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Talks Fail; Exiled President Manuel Zelaya Says He Is Headed Home To Honduras Regardless Of Feared Consequences

by LADB Staff

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Negotiations between Honduran President Manuel Zelaya and coup leader Roberto Micheletti died aborning when both parties denied that the discussions brokered by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and mediated by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias were, in fact, negotiations. That was the first week in July. Now, the "talks," or "discussions," that replaced them have inevitably and predictably collapsed as well. The devolution to chat mode may have been the last point of agreement between the parties, when Zelaya said, "This is not a negotiation, this is the planning of the exit of the coup leaders," and Micheletti said, "We're not going to negotiate, we're going to talk (see NotiCen, 2009-07-09)." With that as preamble, mediator Arias set about crafting a set of seven points to be talked over between the parties. They were as follows: 1. The legitimate restitution of Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales in the Presidency of the Republic, charge in which he will remain until the end of the constitutional period for which he was elected, which concludes Jan. 27 of next year, date on which he will hand over power to the candidate designated freely and democratically by the people in elections supervised and recognized by the international community. 2. The conformation of a party of unity and reconciliation composed of representatives from the main political parties. 3. The declaration of a general amnesty exclusively for all the political crimes committed because of this conflict, before and after last July 28. 4. The express renouncement of President Zelaya, and of his government, of the pretension of placing a "fourth urn" in the next elections, or to conduct any popular consultation not expressly authorized by the Constitution of the Republic of Honduras. 5. The moving forward of national elections from Nov. 29 to the last Sunday in October, and the moving forward of the beginning of the electoral campaign from the first days of September to the first days of August. 6. The transfer of the command of the armed forces to the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), a month before the elections, to effect a guarantee of transparency and normalcy of the suffrage, according to the terms of the Constitution of the Republic of Honduras. 7. The integration of a verification commission composed of notable Hondurans and members of international organizations, especially by representatives of the Organization of American States (OAS), guarding that these accords are carried out and supervising a correct return to constitutional order. Rejection of the proposal came quickly. Carlos Lopez, a member of the Micheletti delegation to the talks, told Arias by way of the press, "I'm very sorry, but the proposals that you have presented are unacceptable to the constitutional government of Honduras that I represent." Consideration of the proposal did not progress much beyond the first point, according to reports. Speaking for Zelaya's side, Rixi Moncada found the Micheletti people intransigent and said so. "This dialogue with this committee of the de facto regime product of a military coup has ended this day, and because of that intransigence," said Moncada. Arias on the line Arias was set back. He had slid from the mediator's seat to the position of negotiator for his own cause. He tagged after the two receding delegations, asking for one more chance, just 72 more hours, just one more meeting on Wednesday, July 22. Much has been written about Arias putting his reputation as a peace negotiator, which won him a Nobel Prize in 1987, on the line for this, and

it was clear he did not want to come up empty. This goes beyond the personal for him. He has said he believes the talks are the only alternative to spilling Honduran blood, and the possibility of that happening is clearly present, whether or not the threat is being used to cover an attempt to stall, shorten, and impede a resumption of the Zelaya presidency as many of his supporters have claimed. A key to preventing chaos in Honduras, say Arias, the US, the OAS, and others, is to keep Zelaya from making good on his repeatedly demonstrated and stated intention to return to his country prematurely. In this instance, prematurely would mean before there is an agreement guaranteeing his safety and until remission of an arrest warrant whose execution could set off a firestorm among Zelaya supporters who have been massed for action throughout the country almost since the July 28 coup. Zelaya has relented on this point before, but he showed no willingness to do so again. He is going home. "Next weekend we will have everything necessary to make my return as the law and Constitution require, as the mediator [Arias] has requested, and as the UN has asked," he said from Managua. He does not believe that his return would lead to bloodshed. He told Hondurans by radio, "I'm totally sure that with my return the country will become completely calm, everybody will return to their jobs. We will begin a process of dialogue, reconciliation, pardon, and at the same time of judgment against those who committed the golpe de estado." Arias punctuated his plea for more time with a promise to work harder but without revealing any new ideas and without claiming to have any. The main incentive is that "the alternative is that blood will be spilt in Honduras if we don't reach an accord that would permit President Zelaya to return peacefully," said Arias. A couple of deaths have been recorded since the coup, and keeping the numbers low while looking for a solution is a worthy goal by any standard. But acknowledgment must be made that death and bleeding are not the only alternative to talks that are not negotiations in which the mediator is more motivated than are the protagonists. One of the measures pro-Zelaya forces have mentioned is a national general strike. This would not necessarily lead to mayhem, but it would stop the economy in a way that would hurt the business elite who back the coup and the regime it has set up even as it further burdens the poor. US also has skin in the game Besides Arias, another outside player with a lot on the line in the current standoff is the US. During the former administration, the northern colossus lost substantial clout and credibility in the region as a whole and deepened class divisions as it pursued policies that benefited commercial interests, privatized public assets, and instituted neoliberal policies that strained the poor beyond their meager capacities. Under new management, the US appears to be seeking a reasoned and benign way to resolve a Central American crisis that could be an early step in improving its reputation and restoring its credibility. So far that is not happening. The administration fed doubts with a response so slow and careful that it was reluctant even to call the coup a coup. The US is backing Zelaya's return but in a way that has doubters pointing out it is doing so by encouraging him to subscribe to measures enumerated in the Arias proposal that would limit his tenure and force him into a power-sharing agreement that ratifies the Micheletti project and rewards the expulsion of an elected president. With the collapse of the talks, it is becoming clear how far the US has fallen in the hemisphere. Once able to dictate everything from who would rule a country to who could work on a banana farm, it now approaches the de facto government hat in hand and must seek the support of neighbors to get their attention. "We're in constant contact with a number of countries in the hemisphere regarding the situation in Honduras, and we believe the Arias mediation is the right way to go, and the time is now to resolve this issue," said State Department deputy spokesman Robert Wood. While Zelaya has rejected the Arias proposal that the US supports, he is supportive of US efforts to help him. He told Radio Globo for all the country to hear, "It is impossible to sustain a regime with bayonets. The world will not allow it, starting with the United States." Radio Globo supports Zelaya and has, through a network of

reporters throughout the country, kept the story very much alive, even as the regime and corporate-owned media teamed up to limit dissemination and manage the news. The Micheletti lobby But even while Secretary Clinton continues to sound supportive of Zelaya's return, the Micheletti forces have not given up the hope of help from powerful people in the US government and private sector who still cling to the values of the administration of ex-President George W. Bush. They seem to be getting some. For them, issues that have endured from the Cold War still have sway. These are the values with which they paint the Zelaya administration as a dictatorship and his policies as communism. The Micheletti people have sent a lobbying delegation to Washington to try to prevail on these people. They are encouraged by the support of a group of 17 senators who have written to Clinton to criticize the administration's backing of the elected government and who have sided with the coup perpetrators in their contention that they have taken over by constitutional means. To put a fine point on it, a leader of the coup supporters, Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), has delayed a committee vote to confirm Arturo Valenzuela as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, replacing Thomas Shannon, a holdover from the Bush administration. In late developments, Zelaya is expected to arrive in Honduras on July 23 or 24. He told Radio Globo, as the country listened, that he has no illusions of wielding power from the presidency upon his return in the short time left to him, but he vests great importance in a return that would symbolize the people's rejection of the coup and its regime. He comes across as sadder and wiser. "I'm going to my country, to my people, to reunite with my family, my wife, my children," he said. He was not so wistful that he let slip his travel plans. He seemed most hurt by the betrayals at the core of the coup, speaking of "friends who betrayed me, who gave me the kiss of Judas, who sold me out for 30 coins." A painful example was Minister of Agriculture Hector Hernandez Amador, a friend from earliest childhood who grew up on the Zelaya hacienda in Olancho. Hernandez was recently confirmed as minister of agriculture for Micheletti.

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