

African American Community

Drug Dealer Depicted as Contra Fund-Raiser

By Douglas Farah
Washington Post Foreign Service

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Norwin Meneses always seemed to like to do things in a big way, whether it was drug trafficking or serving time in prison. And he has been doing it that way for a long time—before, during and after the events that have put him in the public eye in the United States.

Currently a central figure in the controversy over whether profits from U.S. cocaine sales went to CIA-backed contra guerrillas trying to overthrow the leftist Nicaragua government in the early 1980s, Meneses is in prison here after being caught in 1991 with 1,650 pounds of cocaine—the largest shipment ever captured in Nicaragua.

His lawyer has told Meneses not to speak to reporters, but sources familiar with Meneses's circumstances said he exercises a great deal of authority inside the prison, runs the prison food store and enjoys a large, private room away from the main prison bloc, guarded by two prisoners hired as his private bodyguards. His room has a color television, private kitchen and refrigerators, while other prisoners are crammed four or six to a cell and have no TV.

"He has a lot of money," said one investigator who has seen his accommodations. "He has bought himself a great deal of comfort and . . . influence."

Meneses is allegedly the link between cocaine sales in California in the early 1980s and the CIA-backed contras fighting in Nicaragua's civil war. In court testimony in San Diego in March, Meneses was depicted as both the head of a Nicaraguan drug-smuggling operation in California and as a contra fund-raiser who met contra leaders who worked closely with the CIA.

Meneses has a long history of crime and drug dealing here, stretching back more than two decades, according to investigators and court documents. Investigators here said he carried out at least some of his drug trafficking in the late 1980s while maintaining a relationship with U.S. counter-narcotics agents.

From a prominent family with strong ties to the former Somoza dictatorship, Meneses maintains he is innocent of the drug-trafficking charges for which he is serving a 15-year sentence.

Police investigators said Meneses began drug trafficking in 1974, after a small airplane carrying marijuana from Colombia crashed near where Meneses was attending a party. Using the influence of his brother, who was a general in the National Guard of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, Meneses had the Colombians freed and kept the marijuana to sell.

Allegedly operating under the protection of his brother, Meneses continued to traffic in marijuana and engage in other criminal enterprises, sources familiar with his case said.

After the leftist Sandinistas overthrew Somoza in 1979, Meneses left Nicaragua and settled in the San

Francisco area. He rapidly became involved in efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas. In an August interview with the weekly *Semanario*, Meneses said he worked for the contras for five years, fund-raising and "training and sending people down to Honduras."

Adolfo Calero, who was the political leader of the Democratic Nicaraguan Force (FDN), the main contra organization that was funded by the CIA, said Meneses visited the FDN camps in the early 1980s with the gift of a cross-bow for FDN commander Enrique Bermudez. But he said that Meneses was never a contra leader and that he had no knowledge of his alleged involvement in large-scale drug trafficking.

In late 1990, when a cease-fire ended Nicaragua's civil war, Meneses returned, after living for a time in Costa Rica. Knowledgeable sources said Meneses had begun a sporadic relationship with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) sometime around 1988, occasionally passing on information about trafficking. Meneses was already well-known to the DEA because of his own trafficking, and the relationship lasted about three years, the sources said.

The narcotics police began monitoring Meneses after he tried to befriend several of his old enemies—Sandinista political and military leaders—and shortly afterward he was implicated by small-time traffickers caught smuggling a 750-kilo—about 1,650 pounds—load of cocaine, according to law enforcement sources.

The police were shocked, said a senior investigator, when their surveillance activities detected a meeting between Meneses and DEA agent Federico Villareal, who worked as a liaison with Nicaraguan narcotics police. "We asked Villareal about it, if Meneses was their agent or informant, and if so, why they had not told us 750 kilos of cocaine were coming through our territory," said a senior police official. "Villareal denied knowing Meneses at all, and said he was not an informant. We asked him why he had visited Meneses . . . he stammered and made no reply."

The DEA did not dispute this version of events. A DEA official said it "would not be unusual for us, especially overseas, to be in contact with alleged traffickers to develop information or evidence."

Meneses was arrested shortly thereafter for allegedly trying to smuggle cocaine to the United States in four Mercedes-Benz cars whose struts and chasses were cut open, then carefully welded shut.

The chief witness against Meneses was Enrique Miranda Jaime, a former Sandinista army major who said Meneses had told him how he used cocaine sales during the civil war to fund the contras, using El Salvador's air force facilities for transshipment.

"After analyzing the case, we believe Meneses was sent as a DEA informant here, perhaps to try to implicate senior Sandinista officials in drug trafficking," said a senior investigator. "Then he started trafficking behind the back of the DEA and got busted and they washed their hands of him."

WASH Post

10/5/96