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## **Panamanian President Inherits a Mess**

*by LADB Staff*

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Martin Torrijos has taken over as Panama's president with much to be done to repair diplomatic damage by his predecessor. Torrijos has so far succeeded in normalizing relations with Venezuela, largely because that country is well-disposed toward the idea, but Cuba remains a problem.

Venezuela had recalled its ambassador to Panama in August as a reaction to former President Mireya Moscoso's declaration that she would pardon Luis Posada Carriles and three of his henchmen for humanitarian reasons, because, she said, "We know that if they stay here they would have the possibility of being extradited if not to Venezuela to Cuba, where I am sure they would be killed (see NotiCen, 2004-09-16)." Venezuela's Vice Minister of Foreign Relations Arevalo Mendez lost no time in announcing from Caracas that President Hugo Chavez would not, contrary to plans, attend the Torrijos inauguration on Sept. 1. Chavez had already notified the Panamanian Foreign Ministry of the recall of Ambassador Flavio Granados.

The Venezuelan ambassador's recall followed by one day Cuba's break in relations with Panama because of the release of Posada and his three associates, all of whom had been convicted in April on charges stemming from an alleged intent to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro. The specific charges for which they were convicted were illicit association (conspiracy), possession of explosives, and threatening the security of the state. The prosecution backed off the charge of conspiracy to assassinate a president, considering their evidence insufficient. Posada and co-defendant Gaspar Jimenez Escobedo were serving eight-year sentences, co-conspirators Pedro Crispin Remon and Guillermo Novo Sampoll, seven.

The Venezuelan government was quick to make clear that its quarrel was with Moscoso, not with Torrijos and not with Panama. Venezuelan Vice President Vicente Rangel called her decision "lamentable and mistaken," and said that it "weakens the struggle against terrorism." More importantly for Panamanian diplomacy, he said that, even though Chavez would not attend the Torrijos accession ceremony, his nation was "not going to break relations," and "immediately" following the transfer of power, Caracas would open a dialogue with the new government.

Torrijos lost no time in matching vocabulary with the Venezuelan characterization. Moscoso's move, he said, was "unjustifiable and lamentable." He seconded the view of the release of the felons as weakening anti-terror efforts and reiterated that his country is a signatory to conventions against terrorism. As such, he said, Panama is obligated to confront these threats "without any equivocation, without political considerations." Turning to Cuba, Torrijos said that, upon taking power, he would take steps to normalize relations with that nation, too.

Cuba had sent a diplomatic note informing Panama of "the decision adopted by the Consejo de Estado on Aug. 26 to break diplomatic relations for an indefinite period with the Republic of Panama." Cuban Ambassador to Panama Carlos Valdes pointedly left the country the day before

the transfer of power. The ceremony went off without the two leaders in attendance and, it was duly noted in the press, without the presence of US troops on Panamanian soil during a presidential inauguration for the first time in history.

Also absent was Mireya Moscoso, who had satisfied her relinquishment-of-power obligations with the delivery of her report on her 1999-2004 term to the outgoing Asamblea Legislativa. She was not obliged by law to show up for the event. Notables who did attend included Prince of Asturias Felipe de Borbon, the presidents of Colombia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Honduras, and the US secretary of state. The interim president of Haiti, the presidents of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and Taiwan, and the prime minister of Belize also attended. Along with Torrijos, Samuel Lewis Navarro was sworn in as first vice president and Ruben Arosemena as second vice president for the next five years.

Lewis Navarro announced that same day, before the ceremony, that the new government would immediately start the reconciliation process with his country's offended sisters. "We will start at once to establish the steps to restore relations with Cuba and immediately re-establish the level of relations we have always had with the people of Venezuela," he said. As a first step, Lewis Navarro said, Torrijos would include in his inaugural speech his intention to restore these relations. "We will be working on the diplomatic forms we have at hand to send messages to both peoples, to both states, and I am sure that in the next few days we will have good news," said Lewis Navarro.

Torrijos performed as advertised, proclaiming that "there are not two classes of terrorism one that is condoned and one that is pardoned." He said, "Terrorism must be combated, no matter what its origin, excuses are worthless, and there is no way to justify this act with declarations offensive to other states."

Venezuela responded with equal haste. Ambassador Granados was back in Panama City on Sept. 3. He told reporters he would soon be working with Vice President Lewis Navarro to resolve the issues, and by Sept. 6 the new government announced normalization. Exuberant good wishes soon followed from President Chavez. Cuba, however, was another story.

Torrijos told reporters, "It is understood that this doesn't happen overnight, that it takes time, but we have started the negotiations." Lewis Navarro told them, "We expect news soon, but for the nature of the conflict that we have, we must be very prudent about public declarations." The Cuban situation was more delicate because, whereas Venezuela had simply recalled its ambassador, Cuba had officially broken relations, a different, and more complicated matter entirely. Panama sent an emissary to Cuba to make the necessary arrangements.

Lewis Navarro was a bit more forthcoming in his next meeting with the press. "I can say that we have had communication through the emissaries that are very favorable," he said. He gave no further details other than to repeat the need for patience and discretion and to reiterate the seriousness of Moscoso's act. Without evidence of linkage between the diplomatic negotiations and Moscoso's future, on Sept. 18, Procuradora de la Administracion Alma Montenegro de Fletcher charged that the ex-president had violated the Constitution in freeing Posada and his cohorts. She lent her support to charges from prosecutor Jose Antonio Sossa that Provisions 179 and 22 had been

breached, and she requested the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to declare the pardons without effect.

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