

Fugitive From U.S. Justice Leads Panama's Assembly

By Marc Lacey
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PANAMA — The hand that Pedro Miguel González Pinzón extends in greeting — the one that wields the gavel during proceedings of the National Assembly, the one that waves to rural constituents and signs legislative documents — may have blood on it.

He insists otherwise. He says he was not the one who opened fire on two American soldiers, killing one and severely wounding another, on the eve of the first President Bush's visit to Panama in June 1992 after the 1989 invasion by the United States. In his favor, Mr. González has the not-guilty verdict a Panamanian jury reached in 1997.

But he remains in the cross hairs of American law enforcement officials, who would cuff his hand rather than shake it. A United States grand jury indicted Mr. González on murder and other charges shortly after the killing. As for the Panamanian jury's verdict, those still pursuing Mr. González contend that the trial was deeply flawed.

The world is full of fugitives. But Mr. González is different. His face appears both on wanted posters and campaign fliers. His whereabouts are widely known: the luxurious, wood-paneled offices of the president at the Legislative Palace.

In September, after two successful campaigns for legislator, Mr. González raised his profile even higher by winning the National Assembly's top job. His colleagues elected him by a wide margin but not without creating political turmoil that extends from Panama City to Washington.

Before the vote, on Sept. 1, the American Embassy quietly made clear its opposition to Mr. González's elevation to president of the assembly. In private meetings, American officials pointed out that the free trade agreement between the United States and Panama pending in Washington might be imperiled. Since then, crucial members of the United States House and Senate have refused to support the pact because of Mr. González.

His supporters, particularly those in the populist, anti-American wing of the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party, have turned the affair into a debate over Washington's interference in Panamanian affairs, which indeed has a long history.

In an interview in November, Mr. González, 42, said the lingering indictment and the intense opposition by American officials to his new job had created a political crisis here. "The pressure has been great," he said. "It's been a very difficult time."

He mentioned other difficult times as well: the moment he learned he was a suspect; the long spell he spent in hiding — he says in Panama, but others say in the Dominican

Republic or Cuba; the years he was detained while awaiting trial, albeit in a rather luxurious holding center by Panamanian prison standards.

Then came the not-guilty verdict for Mr. González and two people accused of being accomplices. "I'm a free man," was how he described his feelings at the time.

But he has not really been free. The American indictment that still hangs over him has restricted his movements outside the country considerably.

As for why he ran and hid for more than two years, he said the reason was fear, not guilt.

"I didn't want to be grabbed and put on the next plane to the United States," he said, adding that he still took considerable precautions to make sure that would not happen. His ample security team is on the lookout not just for attackers, but for bounty hunters.

Mr. González portrays his personal legal jeopardy as a matter of national pride, an argument that has divided the country. In a recent poll, most of the Panamanians surveyed said he should step down for the good of the country. But his backers say that would amount to Washington's dictating Panamanian affairs.

"We are owners of our destiny," he said. "It is a decision that should be up to us."

But Guillermo Endara, who was the American-backed president when the crime was committed, views Mr. González's legal problems as his own.

"In my opinion, Pedro Miguel is guilty of what he is charged with in the U.S.," said Mr. Endara, who opposes the free trade pact and, as a result, is not overly concerned about the effect the controversy has on it.

In a sense, Mr. González remains on trial. During a recent discussion of his case on the popular television program "Open Debate," Mr. González's lawyer, Carlos E. Carrillo, sparred with Jaime O. Abad, who led Panama's detective force at the time of the shooting.

Mr. Abad laid out the evidence against Mr. González, including the facts that the car involved in the shooting was found on the González family ranch and that various guns were discovered buried at Mr. González's sister's workplace.

Mr. Carrillo offered a fierce rebuttal. Ballistic tests, for instance, were inconclusive, he said. The F.B.I. identified an AK-47 that Mr. González's sister buried as the weapon in the shooting. But Scotland Yard and tests by the police in Panama did not match the gun to bullets recovered from the scene, an isolated country road outside the capital, where Sgt. Zak A. Hernández Laporte, the American soldier, was killed on June 10, 1992.

"Everything you can think of to detract from a fair trial was done," said William J. Hughes, the American ambassador at the time of the trial. "It was a manipulated trial."

Mr. Hughes cites the circumstances of Mr. González's surrender as the first sign that this would be no typical trial. In an enormous political spectacle, Mr. González's father, Gerardo González, the president of the governing party at the time, as well as legislative leader, arranged for his son to turn himself in to the president, the attorney general and the police chief, among other government officials.

In an interview, Mr. Carrillo, the defense lawyer, jabbed his Montblanc pen firmly into a legal pad when asked about the fairness of the trial. He said that Americans had been deeply involved in the prosecution of the case from beginning to end. Only when the verdict was issued, he said, did they complain.

Ernesto Pérez Balladares, who was president at the time of the trial, had this response then to American criticism of the verdict: "Very frankly, I didn't like the result of the O. J. Simpson trial either."

Although Mr. González insists that he had nothing to do with the attack on the American soldiers, he does acknowledge that he was part of the antioccupation protests at the time.

President Bush visited on June 11, and protesters were doing everything they could to make his arrival a fiasco. Days before Sergeant Hernández was killed, someone sprayed bullets from an AK-47 at the entrance to Albrook Air Base. When Mr. Bush did arrive, riot policemen fired tear gas at demonstrators. Some of the gas reached the president. Mr. González was among those in the crowd.

"Zak Hernández was a soldier of the invading army," Mr. González said. "Who killed him? It could have been any Panamanian angry about the visit of President Bush."