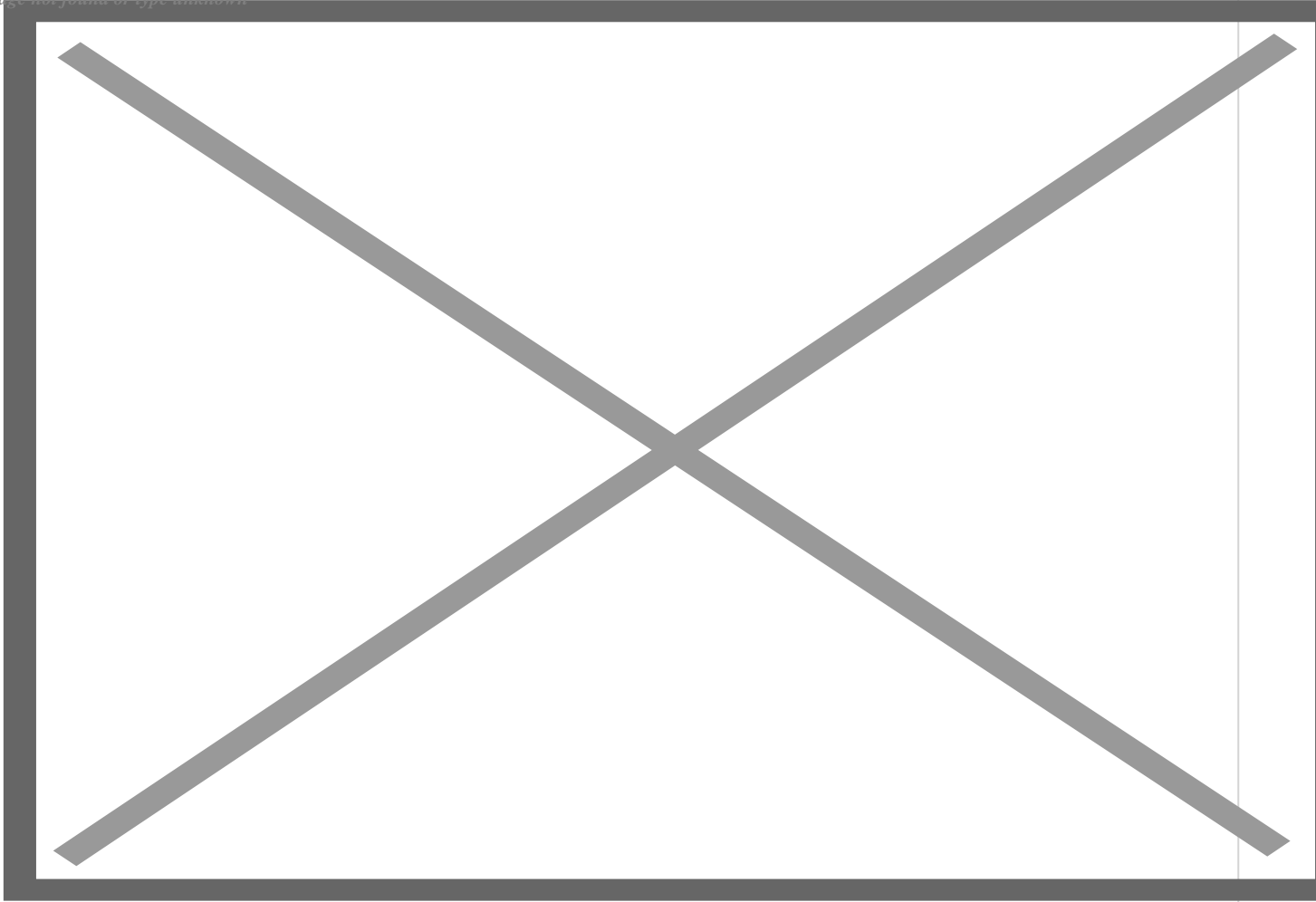


Honduran president denies drug trafficking accusations

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Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez

Tegucigalpa, March 11 (RHC)-- Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez has denied allegations made by a U.S. prosecutor that he helped smuggle tonnes of cocaine into the United States. New York prosecutor Jacob Gutwillig said, during the trial of alleged Honduran drug trafficker Geovanny Fuentes in federal court on Tuesday, that Fuentes had paid Hernandez a \$25,000 bribe.

"How can anyone believe false testimonies that I was dealing with drug traffickers," Hernandez wrote on Twitter on Thursday. Gutwillig claimed that accountant Jose Sanchez was present at meetings in 2013

and 2014 where Fuentes paid the money to Hernandez.

Sanchez was due to tell the New York jury about “the shock, the fear he felt when he saw the defendant sitting with the president,” said Gutwillig. The witness worked at a rice-growing company through which Fuentes laundered money, the prosecutor alleged.

Sanchez will testify that Hernandez told Fuentes “they’d transport so much cocaine into the US they’d shove the drugs up the noses of the gringos”, said Gutwillig. Hernandez, a lawyer who came to power in January 2014 and is in his second term, has styled himself as a champion in the fight against drugs.

U.S prosecutors consider him a co-conspirator alongside Fuentes but have not charged him.

The Honduran government claimed on Wednesday night that photos shown during the trial, in which Fuentes’s family members are seen with Hernandez, were taken during a public event for the president’s birthday during the 2017 election campaign.

The president’s brother, Tony Hernandez, was convicted of large-scale drug trafficking in a New York trial in 2019. Prosecutors say he was the middle man between accused trafficker Fuentes and the president.

President Hernandez was linked to drug trafficking at his brother’s trial by Leonel Rivera, leader of a Honduran drug trafficking gang called Los Cachiros. “It’s a proven fact that Los Cachiros tried to make a deal with the U.S.,” Hernandez tweeted. “The false testimonies of drug traffickers are obvious lies.”

Rivera began testifying Wednesday, telling the New York jury that he had worked with Fuentes from 2011 to 2013 until they got into a fight and the alleged trafficker tried to kill him. Rivera faces a life sentence plus 30 years in prison but hopes it will be reduced in exchange for his testimony.

He collaborated for two years with the US Drug Enforcement Administration before turning himself in to American authorities in 2015. Rivera has been a cooperating witness for the US government in other major drug trafficking trials in New York, including that of president Hernandez’s brother.

During the trial of Tony Hernandez, Rivera said the president received millions of dollars in bribes from drug traffickers to protect the cocaine shipments to the United States.

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