at the National Palace. If all went well, the minister would be able to return from his vacation to tell President Saca they had done something exceptional: capture the drug dealer most wanted by the DEA in El Salvador. So, on alert, the minister went to his ranch, ready to rest for a couple of days. He left his cell phone turned on.

From the early hours of that Ash Wednesday, long before the minister set off on his route to the beach, a couple of agents and their Nicaraguan counterparts finished refining the surveillance operation in Nicaragua that, according to the

plan, would kick off the hunt. The idea was to make Chepe Luna fall into a trap. Undercover agents had made an agreement for him to deliver a shipment of cattle and cocaine from the shores of Chinandega, in western Nicaragua, to the Salvadoran side of the Pan-American Highway. Intelligence analyzed in San Salvador, collected by narcotics agents with the help of the DEA, had given them a pretty good idea of the routes used by Chepe Luna: Chinandega, the Gulf of Fonseca, Barrancones or Las Tunas, Pasaquina and Santa Rosa de Lima, the last of which lay along the Pan-American Highway. The operation involved monitoring points in several of these places, including San Miguel, the last point of departure to the capital and Guatemala.

In San Miguel, Rosario and Marcial,[3] two officers involved in the arrest operation, who were not identified by their real names, awaited a signal near the Metrocenter Mall. Sitting in a white Nissan, they pretended to be a loving couple taking advantage of the first day of vacation to exchange kisses in the half-empty parking lot.

Late into the night, the minister continued to await a phone call at the beach.

According to the account later given by the minister, a child left his bike on the pavement near the white Nissan's driver's door and knocked on the window a couple of times. Agent Marcial lowered the glass.

"If you want, you can leave. The gentleman you are waiting for is not coming," said the boy.

And indeed: the man that Salvadoran, American and Nicaraguan police all awaited would not come. Chepe Luna had escaped.

When the minister's phone finally rang at the beach house, he was told the whole plan had collapsed. The only possibility, thought the minister, was that the group had missed its chance to capture the drug trafficker. From the outset, the minister suspected police officers had been involved. It was not the first time that complicity at the highest levels had destroyed investigations like this. And it would not be the last.

In 2006, a year after that failed operation, the Salvadoran government embarked on a kind of silent cleansing that included the transfer of PNC Director General Ricardo Menesses to the Salvadoran Embassy in Washington, as a police liaison, in a position created ad hoc by the executive.



Three years later, Inspector Zaira Navas would investigate him and four other senior police chiefs for alleged links to Chepe Luna, including Cachorro, who the PNC director in 2008, Francisco Rovira,[4] had rescued from ostracism by naming him head of the Police Intelligence Center (CIP), despite internal reports linking him with the Perrones.



Ultimately, Zaira Navas' investigations were overshadowed by the lack of political support for President Mauricio Funes Cartagena, with attacks coming from the PNC and some right-wing parties.

After the failure of the operation against Chepe Luna in 2004, one of many failures caused by complicity between the capo and police, the minister decided to restrict access to the group at the end of 2005.

"I informed the executive of everything. What just happened was very serious. They knew everything. We also shared our suspicions about the PNC," said the minister in 2009.

What did President Saca do?

Nothing, or very little, said the former official.

** This is a shortened version of an investigation by the Salvadoran journalist Hector Silva. The contents are part of a soon to be released book entitled: "The Infiltrators: the story of corruption in the police of El Salvador." This is the second article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.*

Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. For additional information, please contact the author by email .

Footnotes

[1] Interview with Odir Ramírez, Mayor of Pasaquina, La Unión, *La Prensa Grafica*.

[2] A team of journalists from *El Diario de Hoy* attested to the smuggling of milk along a blind passage in La Union.

[3] Pseudonyms are used for two officers who an ex-minister of Saca spoke about as involved in the capture operation.

[4] Francisco Rovira was named as the replacement for Rodrigo Avila on February 5, 2008, and resigned on August 23 of that same year amid accusations of corruption against him and his assistants.

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