

French prosecutors demand 10 years' jail for Noriega
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French prosecutors on Wednesday demanded the maximum 10-year jail sentence for Panama's ageing former dictator Manuel Noriega on charges of laundering drug money.

The 76-year-old general has denied taking payments from Colombian drug lords in the 1980s, dismissing the accusations that he laundered drug money in France as a scheme concocted by the United States.

"I call on God's divine providence to give wisdom to you and all the judges," Noriega said, punching the air as he addressed the presiding judge after the prosecutors spoke.

Announcing the sentencing demand, state prosecutor Michel Maes told the Paris court: "We should retain the image of a perfectly structured organisation in the hands of one man, and in the interests of one man, Manuel Noriega.

"This system was conceived to launder drug money for Mr Noriega's profit."

Maes also demanded that all of Noriega's money in French accounts be seized.

Noriega's lawyers asked for him to be acquitted, saying the charges against him hinge on dodgy testimony from ex-drug traffickers who were paid and given protection by US authorities.

One of the lawyers, Yves Leberquier, urged the court to "go beyond the image that the United States present of Noriega" as a "dictator and cocaine-trafficker."

He said a 10-year term would amount to a life sentence for the frail general, who suffers from partial paralysis and high blood pressure, meaning "the death in jail of an ill man of 76."

A French court had already sentenced Noriega to 10 years in jail at a trial in his absence in 1999, but the general was allowed to appeal that ruling in person after his extradition. A verdict is expected as early as next month.

Noriega, who ruled Panama from 1983 to 1989, has already spent 20 years in a Miami prison for drug trafficking and money laundering and for years fought against being extradited to France.

He was finally extradited there on April 26 to answer charges of laundering the equivalent of 2.3 million euros (2.8 million dollars) from the Medellin drug cartel through French banks in the late 1980s.

Once a close US ally, Noriega testified that Washington turned against him in the 1980s when he refused to allow Panama to become a staging ground for operations against leftists across Central America.

The pock-marked general known as "Pineapple Face" was arrested by US troops that invaded Panama in December 1989.

French prosecutors say that drug money funnelled in the late 1980s was used by Noriega's

wife and a shell company to buy three luxury apartments in Paris.

Much of the hearing on Tuesday was devoted to questions about Noriega's bank accounts and his ties to the now-defunct BCCI bank, which allegedly handled his financial affairs.

Asked about the source of millions in cash deposits at the bank, Noriega said they came from successful business ventures including duty-free sales at Panama airport and life insurance policies.

The one-time strongman was a key asset for the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1980s but fell out with Washington when he was widely considered to have turned his strategically important country into a drugs hub.

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