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Guatemala Reshuffles Cops

by LADB Staff

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The US has leveled strong accusations of corruption against the Guatemalan government in recent days. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich has said that the government is linked to narcotraffic and organized crime. It was not the first time that Reich has made criminal accusations against the Portillo government (see NotiCen, 2002-03-21). Despite a demand from President Alfonso Portillo to name names, Reich has declined to do so. There followed a major shakeup in Guatemalan security forces, which the government insisted had nothing to do with the Reich accusations.

On October 17, Guatemalan authorities presented a broad plan against organized crime, along with a denial that they were knuckling under to demands from the north. The plan calls for the dissolution of the Departamento de Operaciones Antinarcoticos (DOAN), according to the joint announcement by Minister of Government Adolfo Reyes and Carlos de Leon, chief of the Fiscalia General and of the Public Ministry. "The decisions are not motivated by the comments from the United States," said de Leon. He maintained that Guatemala as a sovereign nation makes its own decisions. Reyes said that the dissolution of the DOAN had been accomplished by a decree signed by Vice President Juan Francisco Reyes, citing corruption and inefficiency as principal reasons for the action.

The anti-narcotics agency had been scandal-ridden for years, scandals that involved the chiefs of the institution. Reyes said that future anti-narcotics enforcement will not be centralized in a specific unit, but the work will be assigned to several different sections of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC). About 90 recent graduates of a US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) curriculum will have intelligence and investigation assignments, but operations will be the responsibility of the PNC. The disbanded unit was already a slimmer, trimmer organization.

In April, 90% of DOAN's agents lost their jobs after some 600 kg of cocaine disappeared from their custodial warehouses. Reyes said that 200 former agents are still under investigation in the incident. The reorganization also calls for creating a new unit, the Unidades Moviles Operativas (UMO), which will bring its expertise to bear on drug traffic, terrorism, trafficking in people, organized crime, and common delinquency. It will begin to function immediately with a complement of 3,000 agents from the PNC and personnel from the Public Ministry, and it will have the additional support of the army when needed. It will be deployed on the nation's highways, in customs offices, ports, airports, and in areas where the influence of international drug bands has been detected.

Also relieved of their duties will be the entire staff of lawyers at the Public Ministry with responsibilities in narcotics investigation, with the exception of the chief drug officer, Mynor Melgar. New lawyers will be assigned to this function. "We have ordered changing 100% of the people in all the specialized anti-drug units. We're not accusing anybody, but we are going to change all the lawyers, auxiliaries, and officers," said Reyes, adding that the government is considering having

observers from the international community, especially the US Embassy, monitor the performance of the UMO.

At the PNC, meanwhile, further changes have been taking place. Presidential spokesman Byron Barrera said that the government is seeking better control of drugs and that the PNC has also been "purged," with the dismissal of 117 officers for alleged commission of illicit acts. There is not, however, total agreement that all this activity is not a consequence of directives from the US.

As officials bend over backwards to assure that there is no linkage, former vice minister of government Mario Merida viewed it all as an improvised measure in direct response to Reich's Oct. 10 statements. "It isn't a reworking of anti- drug policy in its total context, because that would have to include other activities like money laundering, internal consumption, and of course the cultivation of some drugs," he said. President Portillo remained adamant on the subject of Reich's harsh critique.

In Germany on other business, the president confirmed that he had demanded an explanation directly from his North American homologue. "I have sent a letter to President Bush; I demand an explanation and that they give me names," he told Prensa Libre, adding, "He who accuses must prove." Apparently sinking his own administration's denials on the issue of US influence, Portillo confessed, "All the security posts are decided in the Embassy of the United States. The gringos have approved all the posts." This in turn led to some counterdenials at the embassy, where spokeswoman Kay Mayfield clarified that the mission had only participated in the discussion of "possible appointments," but that final decisions correspond to the Guatemalan government, in accordance with local and international laws.

At home in Guatemala City, government officials recoiled from their leader's statement. Byron Barrera doubted Prensa Libre's reporting, telling Spanish news agency EFE that it would be better to await a statement from Portillo. But he hedged later when facing a Prensa Libre reporter. "I suppose this letter might have been sent in the course of his trip in Germany, or it's going to be sent, because we didn't have a copy," he said.

Edgar Arana, spokesman at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, declined to comment, saying only that the president directs policy and can take his own initiatives. Portillo was scheduled to return to Guatemala the following day, but in a strange twist, it was left to his wife to explain days later that he had gone to Italy for some undisclosed reason, and it was not clear exactly when he would be back.

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