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US Fighting For Guatemala In Battle Against Venezuela For Security Council Seat

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemala, flush from a May victory in the UN that brought it a seat on the newly formed Human Rights Council (see Noticen, 2006-06-01), is now looking to extend its run on the international stage with a role in the UN Security Council. In the auditions for the Human Rights Council, Guatemala was not of star quality its own human rights record is abysmal - but the country had the backing of the most powerful star makers in the business. Those same backers are now pressing to see the country in an even larger role.

Civil Security is in woefully short supply in Guatemala. Officials there say there has been an upsurge this year in mob violence, in part due to an inept justice system that fails to catch, charge, and convict criminals. Said human rights ombudsman Sergio Morales, "It's intolerable that in 95% of criminal cases in Guatemala, no one is charged. It's a criminal's paradise." The government stands by as community after community takes justice into its own hands, raising the question whether Guatemala should be on an international security council when it can't guarantee national security.

Locally, where prosecution is not an option, lynching is. "Every day the people get more desperate. Impunity is the reason there are so many lynchings," explains Morales. More than a dozen people have fallen victim to this method of popular justice that usually involves a mob beating, stoning, or machete hacking, and ending with gasoline-fueled immolation. The term "lynching" has taken a place in the country's Spanish lexicon, but the practice bears little resemblance to the racist hanging of blacks prevalent in the US from the 1880s to the 1960s. When police or the communities are unable to catch a suspect, proxy lynchings are carried out.

In late July, in Alta Verapaz, an accused killer escaped capture, so the citizens burned down the home of his two sisters and beat his relatives nearly to death with sticks and rocks. Analysts trace this mob justice beyond the government's almost nonexistent security institutions to the culture of violence that became the norm during the 36-year internal war, and the aftermath for which the state was, and remains, unprepared. Yet this is the country seeking to sit on the UN Security Council.

The campaigning is intense. Guatemala's competitor for the position is Venezuela, a country the US wants zealously to keep from the council. The contest has already taken a toll in high places within the government. President Oscar Berger has fired Foreign Minister Jorge Briz for his allegedly poor performance in marshaling the votes needed. Berger told the media he had other differences with Briz in announcing his intention to replace him, but it is clear that Berger has long been content to put up with a foreign minister lacking in the skills and relationships necessary to the office until this failure to secure the UN seat.

Briz reportedly took and held the job only to enhance his business interests, and failed in diplomatic priorities, such as the immigration issue with the US. He has repeatedly been criticized in the press for his lack of attention to the defense of the rights of the many thousands of Guatemalan workers in the US. Berger has not named a successor, but the four most likely are: Marta Altolaguirre, undersecretary of planning; Gert Rosenthal, former Guatemalan ambassador to the UN; Francisco Villagran de Leon, Guatemala's ambassador to the Organization of American States; and Hugo Beteta, secretary of planning in the presidency, and Altolaguirre's boss.

Absent a foreign minister, Berger has assigned the task of guiding the country's campaign to Vice President Eduardo Stein, who has in abundance the skills and contacts Briz lacks, and to Rigoberta Menchu Tum, Guatemala's goodwill ambassador and winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize.

Berger sends a team, Chavez sends himself

Announcing a diplomatic offensive under new management, Berger said, "We are going to make a major effort to capture all the votes possible to obtain a place on the council." He said he had scheduled for the following day a meeting with US ambassador to Guatemala James Derham and three Washington officials to outline strategy. Guatemala needs at least 128 of the 192 members to back them. Berger claimed to have 98 countries already signed on, but would not say which. Berger has not gone out to beat the bushes like his Venezuelan rival, Hugo Chavez. Chavez is on a world tour taking him through Russia, where he made a substantial arms purchase, Belarus, Qatar, Iran, Vietnam, Mali, and it is rumored, North Korea. He has claimed the support of the 22-member Arab League, is clearly courting countries at odds with the US, and is enjoying some success in doing so. Venezuela has gained observer status in the Arab League.

This is unmistakably a US-Venezuela contest, with Guatemala as proxy. The arms purchase was a shot across the bow, showing how easily Venezuela is able to circumvent US attempts to prevent Venezuela from doing as it pleases on the world stage. Venezuela has also gained support in Latin America. Having become a full member of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), it is no great surprise that it has the support of the member countries, which includes Argentina, whose expiring two-year term on the Security Council is creating the vacancy.

The sharply pointed MERCOSUR statement of support said that Venezuela on the council "will promote respect for the rule of international law," and provide balance. But Venezuela's overall success also points to the ineptitude of Briz, who has ignored the south for ideological reasons; he doesn't like talking to leftists. Briz even managed to lose neighboring Belize. While Briz picked and chose the countries he'd talk to, Venezuela has made inroads in countries that have reason to step lightly when it comes to crossing the US. Chilean ambassador to Venezuela Claudio Huepe was sanctioned with a letter of remonstrance from his President, Michelle Bachelet and Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley, after expressing support for Venezuela's candidacy in a July 19 Chilean newspaper interview.

Venezuela has been working hard for months on the endorsement, and Chile has still not declared its intention. US Secretary of State Rice is known to have lobbied Foxley directly on the matter. Chile has recently stood up to the US by signing onto the International Criminal Court, and declining

to grant the US exemption from prosecution (see NotiSur, 2005-09-02). It has also been reported that Chile is miffed by the heavy handedness of the US approach, which it has been reported, has included a warning that the US would not train Chilean military pilots if Chile voted against Guatemala. The US has denied having made this threat, but presses on unabashed.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tried to prevail upon Chile's Defense Minister Vivianne Blanlot, but she gave no quarter. "I told him that it is a subject under study in Chile, and there are many factors to consider. And I explained to him that whatever our vote, in no case is it going to have to do with greater or lesser propinquity with the United States," she said.

If successful in its bid, Guatemala would join the Security Council as a first-time member on the 15-member body, whereas Venezuela has served four times. Britain, China, France, Russia, and the US are the permanent members, each having the power of veto. The rest serve for two-year periods; their seats regionally apportioned. Usually the Latin American group of 33 countries makes their own choice. Under those circumstances, most observers concur that Venezuela would win.

The issue is going to a secret ballot of the whole membership because Guatemala has entered as challenger. Because the ballot is secret, member states can promise to vote one way, but then vote another. Guatemala beholden to US in campaign Guatemala lacks the resources of oil-rich Venezuela, and is relying on its patron the US for technical support, strategic planning, and diplomatic expertise.

Guatemalan political and military analyst Hector Rosada considers this state of affairs unfortunate. He said that putting strategy in the hands of the US is risky because "It is a candidacy of Guatemala, and not of the United States." The effect of Guatemala's lack of self-reliance is reflected in a comment from Barbados Prime Minister Owen Arthur. "They should speak to us directly rather than send somebody to speak on their behalf," he said.

Guatemala's UN ambassador Jorge Skinner-Klee agreed that the US - Venezuela fight has virtually taken the campaign out of his country's hands. The battle, he said, has "poisoned the atmosphere beyond repair. We would have preferred that people look into why Guatemala is running and why we can make a good non-permanent member in the council," he said without elaboration. If the Central American country has any credentials for the post, it is that it is a leading contributor of troops to a number of UN peacekeeping missions, including Iraq.

This is the position taken by the State Department, whose spokesman J Adam Ereli has told the media, "Guatemalans have shed blood for the United Nations. We believe that they are a solid candidate who merit support." There have been indications that this argument will not go far with the general assembly. When Guatemala was elevated to membership on the human rights council, many analysts, seeking to square the election with Guatemala's internal human rights situation interpreted the result to mean that the vote was by way of a consolation prize because they intended to deny Guatemala the Security Council.

Weighing the pluses and minuses, a difficult vote to predict

Just as Venezuela can reap the harvest of anti-US sentiment in the world, so can Guatemala gain something from countries bruised by or wary of Hugo Chavez. Mexico is one such country, where there is a history of bad blood between Chavez and President Vicente Fox. Another is Peru, where President-elect Alan Garcia and Chavez have been at each other's throats. There are substantive issues underlying the contest. Issues concerning Iran's nuclear pretensions, North Korea's missiles, Sudan's genocide, and similar critical concerns may come up soon, and the US needs all the help it can get in pursuing its policies in the council. But if the question is settled on the basis of negatives, on whether countries are more put off by the boorishness of Bush than by Chavez, the latter might have the edge.

Associated Press interviews with diplomats of member states reveal wariness and expectations of a boomerang effect against Guatemala. When a European UN ambassador who didn't want to be identified in order not to anger the US said that lobbying against Venezuela would only gain it votes, Venezuela's ambassador Francisco Arias Cardenas agreed. "We're a smaller nation, but nonetheless this campaign that the US has been taking against us works in our favor; we now are all over the news." The US is unimpressed by the risk, and although it continues to assert that its campaign is pro-Guatemala rather than anti-Venezuela, it has at the same time sent position papers outlining its objections to Venezuela to its ambassadors around the world to present to their host governments.

With the vote scheduled for October, and the option for countries not to reveal their actual vote an option, it is difficult to predict the vote. The group of 50 nations that include Europe and the US will, observers speculate, lean toward Guatemala. The Latin America 33 vote bloc will favor Venezuela, and the 53 countries of the African group are expected to do so as well. Chavez made a trip to Africa in early July. The 54 Asian nations are thought to be split. Two nations are not grouped. Montenegro is undecided, and Israel will almost certainly go for Guatemala. Even the US is projecting its position as uncertain. UN Ambassador John Bolton told the media that the US could be for Guatemala or against it whichever would help it win.

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