

Former Guatemalan vice president's attorney found guilty in prison break probe



Guatemala City, June 2 (RHC)-- A Guatemalan court has found Benjamin Estrada guilty of aiding Salvadoran citizen Marixa Ethelinda Lemus Perez alias "La Patrona" in escaping prison and sentenced him to eight years in jail with a fine of \$5,347 (\$40,000 Quetzales). Estrada, who also represented the former vice president Roxana Baldetti when he faced corruption charges, denied any responsibility in the case, stating that he was never Lemus's attorney.

He, instead, admitted to representing her cousin, Sonia Lemus Vasquez, who received a 40-year prison sentence for the murder of Alvaro Alfonso Mejia Estrada, La Patrona's husband. According to reports, La Patrona planned the murder of her husband along with Vasquez, hoping to collect payments from his insurance policy and inherit his businesses. Vasquez, who is La Patrona cousin, was allegedly responsible for hiring the hit-man.

In 2011, Perez ran for the office of Mayor in Moyuta, in the Guatemalan department of Jutiapa, for the National Unity of Hope (UNE-GANA) party, but lost to Carlos Marroquin, who had a friendship with her husband. La Patrona, the leader of a gang, was sentenced to a 94-year prison in 2015 sentence for parricide, murder, attempted murder, kidnapping and illegal association. Six former members of the

National Civil Police (PNC) were also arrested and charged with being part of La Patrona's gang.

She attempted an escape in 2016 by jumping the prison's wall with the help of other prisoners but was detained shortly after. Her successful escape, however, was more sophisticated. With the help of security guards, La Patrona exited the Mariscal Zavala "VIP" prison, in which ex-president Otto Perez Molina is also being held, disguised as a security guard.

Her lawyer Byron Manuel Santos Galindo was arrested for his involvement in the prison break as the police found \$55 thousand in his home during a raid. The police also raided Estrada's home in the city's Zone 16 and found clothing, a mobile phone and a car where fingerprints and hairs of La Patrona were found.

The Sixth Tribunal of Criminal Sentence absolved Estrada from the illegal association charges, but forbid him from practicing as a lawyer. The tribunal also sentenced seven security guards to a five year sentence for their participation in La Patrona's prison break and let other three agents free as it didn't find enough evidence against them. Lemus Perez was re-captured in El Salvador two weeks after her prison break.

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