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LADB Staff

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Low-key U.S. Places Honduras Coup Resolution In Hands Of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias

by LADB Staff

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He made it to within hailing distance of thousands of supporters on July 5, but Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was in a circling airplane and the fans were on the ground at Toncontin International Airport. He never landed. The de facto government that installed itself after pulling off the first Latin American military coup of the 21st century forbade it, blocked the airport runways, and, to dissuade his entry by any other means, issued a multiple-count order for Zelaya's arrest. Zelaya was flying from Washington, DC, accompanied by UN General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto. After the period of circling, the Zelaya plane headed for El Salvador, where the embattled president was to rendezvous with Presidents Cristina Fernandez of Argentina and Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza. The presidents had originally planned to accompany Zelaya in flight but later thought better of it as it became clear there would likely be no landing in Honduras. On the way, Zelaya touched down briefly in Managua for a few words with President Daniel Ortega. Zelaya had known upon departure that he would not be allowed to land. As his plane circled, he attempted to reach his military by phone with the message, "I am commanding general of the armed forces, elected by the people, and ask the Joint Chiefs of the Armed Forces to comply with the order to open the airport." They did not comply. On the ground in Honduras, troops fired on the crowds converging on the airport, killing two people and injuring an unspecified number. Riot-gear-clad troops fired tear gas at the thousands of people who nevertheless managed to break through security cordons. The crowds were defenseless but adamant. They chanted, "We want blue helmets (UN peacekeepers)." That was not going to happen in the near term, but reporters gathered statements from individuals in the crowds to drive home the point that the anti-golpistas were not going to back down. "This is a war," said one, Matias Saucedo. People are under near-martial law. De facto president Roberto Micheletti had ordered a curfew upon taking possession of the government. Rather than relax the order as he had said he would, he extended it to a sunrise-to-sunset order for the population to remain indoors and piled other restrictions upon the media and even upon the generation of electricity. Strong international support for the elected government continued beyond the initial outpouring (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). The OAS sent Insulza on a mission to Honduras to talk the de facto government down off the limb it had crawled out on, but the mission failed. Protocol did not help the venture. Insulza did not meet with Micheletti out of concern that doing so might confer legitimacy on the regime, but that concern seemed misplaced given that it was Micheletti who had the power to end the stalemate. Warned that the OAS intended to suspend Honduras' membership, Micheletti attempted to pre-empt the suspension by voluntarily withdrawing from the institution. His thinking was, according to reports, that withdrawal would not set in motion a series of cuts in aid, loans, and other benefits to Honduras, without which this third-poorest nation in the hemisphere would have a hard time coping. The manipulation did not work (see other article, this edition of NotiCen). The OAS reasoned that the de facto regime lacked authority to withdraw membership, wherewith Honduras was duly suspended, as the OAS charter requires in the case of a disruption of democratic order, and formally isolated internationally. After a brief stay

in El Salvador, Zelaya left for Washington but this time to meet directly with US officials, who had been indirectly supportive. This time Zelaya would be meeting with Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton. This would be the highest-level contact with Zelaya that the administration of President Barack Obama had had since the coup. The meeting occurred on Tuesday, July 7, around midday. Immediately upon leaving the meeting, Zelaya spoke by phone with Radio Globo in Honduras, and thus to the people of Honduras. He told his listeners a deal had been arranged whereby he would meet with Micheletti in Costa Rica, with President Oscar Arias mediating. In response to the Globo interviewer's questions, Zelaya said Arias was chosen because he was the president of a kindred country and because he was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. The plan as Zelaya explained it was for the meeting with Micheletti to take place on Thursday, July 9. Zelaya reiterated several times, for clarity, that he was not negotiating anything less than his restoration to office. Having just come from the meeting with Clinton, he assured Hondurans that the US was now speaking "with a single voice" and that it recognized only one government his. Not negotiations Shortly after the coup, Honduras' ambassador to the US announced that he had gone over to the Micheletti forces and now represented that regime in Washington. Zelaya made short work of him on July 7, replacing him with personal secretary Enrique Reina. The new regime was left without a voice in Washington, placing a thumb on Zelaya's side of the scale and moving things closer to his definition of the Costa Rica meetings. "This is not a negotiation, this is the planning of the exit of the coup leaders," Zelaya said. Not so, said Micheletti from Tegucigalpa. He had formally agreed to the talks but had not backed off his position that Zelaya could not return as president. The parties concurred that the talks were not negotiations. "We're not going to negotiate, we're going to talk," said Micheletti. "We're going into these talks because we're interested in having peace and tranquility in Honduras." US treading lightly amid allegations of Republican involvement Most reports had it that the impetus for an Arias-mediated meeting came from Secretary Clinton. The US is in a difficult spot in this situation. After several balky attempts at trying to regain lost credibility and regional relevance, the US is looking to be seen as helpful but not attempting to revert to type in dictating terms to client states. But, while it has repeatedly called for a return to institutionality and democratic order, the US has not made a full-throated call for Zelaya's unconditional return. As all 27 nations of the European Union (EU) and others have withdrawn their ambassadors, the US has not. But it has taken the edge off criticisms of its tepid response by offering Zelaya's family protection within the US Embassy. Zelaya's wife Xiomara and son Hector are staying there even while the first lady joins protests and public activities agitating for restoration. Xiomara Castro has worked tirelessly to keep supporters working fervently for her husband's return. A conclusion to this coup that is satisfactory to all sides would be useful to a US eager to regain its status in Latin America. It would be seen not as having brokered a deal but rather as having facilitated an outcome designed and executed by Central Americans, in other words, being helpful rather than aggressive. The response is already a departure from the swift endorsement of the April 2002 failed coup against Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19), a very close Zelaya ally, but rumblings have begun to surface as investigative reporters are attempting to tie the coup, or backing for it, to the International Republican Institute (IRI). The IRI, the international arm of the US Republican Party, headed by Sen. John McCain, has in the past been associated with the coup against Chavez and the 2004 overthrow of the Jean-Bertrand Aristide government in Haiti. An article distributed by Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias (ABN), written by Eva Golinger, links the IRI to the coup through its continuing presence in Honduras, fielding "good-governance" and "political-influence" programs. The article traces IRI Regional Program Director, Latin America and the Caribbean, Alex Sutton's close recent involvement "with many of the organizations that have backed the Honduran coup." IRI

press secretary Lisa Gates denied the allegations of linkage to the coup, calling them "false reports." The allegations, aimed as they are at the Republican Party, could deflect accusations away from the Obama administration, but Clinton is still taking criticism for not specifically supporting Zelaya or his definitive return to office. She told reporters after the meeting with Zelaya, "I reiterated to him that the United States supports the restoration of the democratic, constitutional order in Honduras." But, as for his making another attempt to return, she said, "I believe it is a better route for him to follow at this time than to attempt to return in the face of the implacable opposition of the de facto regime. So, instead of another confrontation that might result in a loss of life, let's try the dialogue process and see where that leads, and let the parties determine all the various issues as they should." Arias, in whose willing lap all this is being dumped, seemed content with his role, although it is not clear yet what exactly to call it. "You can call it a negotiation, or simply a talk, a conversation, a dialogue, but I want the two parties to sit around a table and discuss the issues," he said. Arias told Costa Rica's largest daily he had been approached by several sources to play the mediation role. He said he would if directly requested to do so by Zelaya and Micheletti. Each of the contestants called him on July 7, and he accepted. Arias slipped easily into calling the talks a negotiation. He said that, for a satisfactory solution to be arrived at, each side would have to give in, and that was a negotiation. He said that he would hold the talks at his house to create "a warmer atmosphere" and that he could not predict the outcome. He would begin by preparing an agenda, and he broadly outlined his expectation that the details of the coup would be discussed, "but the crux of the matter is to solve the conflict and create an atmosphere of peace, which is necessary to carry out a campaign that allows the election of the next president of Honduras." This suggested that an agreement might more easily be reached since, at worst, Zelaya would only hold office until January, with a government-in-waiting coming into being in November. Arias had condemned the coup and criticized the use of the military. La Nacion interpreted that to mean he had taken sides, implying that he may not be objective in his mediating role. He responded, "Let's see. When I was called and told that Zelaya was on his way to Costa Rica in an airplane, I stated my opinion to the media and deplored what had happened in Honduras. I deplored the way he was brought out of his house and taken to an airplane, and I deplored the fact that Honduran democracy, which was being slowly consolidated, had taken a step backward with the coup d'etat. The fact is you cannot use euphemisms; it was a coup d'etat, violating the Constitution. Now if the two sides ask me to participate as a mediator in an attempt to solve the conflict, then we have to turn the page and again look toward the future. I deplore what happened, but now my obligation is to sit down with the two sides and search for a solution."

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