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## **Costa Rica's Security Minister Fired For Alleging National Politicians Are Involved With**

*by LADB Staff*

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Costa Rica's Security Minister Fernando Berrocal Soto has been forced out of his job, or, as official notices would have it, "left by mutual agreement" with President Oscar Arias. The former minister has been described in the media as "the first political casualty of the March 1 raid by Colombia on a Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) camp in Ecuador." On March 15, Berrocal claimed the FARC had links with opposition politicians in Costa Rica, touching off a lavish political pyrotechnical display. Berrocal's step-down came March 30, the day before he was scheduled to appear before a legislative committee to answer questions about his allegations.

The minister leveled the charges after a cache of US\$480,000 in nearly disintegrated US currency was discovered in Heredia, Costa Rica. Authorities were led to the find by information on a computer allegedly owned by FARC second-in-command Raul Reyes. Reyes was killed in the March 1 raid. The computer was recovered in the aftermath of the Colombian incursion into a FARC encampment in Ecuadoran territory (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07). "There's more on this computer that I'm not going to tell you now, but the country will soon find out," said Berrocal. Berrocal tantalized but did not deliver. "This country has to know, because there are people in the political sectors who have gone in the wrong direction," he said. "Many things will come from what is on the computer: relationships not just with the mafia that organized to distribute drugs but with some political sectors of this country that have lost the sense of reality. What does not fit in the Costa Rican democracy is the alliance of political sectors with those criminals of the FARC and of narcotraffic."

Arias and his brother Rodrigo both supported Berrocal immediately following his allegations, but they were clearly discomfited by them. The decision to dump Berrocal was reported as mutual among the three, Berrocal explaining, "To have testified would have politicized the issue. The only way to avoid that was to not be a minister." Rodrigo Arias said separately on a radio broadcast, "It was prudent for Don Fernando to cease to be minister. The way in which the issue was managed in public opinion was not the best." None of this backed Berrocal off his accusations. He said he was expecting further information from Colombian Attorney General Mario Iguaran. He also invoked Colombian police chief Oscar Naranjo, who has said the FARC wanted to turn Costa Rica into a safe haven. The issue is already thoroughly politicized. Soon after the security minister made his accusations, Rolando Araya, leader of the opposition Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN), said on national radio, "It would be good if he'd tell us and bring to the public light who these politicians are who are linked to the FARC." The PLN was the ruling party prior to the last presidential election, and Araya stood as its candidate against Arias. Spokespersons and leaders of other parties have made similar statements.

*Enter the absent-minded professors*

It remains far from proven whether the FARC sought to make a haven of Costa Rica, but the US \$480,000 summoned the impression that the Colombian rebels had in the past felt at least somewhat relaxed in the Switzerland of Central America. This part of the story developed when Costa Rican authorities got information from the Colombian military that the cash was at a house near San Jose. Far from a sidebar, this is the story that motivated Berrocal's accusations. The property turned out to be the home of retired university professors Francisco Gutierrez and Cruz Prado. The two said they had been holding a safe for a Colombian man since the late 1990s, but they had not known he was a senior FARC leader.

The former professors held a news conference to tell an intrigued public that in 1997 they had hosted Raul Reyes and Rodrigo Granda Escobar, the "foreign minister" of the FARC. The couple agreed to store a safe in their home belonging to the two Colombians. They said that Reyes and Granda used false names and told them they were peace negotiators in the Colombian conflict. Nor did they know the safe contained money; they thought it contained documents. The professors were members of organizations concerned with mediating between the warring sides. They said they had agreed to host Reyes and a woman named Olga. They didn't know who Olga was, and apparently neither did the media, but she was almost certainly Olga Marn, daughter of FARC founder Manuel Marulanda. Marn was identified in a recently declassified US State Department document. "They stayed with us several days," said Prado. "Later, he asked us if a third person could leave something at our house and we said yes." It was Granda, with the safe. Subsequently, the two academics perceived themselves to be in a bind. They learned of Granda's identity in 2004.

Colombian agents had kidnapped him in Caracas in December of that year, but he was released when France pressed Colombia to let him go so as not to compromise French efforts to obtain the release of FARC hostage Ingrid Betancourt, a dual citizen of France and Colombia. Granda is thought still to be living in Venezuela. "We were very scared to see who we had been dealing with, but this [safe] wasn't ours, and we couldn't get rid of it, so we didn't tell anyone," said Prado. But maybe not so very scared. In 1997, Granda granted to Prado, full name Cruz Mary Prado Rojas, a very broad power of attorney without any monetary limit. The document was discovered in the search of the house that yielded the safe.

In the document, Prado appears as the wife of Granda, but she had been married to Gutierrez since 1986. Media reports said this was a mistake by the notary. In the document, Granda is a Colombian businessman and resident of the Jesus de Santa Barbara neighborhood in Heredia, where Prado lives. The listed address is where the safe was found. The notary who drew up the document told reporters he did not know the two, they were not his clients, and he had only seen them that one time. There was no indication of what the power of attorney was to be used for, but it was clearly not used in connection with the money, which was left to rot and is now unspendable.

No charges were immediately lodged against the professors, and authorities turned to the business of political damage control. Of the dismissal of Berrocal, Rodrigo Arias, who is, in addition to presidential brother, also minister of the presidency, said, "This should not be used as a political issue, and I reiterate that nothing is hidden here. The government simply considered that it was a mistake to treat a subject as important and sensitive as this in a public way, and we believe that it is necessary to reorient the discussion toward the appropriate institutions." Rodrigo Arias said all information in the government's possession would be turned over to a judicial body, in this case the

attorney general. From there, a commission to investigate matters further might be formed. Berrocal, his public testimony forestalled, would instead present a written report to the legislature about the penetration of the Colombian guerrillas in Costa Rica.

The report would also go to the commission, whenever it was constituted. Frustrated and hungry to get at the meat of Berrocal's allegations, the legislature has signaled its intent to discover hard facts, regardless the venue.

They want names. "It is a shame that the minister left before today's hearing," said Unidad Social Cristiana (USC) Deputy Jorge Eduardo Sanchez, "but we have presented the motion to create the commission and even though the minister doesn't arrive today, he will speak later as an ex-minister to this commission." President Arias wants Berrocal to tell all, too. In the lead-up to the firing, Arias said the minister ought to come clean. "If he has [the names], he should give them," Arias said. "It will be Don Fernando who has to give an explanation." Costa Rica besmirched again Beyond the internal political ramifications of the issues Berrocal raised, there are international considerations. If true, the allegations enmesh the country in the ongoing questions of the reach of FARC influence. Investigations into these matters have already involved groups in Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and even the US in scandal to some degree.

The independent National Security Archive (NSA) in Washington released information tying Reyes to US diplomats. According to a declassified memorandum, Reyes met secretly in Costa Rica in 1998 with a US diplomatic mission led by director of the State Department's Office of Andean Affairs Philip T. Chicola. At this time, the FARC was already on the department's list of foreign terrorist organizations. Chicola told Reyes that under "the absolute requirement for confidentiality," the US wanted "to develop a channel of communication" with the FARC. Chicola says in the memo, "I told the FARC representatives that while the [US] had no preconceived agenda or structure as to how the discussions might proceed, we wanted to use the meeting to describe our views on counternarcotics, the peace process, the New Tribes Missionaries (see NotiCen, 1993-02-05 and NotiSur, 2005-10-21), and the practice of kidnapping and attacks on US interests in Colombia. Beyond that, we were open to discuss, or at least listen to, any topics the FARC wished to raise." Reyes is quoted as responding that a "changing world and domestic circumstances" had brought the parties together. He told Chicola that information in the press and other sources that reached the US were invariably untrue and distorted by anti-FARC interests.

With the election of Arias, Costa Rica has just begun to wriggle out from under a mountain of scandals involving former presidents (see NotiCen, 2004-11-04, and 2007-09-27) that have tarnished, perhaps forever, the country's image as one of the cleanest, least corrupt, nations in the hemisphere. The FARC has long since lost its revolutionary panache and is now generally seen, rightly or wrongly, as a terrorist organization steeped in extortion, kidnapping, and cocaine trafficking. Adam Isacson follows the FARC for the Center for International Policy (CIP) in Washington DC. He commented, "Now we know that the FARC were not just sitting in the jungle. It is clear according to the documents found in Reyes' computer that they had an international contact effort. But it is also clear that it was aborted.

They have not even gotten close to moderate left groups in countries where they have tried. In great measure, they have continued to be pariahs." Isacson said the death of Reyes represented the

loss of the FARC's international contacts and the destruction of whatever support network it had managed to put together over the years. The organization has been reduced, he said, to meetings "with 20-year-old muchachos and people from little South American communist parties." The computer information has been a boon to Colombian propaganda. Costa Rica has been just one of the countries to receive items from the trove. Berrocal seems to have been the unfortunate official who signed for the delivery.

In an interview with Costa Rica's largest paper *La Nacion*, Berrocal placed the FARC's change of orientation at around the year 2000. Before that, he said, it was a Marxist-Leninist group. After that, it became the security force for the drug cartel it is reputed to be today. But Berrocal may not know what he is talking about. In the interview he said the change coincided with the death of Colombian drug king Pablo Escobar, who was killed in 1993, not 2000. The former security minister also has a history of fixating on Colombian drug activity.

In July 2007, he claimed drug gangs were conspiring to assassinate him and Rodrigo Arias after Berrocal had distinguished himself by intercepting a total of 65 tons of drugs. He also opposed the government's traditional hospitality to refugees, claiming that Colombian refugees were gangsters and killers. On April 1, Arias heaped additional doubt upon Berrocal with the announcement that Colombia's President Uribe had just informed him the material in the captured computers "does not permit affirmation that politicians or Costa Rican personalities have direct links" to FARC.

Arias called a news conference to disseminate the information contained in a communique from Uribe. Arias said Colombian authorities "have not encountered lists or any mention of political leaders," and everything on the computers "has been shared with Costa Rican authorities." This included the information leading to the discovery of the money. Arias also said he spoke directly to Uribe to make sure there was no unrevealed linkage, because of "insinuations" cropping up after the dismissal of Berrocal. The insinuations were that the government "could be hiding information that links some Costa Ricans with the FARC and narcotraffic in general." The president was reported as vehement in stressing the importance of getting the whole story told so as to "return confidence to Costa Rica, because we are a transparent government that hides nothing." He said he still intends to channel developing information to appropriate agencies.

Deputies from opposition parties reacted to Arias' declarations with assurances that the investigative commission would continue to function. The commission was created April 1. Said Elizabeth Fonseca, delegation leader of the Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC), of the announcement, "What we are trying to do here at all costs is to cool the problem. The commission must ignore that and do its own investigation." Deputy Jorge Eduardo Sanchez added that the commission still has to determine whether Berrocal has any other information of use in determining if there are FARC supporters among them. Deputies continue to believe there is more to be looked into than what may be on the computers.

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