

OUT OF U.S. DEATH ROW, MEXICAN GOES HOME ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT FREED AFTER 13 YEARS

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Body

An **illegal immigrant** from Mexico jailed for almost 14 **years** on **death row** in a Texas prison returned to Mexico a **free** man Wednesday and received a hero's welcome.

"I'm happy, but I'm also annoyed because they stole 15 **years** of my life," Ricardo Aldape Guerra said on the steps of a **Mexican** government plane that flew him to his hometown, Monterrey.

About 200 well-wishers cheered Aldape Guerra, 35, who several times was just hours from execution for the slaying of a Houston police officer he says he did not kill.

Crowds had waited since Tuesday night to welcome him **home**, and the government of his **home** state of Nuevo Leon had offered to fly a plane to Houston to pick him up **after** a **U.S.** judge dropped the murder charge against him.

The **U.S.** Immigration and Naturalization Service said Aldape Guerra would be treated like any other **illegal immigrant** and he was whisked to the border in a blue sedan by immigration agents as soon as he was **freed**.

Aldape Guerra, who crossed into Matamoros, Mexico, from Brownsville, told reporters that "no money" would repay him for the **years** spent on **death row**.

"Why would I want money?" he replied to reporters in Matamoros who asked him if he would demand compensation from the **U.S.** justice system.

Aldape Guerra, who came to the **United States** illegally in 1982, has always insisted on his innocence. "I never committed any crime," he told Mexico's Televisa news network Wednesday.

Aldape Guerra's nightmare ended **after** Harris County District Attorney Johnny Holmes said Tuesday that he would drop the murder charge against him and not seek a new trial.

Holmes told reporters that a judge's decision earlier this week to throw **out** six key prosecution witnesses for lack of credibility had made it impossible to retry the case.

Aldape Guerra was convicted in October 1982 and sentenced to **death** for the killing of Houston police officer James Harris during a routine traffic stop.

Aldape Guerra contended from the beginning that an acquaintance, Roberto Carrasco Flores, shot Harris. In 1994, **U.S.** District Judge Kenneth Hoyt ordered a new trial because he said police had intimidated witnesses into

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identifying Aldape Guerra as the shooter, and prosecutors, in their zeal to avenge a cop's death, had manipulated evidence to get a conviction.

But Aldape Guerra remained on death row until last August, when a federal appellate court upheld Hoyt's s decision.

Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

A U.S. official removes the handcuffs from Ricardo Aldape Guerra.

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