

Crime pays, if you're against Noriega

by Carlos Wesley

The U.S. has given generous payoffs to murderers and drug traffickers, in its zeal to prosecute Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega. Here are some of the prosecution's key witnesses.

Name	Crimes	Current status	Paid by U.S.
Tony Aizprua	Drug pilot. Employed by Floyd Carlton Caceres (see below).	Free.	\$511,000 so far, with more to come.
José Blandón	A former Panamanian diplomat, Blandón was identified by the U.S. government as the chief suspect in selling Noriega's taped jail conversations.	Free; has returned to Panama to finger political opponents for persecution.	\$169,000, so far.
Ricardo Bilonick	Owned Inair, an airline caught with some 1,000 kilos of cocaine in Miami in 1984. Admits to smuggling at least 15 tons of cocaine into the U.S.	Government dropped most charges against Bilonick, who was facing up to 60 years in prison.	Bilonick and his family are getting green cards and assistance from the government to become permanent U.S. residents.
Floyd Carlton Caceres	Drug pilot. Partner in Diacsá, a Miami air company involved in the drugs-for-weapons Contra resupply operation. Charged in 1987 with 9 counts of cocaine trafficking, Carlton was facing a sentence of life in prison plus 145 years with no parole. He pleaded guilty to one charge, punishable with 20 years.	Released from prison after 4.5 years. Carlton was given a new identity through the Federal Witness Protection Program (FWPP).	Carlton and his family are getting green cards and assistance from the government to resettle as permanent U.S. residents. He was allowed to keep a ranch and other property, and the government has paid him at least \$211,000 so far.
Luis del Cid	A former colonel in Panama's Defense Forces, the prosecution had charged him with 4 counts of drug trafficking and racketeering, which could have netted him 70 years in jail or more.	Three counts were dropped. Del Cid pleaded guilty to one charge, in a plea agreement that his lawyer says means he will be out of jail by January.	Del Cid and his family are getting green cards and assistance from the government to resettle as permanent U.S. residents.
Carlos Lehder	Drug trafficking, murder, kidnaping. Biggest cocaine kingpin ever to be jailed by the U.S. government.	Serving a life sentence plus 135 years in prison with no possibility of parole.	All the details are not yet known, but attorneys say the deal means Lehder will eventually go free and get a new identity under the FWPP.
Max Mermelstein	Admits guilt in 3 murders and is implicated in 2 more. Was charged on 11 drug counts. Admits he smuggled 56 tons of cocaine and 42,000 pounds of marijuana into Florida and that he was a transportation chief for Colombia's Medellín drug cartel before his 1985 arrest. Also admits to tax fraud and gun smuggling. The drug charges alone should have kept him in jail for life.	Free, after spending 2 years in prison. Is in the Federal Witness Protection Program and has been granted immunity on all charges, including the murders.	Has received \$670,245 from the government so far, at least \$250,000 a year. While he was still in jail, the government paid \$900 into his commissary fund so he could purchase snacks.
Daniel Miranda	Drug pilot. Sentenced to 5 years in jail in plea bargain.	Free on a suspended sentence.	Miranda and his family are getting green cards and assistance from the government to resettle as permanent U.S. residents. He also gets a U.S. commercial pilot's license.
Boris Olarte	Drug pilot.		\$200,000
Ramón Navarro	Drug smuggler.	Deceased.	\$170,000
Roberto Striedinger	Cocaine smuggler.	Free.	Given green cards for himself and family, a Mercedes Benz, a 10-passenger plane, a 40-foot yacht, and a cache of assault weapons.