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## **New Complexities And New Risks As Honduras Coup Stalemate Enters Its Second Month**

*by LADB Staff*

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Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, sitting as mediator in the talks meant to resolve the crisis in Honduras brought on by the golpe de estado and exile of President Manuel Zelaya, has admitted failure for a second time. Arias added a few points to a seven-point plan to restore Zelaya under restrictions, but as before, the sides rejected it (see NotiCen, 2009-07-09). Now, Arias says, Honduras may be on its way to becoming "the Albania or the North Korea of Central America." The 1987 Nobel Peace Prize laureate was joined in disappointment by Zelaya, who had positioned himself at the Nicaraguan border to return to his country come what may but who was turned back and threatened with arrest by the military. But before Honduras becomes a North Korea, other avenues remain to be explored. Rixi Moncada led the Zelaya delegation in the talks; she had been Zelaya's energy minister. She said, "The only purpose of the negotiations was to exhaust the option so that the Organization of American States (OAS) could take charge of the discussions. The only purpose of the negotiations was to make the OAS resolution effective." The OAS wields the power to apply sanctions, opening the door to the UN Security Council and the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA) to do likewise. Arias is president pro tem of SICA. Also, the US, which in many ways holds the keys to Honduras' viability, would necessarily be obligated to join in a united front of sanctions. While interpreting events in a way favorable to Zelaya's hope of return, Moncada simultaneously blamed the forces of de facto President Roberto Micheletti for the collapse of negotiations. Micheletti held to his position that Zelaya is welcome to return but only to face the courts for violations of the Constitution and not, under any circumstances, to return to office. Micheletti negotiator Mauricio Villeda has nevertheless supported continuing discussions but, from the point of view of most observers, only because it costs his side nothing, prevents consolidation of sanctioning bodies, and runs out the clock on the Zelaya presidency. The term expires in January, and elections are scheduled for November. Illegitimacy in perpetuity A serious downside risk could befall any government elected in the November contest, or any election run under the auspices of the de facto government. At the recent Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) summit, the group voted to not recognize the Honduran regime or the results of elections that might take place under it (see NotiSur, 08-07-09). President Rafael Correa of Ecuador said on Aug. 3 that he would seek agreement within UNASUR (Union de Naciones Suramericanas) not to recognize any such new government. He called for the OAS to do the same. Correa went beyond his recommendation to highlight his perception of a negative US role in the Honduras turmoil. He spoke of "the powerful maquila interests in Honduras" and said that, if the US really "wanted to end the military coup in Honduras, it would end tomorrow." Reports elsewhere have implicated US interests without necessarily involving the administration of US President Barack Obama. Names that have surfaced in news reports have included Otto Reich, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs in the administration of former President George W. Bush, and Bennett Ratcliff, known for his strong ties to the Democratic Party and to the administration of former President Bill Clinton. Neither man, coming from opposite sides of the US's rather narrow mainstream political spectrum, has specifically denied complicity. Correa urged the OAS

to get serious, as well, counseling more forceful decision making on any recognition of the next Honduran government. A final shot was aimed at the de facto regime's strategy of using talks as a stalling tactic. He said, "We want a resolution." The message had to be clear and unequivocal. "Whatever election under a de facto regime has no validity whatever. In consequence, it will serve no purpose to try to make it to November because all these elections will not be recognized by the international community," said Correa. The OAS has already come a long way toward Correa's position. Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza has said, "No Honduran government will be recognized if Honduras remains suspended from the OAS and the suspensions will not be lifted for as long as the OAS General Assembly considers that the constitutional order has not been restored." Assessing the probability of violence The possibility of this conflict breaking out into major violence or civil war has been widely discounted in the five post-coup weeks, mostly based on military assurances not to fire on civilians and on analyses pointing out that Zelaya's supporters are wholly unprepared for armed uprising, materially or spiritually. But the subject continues to come up, and events could precipitate what no one fully intended. The mobilization of Honduran troops on the Nicaraguan border is an example. It also opens speculation on a bellicose response from Nicaragua, whose President Daniel Ortega is politically close to Zelaya and has offered succor in these trying times for the exile. A national strike and roadblocks by Zelaya supporters, if they continue, could also spill over into armed conflict. Many Hondurans have already found the de facto government's curfews and other edicts repressive and the military's ongoing participation oppressive. Zelaya has used language suggestive of support for a violent confrontation, as when he said, in the context of an expressed willingness to continue negotiating, that opposing him is "an oligarchy that has exploited the country for decades and is not willing to relinquish power that it has gained through violent means. Anyone can see that the civil war has already begun." Perhaps by way of disclaimer, he added, "Generally speaking, the idea is to avoid violence and confrontation between Hondurans as the way forward, but I don't think it can be avoided if the de facto regime is unwilling to compromise." Even OAS Secretary-General Insulza seemed to recognize the potential for a clash when he frankly admitted, "It is impossible to call for patience when the dictatorship clearly intends to cling to power." An upcoming march of Zelaya partisans could also set the situation ablaze. Several marches, designed to converge simultaneously on Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, are planned. The action is the brainchild of the Frente Nacional Contra el Golpe de Estado, whose coordinator Eulogio Chavez explained that marchers would travel the roads for seven consecutive days. People will come from eight provinces of the country and meet in Tela, from where they will march with the aim of reaching San Pedro Sula on Aug. 10. Others will meet in either Nacaome in the east or Danli in the west to head for Tegucigalpa. This will bring people from rural Zelaya strongholds into contact with urban populations said to be more sympathetic to the Micheletti regime. Organizers designed the event so that demonstrators would travel 15 km a day in an orderly fashion along the roadside so as not to obstruct traffic. They will put on demonstrations as they pass through population centers along the way. Chavez is also president of the Colegio de Profesores de Educacion Media, a group of at least 15,000 members. Many of these people, along with other educators, will attend a popular assembly in conjunction with the funerals of two teachers who have been killed in anti-coup related events. The number of dead so far is reported as just four. All were Zelaya supporters. The plan has had the effect of reducing tensions somewhat in other areas of protest against the regime. The Frente Nacional de Resistencia and others have been, during the post-coup weeks, active in roadblocks and other disruptions, which are now giving way to the grander tactic. Zelaya's strong and stirring rhetoric has led him to deny, most recently, that he is organizing a militia in Nicaragua to fight his way back into the country, as reports have begun to

come from the international press saying he is putting together "milicias populares de resistencia." The president told Reuters, "I am not forming any armed military force, even though I have all possibilities of doing so because I am from a place where arms are everywhere in my department." Rather, he said, "It was he [Micheletti] who provoked the bloody war. We don't use arms." Zelaya then turned to lamenting the death of Roger Abraham Vallejo, one of the two teachers whose funerals will soon become a rallying point for supporters. Zelaya's rhetoric appears to have shifted back to diplomacy. Rather than more supervised, mediated talk, however, he is asking for stronger action from the US to bring Micheletti and his people around. His call counters the Micheletti claim that Venezuelan desires to exert influence in Honduras with a counterclaim that the real locus of control lies northward. "Honduras, [despite] all the golpistas say, does not depend on Caracas; Honduras depends on Washington," said Zelaya. "The US has only to tighten its fist, and this golpe lasts five seconds." He thus echoes Ecuador's Correa and puts any Obama administration hope of staying distant enough to cleanse its interfering image in difficulty. A tepid, timid US steps away. The US response has been tepid compared to that of other countries. Many have withdrawn their ambassadors; the US has not. Many have cut aid and cooperation funds massively; the US just a little. None of the decisively acting countries has the close, nearly proprietary, relationship with the military that the US has. With Honduran military support crucial to the continued existence of the regime, military-to-military pressure could be decisive. By illustration, when former Guatemalan President Jorge Serrano (1991-1993) staged his auto coup in May of his final year in office, a sudden withdrawal of the Army's support ended the government overnight and sent Serrano packing to Panama, where he remains to this day. Indications are that Zelaya will not get his wish from the Obama administration, which is seen to be backing off its support of Zelaya in its ongoing timidity before a conservative minority supporting the coup. A letter from the State Department to Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) reads, in part, "Our policy and strategy for engagement is not based on supporting any particular politician or individual. Rather, it is based on finding a resolution that best serves the Honduran people and their democratic aspirations. We have rejected calls for crippling economic sanctions and made clear that all states should seek to facilitate a solution without calls for violence and with respect for the principle of nonintervention." The letter, signed by the assistant secretary for legislative affairs, goes on to substantially blame Zelaya for the coup. "We also recognize that President Zelaya's insistence on undertaking provocative actions contributed to the polarization of Honduran society and led to a confrontation that unleashed the events that led to his removal." Analysts attribute the cave-in to conservative threats to delay a vote on the nomination of Arturo Valenzuela to the post of assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. Lugar is the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he specifically asked for an explanatory letter. If this is so, the message to Latin America continues to be that their interests are to be subordinated to US internal politics whenever necessary. In consolation for the sudden reversal from the US, the OAS will send a mission to Honduras for the purpose of persuading the Micheletti regime to accept Arias' improved 12-point plan. "The most important one, of course," said Arias, being the return of President Zelaya.

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