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Fallout From Farc Files Intensifying On The Isthmus

by LADB Staff

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A kind of FARC fever is breaking out in the region as countries scramble to discover whether their governments or institutions have, or have had, links to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Nowhere is that more true than in Costa Rica, where former security minister Fernando Berrocal was fired for alleging such associations (see NotiCen, 2008-04-03).

The new scrutiny comes as the FARC has struggled with a series of reversals. Berrocal's charges stemmed from documents in files from computers found following a bombing raid in Ecuador in which Raul Reyes, the organization's second in command, died (see NotiSur, 2008-05-09). Elsewhere on the isthmus, in El Salvador, the information in those same files is at the center of intense political jockeying ahead of next year's elections. In another reversal for the Colombian revolutionaries, it has been confirmed that high-ranking leader and founder Manuel Marulanda has died of a heart attack (see NotiSur, 2008-06-06).

A review of intelligence documents and emails in the computers has turned up a number of well-known Costa Rican names from leadership positions in and out of government. These have included, according to The Tico Times, the secretary of the Asociacion Nacional de Empleados Publicos y Privados (ANEP) Albino Vargas, ANEP lawyer Saul Umana, former President Rodrigo Carazo (1978-1982), Frente Amplio Deputy Jose Merino, and former deputies Humberto Vargas, Rodrigo Gutierrez, and Jose Jurado.

These links go back years, and Merino has said he has not seen or heard from the FARC in eight or ten years. Yet, his name appeared in the computer files. "Maybe it's that they wanted to renew old contacts," Merino told the Times, "but I never was an intermediary, and they never contacted me to arrange a meeting" with ex-President Carazo, as the computer files indicated. "All the meetings I had were open and part of a process requested by Colombian Presidents Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) and Andres Pastrana (1998-2002)."

Carazo said he had not been involved with the FARC since 1997, during a negotiation for the release of 70 kidnapped Colombian soldiers. "Merino never contacted me, and a meeting was never realized." He explained that the FARC people might have gotten the impression that he was well-disposed toward them because he was negotiating with them. "So of course I didn't insult them or fight with them," he said. "To get prisoners released, you can't be belligerent." But that was the extent of it, he said. There was no friendship.

A complex history, much of it legitimate

The other Costa Ricans named also denied any contacts, the legislators to other newspapers and Albino Vargas to the Times. The tenor of the investigations into FARC connections is accusatory, without question. The suggestion of wrongdoing was clearly the tone underlying Berrocal's

allegations. But as Carazo's negotiations, which were successful in freeing hostages, would indicate, there was more than evil plotting in the thirteen-year history of the FARC in Costa Rica.

Records show that Alvaro "El Profesor" Leyva, a former Colombian presidential candidate and FARC ally, lived in Costa Rica as a refugee for years, during which time he was involved in several FARC meetings. In 1998 he met with US State Department representative Phil Chicola. The subject of the meeting was classified for some years, but subsequent declassification revealed that the meeting concerned the whereabouts of three US missionaries from the New Tribes group kidnapped in Colombia in 1993 (see Update, 1993-02-05). Leyva was granted asylum in Costa Rica that year, after President Oscar Arias (1986-1990) and his Foundation for Peace vouched for him.

Records also show that in 2001 the FARC, through its foreign minister Rodrigo Granda Escobar, requested permission to open a FARC office in Costa Rica after its office in Mexico City was shut. It is unclear whether this ever was approved. Former public security minister Rogelio Ramos said the request was denied, but Reyes' computer files indicate it was approved.

Berrocal's terrorism report, made available online by the Colombian news agency ANNCOL, indicated there was also an effort to open a hospital in Costa Rica to tend to FARC's wounded and infirm. A Colombian doctor came to Costa Rica as a refugee and went to work for La Caja, the social security system, at the San Juan de Dios hospital. But Hernando Vanegas, aka Salvador, was also alleged to be FARC's man in the country and to have created the Asociacion Centro de Integracion Cultural Costa Rica Colombia (ACCINC).

When the Costa Rican authorities became curious about Vanegas' activities, he fled, supposedly for Sweden. The affairs he left behind were taken over by Ana Cecilia Jimenez of the Commission for Human Rights in Central America (CODEHUCA). Jimenez apparently supported Vanegas' request for asylum in Costa Rica. These are some of the threads that preceded the discovery of US\$480,000 in the home of a couple of Costa Rican academics in May, indicating a FARC history more dense and more extensive than was supposed at that time (see NotiCen, 2008-04-03).

Berrocal's report claimed that, in addition to these political and organizational activities, FARC operatives set up a system whereby "every gram" of drugs coming into the country bears the FARC stamp. Berrocal testified to the legislature's FARC Commission that Hector Martinez, extradited to Colombia in 2006 for his involvement in a massacre, was in Costa Rica to set up the drug operation. "His mission was to penetrate the fishing fleet, and he achieved that," Berrocal told the commission. The Tico Times reported, however, that Berrocal's predecessor in office, Rogelio Ramos, denied there was any evidence of this. Berrocal made other statements not backed by evidence. He said that there had been a Buenaventura Cartel plot to assassinate him and Presidency Minister Rodrigo Arias and that the FARC had induced it. Several officials called that nonsense before the commission.

Former chief prosecutor Francisco Dall'Anese told the panel that, since 2005, there have been four documented instances of FARC activity in Costa Rica. The first was the arrest of Martinez. Second was the arrest of Libardo Parra, a member of M-19, a former Colombian guerrilla movement. Parra

had apparently done nothing to deserve arrest other than to let his tourist visa expire in 2006, but further investigation turned up US\$1.4 million in his house. In Colombia, though, he was wanted for kidnapping and extortion. The third instance of FARC presence was the sighting of an individual who was thought to have been involved in a plan to kidnap a French diplomat's wife in Colombia. This man escaped; he was not identified by name. The fourth incident was the US\$480,000 in the home of the professors, Francisco Gutierrez and Cruz Prado. Dall'Anese said there had likely been more instances, but the Direccion de Inteligencia y Seguridad (DIS) had failed to track them down.

The documentation from computers captured after the death of Reyes provides an interesting, if disputed, historic record of FARC in Costa Rica. To what political use it may be turned is as yet unclear. Investigations are said to be continuing. But the computer files were not limited to Costa Rica.

FARC in El Salvador

The adventures of the FARC in El Salvador are also documented in the computer files, and there they could represent a treasure trove to the ruling right wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). El Salvador is looking toward a presidential election in March 2009, and, for the first time in the post-war period, ARENA appears to be in serious jeopardy of losing the executive office to rival leftist Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN). A scandal linking the FMLN to the FARC would be opportune for the struggling ARENA, and it seems that is where the Reyes files and the Berrocal report might take them.

According to reports, Salvadoran Attorney General Garrid Safie has obtained the files from his Costa Rican homologue Dall'Anese. The Salvadoran paper Prensa Grafica has reported that Colombian Attorney General Mario German Iguaran Arana told a reporter of an investigation of FARC properties in El Salvador. Iguaran said the investigation stemmed from information in Reyes' emails. "It talks about FARC assets in Ecuador, assets of [FARC chancellor] Rodrigo Granda in Panama and in El Salvador. At the moment we are engaged in information exchange through regular channels with countries such as Costa Rica and El Salvador, among others," he told Prensa Grafica. Iguaran said the big fish netted in the exchange was Jose Luis Merino, nom de guerre Ramiro, high-ranking FMLN leader and Parlacen deputy. Several messages in the files identify Merino as an intermediary in arms trafficking and also indicate that a house of his in San Salvador is the property of the FARC. Iguaran admitted nothing has been proven, but said, "In the event that this can be verified, we would be looking at a financing, an aiding of terrorism."

Hector Acevedo, FMLN Sansonate departmental director, was caught in the net too. His involvement was to have organized a forum for the FARC in 2001 and to have participated with a FARC group in El Salvador. The forum was the Primer Encuentro Internacional en Solidaridad y por la Paz de Colombia y America Latina. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were involved in the forum, including the US-based Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, CISPES.

Long on scandal, short on prosecution

In addition to the information Dall'Anese gave Safie, the Salvadoran official also obtained documents directly from Iguaran in Panama during the recent Segunda Conferencia Ministerial sobre Cooperacion Internacional contra Terrorismo y la Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional. Beyond the political windfall, it is uncertain if there is a prosecution in all this. "We're going to examine these files to find out what kind of properties and what kind of assets are in whose possession, and he (Iguaran), has agreed, by way of judicial assistance, to put all the information in our hands that could have any link with Salvadoran persons," said Safie.

Both officials have confirmed that a list of names has passed between them but have declined to make them public to safeguard the investigation. Iguaran wants, and Safie has offered, to get the names of Colombians involved in FARC-related activities in El Salvador. With nothing proven yet in all of this, and no actual crimes alleged, Iguaran leans heavily on the widely reported discovery in Costa Rica of the US\$480,000 in rotted and now-worthless bills as evidence that the computer information is genuine and reliable.

As the investigation into criminality grinds on, political hay has been made. El Salvador's conservative newspapers have played the story prominently, with plenty of photos of Merino with FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes. Analysts, commentators, academics, and bloggers have taken on the task of assessing the impact on the still far-off election. The strategy of playing the FARC card was clearly to turn the swing voter, the independent who has been causing serious worry among ARENA campaign officials, back into the conservative column. The possible prosecutory angle is necessary to keep the FMLN equals FARC equation alive through to next March.

Judging the strategy

The Salvadorenos en el Mundo Web site finds the situation not at all different from any other presidential election, in which the left characterizes the accusations as a rightist strategy to stay in power, the right points self-righteous fingers, and both enjoy the luxury of seeing relevant issues of importance to the country "relegated to a third or fourth level." The analyst gives a slight edge to Funes in this, since he is not an FMLN party regular but rather someone chosen in the first place as an alternative to the usual FMLN candidate (see NotiCen, 2008-02-07). "In this adverse scenario," says Salvadorenos en el Mundo, "Mauricio Funes should give clear signals that he has his own criteria and, most importantly, that he has sufficient independence from commanders in the FMLN to ask for a thorough investigation into the allegations."

Former El Salvador ambassador to the US and now Prensa Grafica columnist Ernesto Rivas-Gallant's view was that Funes missed his opportunity to do that. When the story broke, he saw Funes as defending Merino unconditionally. "With that attitude," wrote Rivas, "Mauricio has disillusioned those of us who believed in his independence, because we are convinced that a Funes government would be controlled by the same people who control the party today and who appear to control the candidate."

The blog Chichicaste has turned its spotlight on another of El Salvador's ongoing problems the uniform coverage of a conservative, conglomerated press. It notes that the story broke in the Spanish El Pais and blew back to the Salvadoran mainstream papers using a shopworn but still effective

means of scandal mongering and signaling the depth of fear multinationals have at the prospect of a FMLN electoral victory.

-- End --