

Arizona Mother Walks Free From Mexico Drug Bust Nightmare

An Arizona mother of seven jailed in Mexico after marijuana was found under her bus seat was released on Thursday after video evidence showed her boarding the vehicle without the drugs, her attorney said.

Yanira Maldonado, a Mormon, walked free shortly before midnight from the prison in the Mexican border city of Nogales, where she had been held since her arrest on May 22.

"She's been released right now," her attorney Jose Francisco Benitez Paz said by phone.

Maldonado was arrested when soldiers searched a bus on which she was traveling with her husband Gary, and found some 12 pounds (5 kilograms) of marijuana under her seat.

Benitez Paz said a security video from the bus terminal in Los Mochis in northwest Sinaloa state, where the couple boarded the bus, showed Maldonado carrying only two blankets, water bottles and her purse.

"You can clearly see on the video that she did not at any moment have drugs," Benitez Paz said.

He said a judge on Thursday declined to charge Maldonado and ordered her released. She planned to return to the United States immediately, the attorney said.

Maldonado, who was born in Mexico and is a naturalized U.S. citizen, traveled to Mexico with her husband to attend a relative's funeral. The couple opted to take a bus back to Arizona as they believed it was safer than traveling by car.

The bus was pulled over at a military checkpoint about 80 miles south of the Arizona border, Benitez Paz said.

Maldonado protested her innocence in television interviews from the Nogales prison where she was held since last week.

The incident drew attention to the world of drug traffickers who grow marijuana in the rugged heartlands of northwest Mexico and transport it across the Arizona border to satisfy strong demand from U.S. consumers.