

Honduran ex-president detained as U.S. seeks extradition

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Police in Honduras have detained former President Juan Orlando Hernandez (Photo: Reuters)

Tegucigalpa, February 16 (RHC)-- Police in Honduras have detained former President Juan Orlando Hernandez, after a judge ordered his arrest amid an extradition request from the United States on accusations of drug trafficking.

An arrest warrant for Hernandez "has been issued," court spokesman Melvin Duarte told reporters on Tuesday afternoon, as the ex-president's home in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, was surrounded by hundreds of police pending a decision on the U.S. request. Hernandez must appear before the judge within 24 hours, the spokesman added.

The former president left his home in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, escorted by armed police, television footage showed on Tuesday. He was given a bulletproof vest by police and handcuffed as he exited his residence.

Speculation had been swirling for months that the U.S. was planning to request Hernandez's extradition when he left office amid accusations that he colluded with drug traffickers. Left-wing leader Xiomara Castro replaced him last month, becoming Honduras's first female president.

The U.S. is seeking to extradite Hernandez on charges relating to weapons and a drug-trafficking scheme between 2004 and 2022, the Reuters news agency reported on Tuesday, citing a U.S. embassy document. The embassy said in the document that Hernandez participated in a scheme to receive in Honduras tonnes of cocaine from Colombia and Venezuela, which were then to be shipped to the United States.

Hernandez, a former U.S. ally who left office last month, has been linked to drug trafficking operations by New York prosecutors. He has denied the claims, which he said were part of a revenge plot by drug lords that his government had captured or extradited to the U.S.

Honduras's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had said via Twitter on Monday that it had notified the country's Supreme Court that the U.S. embassy had requested the "formal provisional arrest of a Honduran politician" for extradition.

Washington's extradition request is in contrast to a period when the U.S. government saw Hernandez as a vital ally in volatile Central America during his eight years in power.

Last week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Hernandez was included on a list last year of people accused of corruption or undermining democracy in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

"The United States is advancing transparency and accountability in Central America by making public visa restrictions against Honduras' former president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, on account of corrupt actions," Blinken said on Twitter on February 7. "No one is above the law."

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