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Accusation Of Murder Against President Alvaro Colom Jeopardizes The State Of Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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"Good afternoon. My name is Rodrigo Rosenberg Marzano and, unfortunately, if you are at this moment hearing or seeing this message, it is because I was murdered by President Alvaro Colom with the help of Gustavo Alejos and Gregorio Valdez." Thus began a piece of video that has swept away what little administrative order, sanity, and legitimacy the nearly permanently beleaguered government of Guatemala had to spare. Eighteen minutes and some seconds later, the videotaped message came to an end, and the 47-year-old lawyer, suited, tied, seated at a conference table behind a microphone against a blue TV backdrop, had explained that the president, the president's secretary, a businessman, and the president's wife had had him killed because of his representation of businessman Khalil Musa, who was slain April 14, along with his daughter, Marjorie. Lawyer Rosenberg explained from the grave that Musa had been murdered for refusing to become complicit in fraudulent transactions of the Banco de Desarrollo Rural de Guatemala (Banrural), to whose board he, Musa, had just been named. The illicit transactions ranged, said Rosenberg, from money laundering to embezzling public funds and to nonexistent programs operated by first lady Sandra de Colom, as well as financing front companies used by drug traffickers. The government is Banrural's majority stockholder. The bank is a mixed-capital entity. The lawyer was unrelenting in his invective for all concerned with the bank, including its general manager Fernando Pena and its president Jose Angel Lopez, for having "done nothing to prevent it from becoming the den of thieves, narcos, and assassins it is today." These last two, he charged, along with Gerardo de Leon, had directly threatened Musa a few weeks before he and his daughter died in an effort to get him to withdraw his nomination to the board. Musa refused. The news was a crushing blow to the fragile state. Even the country's largest paper became unhinged, saying the tape "has created the greatest political crisis for this democracy, because never before has a democratically elected president been accused of murder." The qualifiers might have saved the assertion, but just barely. Plenty of Guatemalan presidents have been accused of murders, thousands of murders, even hundreds of thousands of murders. Better at maintaining journalistic equilibrium was Mario David Garcia, host of the TV program Hablando Claro. Rosenberg had asked him to make the video and hold it against the possibility of his demise, Garcia told the AP. Garcia suggested that Rosenberg instead appear on his show, make his charges, and present evidence. They agreed to do both; Rosenberg would make the video and appear on the program the following week. Rosenberg said he would, in the meantime, go to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights with his story. Rosenberg never made it to airtime. It was a shaken Colom, in an attempt to get out in front of a story that could well be his undoing just four months after his January assumption of office, who appeared on national television. He said he was not a murderer. He said he was not a drug trafficker. He said that everything Rosenberg had said was "totally senseless." He said he had called in the UN's Comision Internacional Contra Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), the US Embassy, and the FBI to "clear up this matter." A state on the brink Institutionally speaking, any time is a bad time for a crisis in Guatemala. But, from the outset, friends and foes of the president are calling this an exquisitely bad time for an institutional crisis. "Congress, the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, and all

the other institutions are being questioned, and now there emerges this serious allegation against the chief executive," said Helen Mack, perhaps the country's most august human rights leader. Colom is now ground zero for the hit the country is taking. Everywhere, people are taking sides. The president received the support of at least 250 of the country's approximately 300 mayors and 22 of the governors but was asked to stand down from office for the duration of the case by the leader of the opposition Partido Patriotica (PP), Otto Perez Molina. Hundreds of Guatemalans took to the streets to demand that Colom resign, with liberal sprinklings of Rosenberg friends and family in the crowds. As they protested, they clawed at the institutional fabric. Edgar Palacios, a Rosenberg friend, told reporters that the Ministerio Publico, the office of the attorney general, was not to be trusted in this case and demanded that CICIG and Carlos Castresana, the Spanish judge who heads it, take over the investigation. Colom supporters were also in the streets, with some shouting matches reported but no violence between the groups. It appears that the president still has the support of his Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party. As noted, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu called upon Colom to guarantee the independence of the judicial process (see other story, this edition of NotiCen). In an open letter to the president, Menchu asked that the charges Rosenberg made and the linkages he described also be investigated. Menchu has a long record of concern regarding the largely dysfunctional judicial system, but she also is a potential contender for the presidency, should it be vacated. Colom retains solid support in the international community. The hemisphere stood with him as Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS) Jose Miguel Insulza accorded him "solidarity" and "confidence" and cautioned, "It is necessary to act in a firm manner in favor of democracy" in Guatemala. Venezuela's alternate OAS representative Carmen Velazquez spoke with particular sympathy. "We know what destabilizing movements are," she said, adding that her country "understands" the situation created in Guatemala. US Ambassador to the OAS Hector Morales also suggested "destabilizing activities" in expressing his country's "confidence." Guatemala's Foreign Minister Haroldo Rodas appeared before the OAS permanent committee to apprise them of the situation. He presented the case as a destabilizing "response" from drug-trafficking groups in relation to Colom's anti-trafficking policies, and the member countries seemed disposed to buy the explanation. In truth, from the OAS point of view, one more unsolved murder, and one more clouded presidency in Guatemala, is a small price to pay to avoid the collapse of a Central American state. Rodas, who flew to Washington specifically for this mission, said the case was an attempt to "subvert the constitutional order," although it was not clear how Rosenberg's making the video was engineered into the scenario. The international community apparently saw the wisdom of leading the investigation. CICIG's Castresana said he would investigate, but without pressures or interference. He said that the process would be "very difficult" but that he expected the Guatemalan prosecutorial and judicial powers to play their part. "The investigation must go where it leads, regardless of the consequences or who is affected," he said in answer to Colom's request. The Spaniard said he would tolerate "zero interference" in the job, reminding that the governability of the country is at stake. The FBI, through US Ambassador Stephen McFarland, also agreed to lend a hand as Colom requested and had already put a mission together for the purpose.

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