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Leader Of Guatemalan Right Says He Fears President Alvaro Colom Will Assassinate Him

by LADB Staff

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Two months ago, President Alvaro Colom's Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party was accusing Gen. Otto Perez Molina and his Partido Patriotico (PP) of being behind the country's violence and of making sustained efforts to destabilize the government. Now it's Perez Molina's turn at bat. He is accusing Colom of plotting to assassinate him. Perez is not known ever to have been on the accusatory side of an assassination charge, but he has plenty of experience as the one charged. Examples abound. Among those most frequently cited is that he was in charge of the Estado Mayor Presidencial (EMP), the dreaded military hit squad behind countless assassinations during the Civil War years. Both the EMP and the intelligence unit known during the war as D-2 have been implicated in some of the worst of the period's human rights abuses. Rights organizations have documented Perez Molina's links to a number of assassinations, including that of Jorge Carpio Nicolle, who was murdered as he campaigned for the presidency, Judge Edgar Ramiro Elias Ogaldez, and guerrilla leader Efraim Bamaca. In the Bamaca case, Perez was accused directly of having thrown the indigenous commander to his death from a helicopter. Otto Perez is also a graduate of the School of the Americas. He has denied involvement in these and other acts, including massacres on his watch in Nebaj. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, he has denied the massacres even occurred. Perez the hunted Perez Molina was handed the lever with which he might pry Colom from his presidency with the public dissemination of the videotape of attorney Rodrigo Rosenberg accusing Colom of plotting his murder. The week after he made the tape, Rosenberg was shot to death while riding his bicycle (see NotiCen, 2009-05-14). On May 26, the retired general began prying. He called a press conference to charge that he had been marked for death along with PP chief legislative Deputy Roxana Baldetti and that it all came to light when a reluctant conspirator went to the attorney general to report having been recruited for the hit. While this twist in the case and the notion that Perez the hunter has become the hunted verges on the bizarre, the stakes are high, and everything must be taken seriously at this point. Colom is battling to retain his office against significant forces that are calling variously for his permanent removal or for a temporary recusal during the investigation of the Rosenberg murder. Colom has not bent to these demands, but he has convened a specific cabinet to deal with his survival in office and with the exigencies of a burgeoning institutional crisis. The term "specific cabinet" is a legal one, coming from Article 18 of the Ley del Organismo Ejecutivo, authorizing the president to form groups of very high-level personnel to formulate strategies and policies in circumstances like this. There are currently specific cabinets for security, economy, and social problems, all front-burner issues. The PP accusation has added more threads to the entanglements that threaten to make the whole process difficult to follow at some point. Attorney General Amilcar Velasquez Zarate's office is the lead entity in the investigation, but he now finds himself being called up before PP legislative committees to give account of himself. Velasquez had ignored three subpoenas before finally appearing. When he showed up on May 28, he was grilled on why he had not moved against Colom, Colom's wife, and others implicated in the Rosenberg tape. The deputies pressed him to explain why he had not sought a *peticion de antejuicio* that would lift presidential immunity.

The attorney general responded that there has to be real evidence as a result of an investigation for that, not just requests. The opposition has collected a reported 35,000 signatures on a petition to that effect. Velasquez got his licks in when asked if he thought a political scandal was being made of the Rosenberg case. He said he believed that PP members were taking advantage of the situation, though without naming them. But there was no mistaking them; they have announced their intention to continue to do so. Baldetti said the president's spokesman, Fernando Barillas, had been subpoenaed to testify as to why he had said Perez Molina's assassination claim was a "political show" and part of a "plan to destabilize the government." Barillas also pointed out that, when a person is threatened, he or she "goes to the security institutions not to the media." But even if the general's claims are suspect and his record is such that in other times they would elicit ridicule, in the present crisis they are being taken seriously. National authorities are in the lead in these investigations, but they are being aided by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and by the Comision Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG) to lend the process credibility that would otherwise be lacking. CICIG is a UN agency. Velasquez has said that the Perez Molina accusation has been turned over to CICIG. "The investigation already is in the special CICIG fiscalia, and the defendant is in [preventive custody]," he said. OAS says the state is not at risk from the international point of view, all this must take a back seat to a more important consideration, the collapse of the state of Guatemala. Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza has been in the country assessing the probability of such a catastrophe, and he reports that "no real risk exists." Insulza presented his findings to the OAS Permanent Committee and assured them, "We can be calm regarding the constitutional problem. I didn't perceive in all the conversations that there exists a real risk against democratic institutionalism." He saw the government as "solid and functioning," but did see it as a problem that the general population is not at all certain of that and is continuing to take sides on the issue of Colom's continuing tenure. Insulza spoke with Colom, many officials of all branches of government, political parties, and business people. He consulted CICIG director Carlos Castresana as well. Insulza's visit was also intended to signal to the country that the international community continues to support the Colom presidency.

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