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LADB Staff

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Portillo Replaces Foreign Minister

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala's Foreign Relations Minister Gabriel Orellana resigned his post on Dec. 12. He had held the job for three years. He said he quit for personal reasons, and Presidential Secretary General Luis Mijangos told the news media that President Alfonso Portillo had accepted the resignation and that Secretary of Strategic Analysis Edgar Gutierrez would replace him.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, John Hamilton arrived at the US Embassy. Upon presenting his credentials on Dec. 16, he became the new US ambassador to Guatemala. His arrival comes soon after former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich pounded the Portillo government and the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) on issues of corruption and organized crime at the highest levels of government.

It was Orellana who met the Washington bombast head-on, demanding proof of Reich's allegations and characterizing them as outside diplomatic norms. Hamilton is reported to have said at the Senate hearing on his appointment, "Corruption and organized crime are significant problems in Guatemala." The local press is interpreting this to mean that the onslaught from the US will continue.

Notice is also taken in Guatemala that Hamilton was ambassador in Peru, where, says one newspaper, "according to observers, he played a leading role in the events that triggered the fall of President Alberto Fujimori." Hamilton's arrival also signals a sharp turn in US policy toward Guatemala.

The former ambassador, Prudence Bushnell, was much less severe with the Portillo government, and she considered some of the criticisms unjustified. Still, there were indications that Guatemala got the new message. After the Reich episode, the Public Ministry announced an investigation of several military officers implicated in illicit activities. On the list of suspects was Gen. Francisco Ortega Menaldo, a close associate of Portillo. Also in the same time frame, the government put together a commission to improve transparency in the use of state funds.

The government has taken other measures to raise an umbrella against the shower from Washington, most prominently the dissolution of the entire police anti-narcotics unit and a conciliatory trip to the US capital by Fiscal General de la Republica Carlos de Leon Argueta. Those sops seemed to have had some soothing effect. Reich made some approving public statements about them. But the US is not appeased.

Deputy Chief of Mission Stephen McFarland said that Hamilton will sharpen the focus on the drug war, impunity issues, and human rights issues. Hamilton, as well as Reich, is reported to have requested that Portillo crack down on military involvement in illicit businesses. The new US agenda has found some favor with the human rights establishment in the country.

Frank LaRue of the Centro de Accion Legal de Derechos Humanos commented, "There are constant violations of human rights, and high officials of the army continue in their impunity." Nineth Montenegro, congressional deputy from the Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN) party and former human rights militant, expressed similar sentiments. She called upon Hamilton to ask Portillo to stop funding the Estado Mayor Presidencial(EMP), the military unit responsible for political assassinations during the internal war that ended in December 1996.

The EMP, which also provides presidential security, was supposed to be disbanded in 1997 as part of the accords that ended the war, but it continues to exist. "We expect that the arrival of the new ambassador will change the position of the Finance Ministry and that the money they transfer to the [EMP] will go to social investment," said Montenegro. Public interest in how the new US policy will play out for Guatemala is intense.

Political analyst Marco Antonio Barahona of the Asociacion de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales gave a lengthy interview to the nation's largest daily Prensa Libre in which he concurs that the US is certainly sending a message that the government needs to step up the pressure on corruption. "By having sent John Hamilton, the US is demonstrating that it is not disposed to let Guatemala keep on being a place where impunity, narcotrafficking, and corruption are the order of the day," he said. He thinks there will be the briefest of periods of tranquility followed by real US pressure on the government in January.

The FRG brought all this on itself by promising much and accomplishing little in these sensitive areas, and the international community is now obligated to make a show of pressure in the final year of this government, Barahona said.

Portillo, speaking elsewhere to the press, did not see his government as being as corrupt as it has been portrayed, and he blamed the press for that perception. "I recognize the role of the press in denouncing acts of corruption, but I also recognize that it has made campaigns that have no basis, like the campaign of the Panama Connection (see NotiCen, 2002-03- 21). You haven't been able to demonstrate that I have any bank account in the world...and you haven't corrected that. You've left the impression that the president had millions of dollars in Panama, and that does damage...not to me, but to the credibility of the press."

Regarding the arrival of Hamilton, Portillo said, "I'd like to have an informal conversation with him, to start the reconciliation. He's the ambassador of the United States, and we, under protocol, must be respectful and give him the greatest attention." That conversation must come quickly.

The US was reportedly at work in Europe seeking to open another front against Portillo. Reports say that Guatemala's Ambassador in Belgium Edmond Mulet has informed his government that Daniel Fisk, current holder of Reich's former job as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, had met with officials of the European Union (EU), asking that they cut off aid to Guatemala. Mulet confirmed that Fisk had, on Nov. 18, a meeting in Belgium, and "his principal purpose: convince the European Union to make a declaration as soon as possible of the withdrawal of the international community from Guatemala."

This 'withdrawal' was taken to mean the suspension of all aid to the government, including donations, financing, inclusion in trade pacts (see other article in this issue of NotiCen), and other support. Mulet quoted Fisk as saying, "These people [the government] have to be stopped before everything is stolen; narcotrafficking in Guatemala has found its greatest allies Portillo and his whole Cabinet." Mulet concluded in his report that Europeans had never before heard "such tough and severe expressions" from a representative of Washington and that the exchange left them "impacted by the drastic US anger."

Enter Edgar Gutierrez

That is the context out of which Edgar Gutierrez emerges to assume the office of foreign minister. He is a historian, economist, poet, and human rights activist who has repeatedly been taken to task in print for his lack of diplomatic background. But Gutierrez is well-known to the international community and highly respected for his human rights militancy and for his work with the office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, where he was director of the Catholic Church's Historical Memory Project. That project took testimony from thousands of victims of the long internal war and in 1998 released the report "Guatemala: Never Again!" which blamed the military for more than 80% of the bloodshed of innocents. The document is the seminal work on the subject.

Its principal author, Bishop Juan Gerardi (see NotiCen2001-06-14), was murdered two days after its release. The appointment of Gutierrez, given the present realities, came as no surprise. What remains to be explained is why Edgar Gutierrez would participate in a FRG government. The FRG is headed by ex-Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (see NotiCen, 2000-12-21), the very antithesis of Gutierrez. Ríos Montt, a former president of Guatemala (1982-1983), is widely held to be responsible for the genocidal military policies of the war (see NotiCen, 2000-03-30). Despite having been declared ineligible to run twice before by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), Ríos Montt is again seeking the presidency in next year's elections.

One prominent Guatemalan analyst offers this explanation: both Gutierrez and Portillo still believe that big monopoly businesses are the cause of Guatemala's problems. They would rather see Ríos Montt president than a pro-business rival. The hope is that Gutierrez can make that case internationally. Given that the private sector controls the media, any bad news from abroad freezing aid, calling the country a money-laundering drug paradise, etc. can be a powerful political weapon for the opposition. The analyst calls Gutierrez "clearly the smartest, most polished and charismatic" person available to counter the attacks upon the current government.

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