

Knight Ridder Newspapers

April 6, 2006

Mogul's Probable Porn Trial Tests Integrity of Mexican Legal System

By Kevin G. Hall, Knight Ridder Newspapers

MEXICO CITY – Mexican prosecutors are preparing for the return from the United States of a wealthy Cancun businessman whose child-sex and pornography case gained notoriety last year after a journalist who wrote a book about the allegations was arrested.

U.S. District Judge David K. Duncan ruled from the bench in Phoenix on Tuesday that Jean Succar Kuri, 61, would be returned to Mexico to face charges ranging from child rape and corruption of minors to participation in an international child-pornography ring. Seven girls and a boy allege sexual abuse that was filmed or photographed.

Succar Kuri, who's a legal U.S. resident, has been in jail in Arizona since Feb. 6, 2004. He's likely to be returned to Mexico within 90 days, though defense attorneys said they'd try to block the judge's decision.

The case exploded onto the international stage in December, after the arrest of journalist Lydia Cacho, who wrote "The Demons of Eden: The Power That Protects Child Pornography." The book, published in Mexico, asserts that powerful politicians have pressured Mexican prosecutors to back off from charging Succar Kuri.

Police from the state of Puebla, near Mexico City, seized Cacho in Cancun, 900 miles outside their jurisdiction, and took her back to Puebla to face local charges of criminal libel. Cacho eventually was released and the charges were dropped after an outcry from international rights and media organizations.

Her arrest became an even bigger issue in February, when leaked audiotapes purportedly showed that the governor of Puebla, Mario Marin, had engineered the arrest as a favor for Mexican clothing magnate Kamel Nacif, whom Cacho describes in her book as a Succar Kuri confidant and protector.

Marin doesn't deny that the voice on the tapes is his, but he says the conversations' content has been altered.

In one of them, Nacif thankfully fawns over Marin for the unusual arrest and calls him "my precious governor."

Many Mexicans think that the tapes expose what they've long suspected: that corrupt state politicians still manipulate the courts and law enforcement on behalf of cronies. The tapes are thought to have damaged the presidential campaign of Roberto Madrazo, a political ally of Marin. Both are members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI in its Spanish initials.

Cacho's book alleges that another prominent PRI member, who headed government ministries in the 1990s, pressured prosecutors to drop the case, and that similar pressure came from a politician who works in the administration of conservative President Vicente Fox, who's a member of the National Action Party. Both deny friendship with Succar Kuri or intervening on his behalf.

Many here and in the United States think the case will be a test of the independence and integrity of Mexico's criminal justice system.

Succar Kuri is a prominent Cancun businessman who controls concessions at the international airport there and whose net worth is estimated to exceed \$20 million. Before his arrest, he divided his time between a condominium in Cancun and a luxury home in Los Angeles.

Alicia Elena Perez Duarte, Mexico's prosecutor for women's rights, who's in charge of the federal charges against Succar Kuri, said her office wouldn't bow to political pressure.

"I don't have personal or political ties to high-level functionaries," she said. "Where we have elements to follow we will follow them."

The case has taken a number of unusual turns, however.

The local prosecutor, Leidy Campos, was removed after Succar Kuri phoned a Cancun radio station from hiding to claim that prosecutors had asked him for \$1 million to make the case go away. Campos denied that any effort had been made to solicit a bribe from him.

Succar Kuri's primary accuser, a 22-year-old woman who charged that he began having sex with her when she was 14, recently recanted her testimony, saying Campos had coerced her into making the accusation. Judge Duncan dismissed her change of heart, saying Mexican police have pictures of disrobed children on Succar Kuri's bed.

"These photos constitute probable cause that the pornography offense has been committed," the judge held.

Controversy surrounds other evidence in the case. Mexican police videotaped Succar Kuri describing sex acts that he said he'd committed with girls as young as 5. The tape was made during a casual lunch in Cancun with his accuser, but he wasn't arrested after that meeting and left the country soon afterward.

The tape was leaked to television stations, which aired it, and state prosecutors released not only the names of the accusers – some still minors – but also their cell phone numbers, addresses, the names of their parents and graphic photographs.

Rape counselors called the release of the information highly unusual.

U.S. prosecutors said they'd follow the case closely, noting that Succar Kuri, as a permanent U.S. resident, could be charged under U.S. laws that prohibit citizens and permanent residents from having sex with minors at home or abroad. His accuser alleges that he took her to Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

“We looked at it very carefully and we're not ruling out the possibility of bringing charges in the future,” said U.S. Attorney Paul K. Charlton, whose office brought the extradition charges on behalf of Mexico.

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