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Honduras President Still In Exile As International Mission Fails

by LADB Staff

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Honduras' de facto government headed by former legislature president Roberto Micheletti has passed the two-month mark in power, on track to keep its small world turning until the term of elected President Manuel Zelaya runs out in January. The Micheletti forces are paying dearly for their insistence that theirs is a constitutionally and legally constituted government, as no state has recognized it, and the clamor for increased sanctions grows. Although observers bet against any chance of its success, the Organization of American States (OAS) did finally send its repeatedly delayed delegation of foreign ministers to Honduras, only to prove those observers right. OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza headed the group, but only in the capacity of observer because the regime declined to deal with him as a negotiator because of his bias in favor of returning Zelaya to office. Insulza was not one of those observers who bet against the mission. The delegation made a show of it, meeting with representatives of practically every sector of society, including the military at whose hands Zelaya was spirited away to Costa Rica (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). The ministers made their way from sector to sector, finally meeting with Micheletti at the end. These ministers were chosen after the regime vetoed anyone from a known pro-Zelaya country. Those picked were from Costa Rica, Canada, Jamaica, Mexico, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, and Panama. But when all was said and nothing done, it was left to Costa Rica's Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno to read a statement regretting "that it was not possible on this occasion to obtain the backing for the San Jose accord." This was an agreement hammered out by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias in his prior role as mediator between Micheletti and Zelaya representatives calling for Zelaya's return under conditions limiting his presidential powers. The mission states its case. The statement went on to explain that the mission stressed in all its meetings that the San Jose accord is internationally recognized as the basis for national reconciliation and the balanced road to restoration of democratic order, but all to no avail. The Micheletti people, said the statement, expressed "fear of the consequences that Zelaya's return to power could have for the peace and social stability of the country." The regime also rejected amnesty for Zelaya. There too, the mission made its case, but from the beginning the de facto government has maintained that Zelaya could return, but only to face charges, likely before the same Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) that ordered the military to act against him. Micheletti is firmly entrenched, unmoved by the international isolation he faces. He dared, as he has before, the world to escalate. "They have sent us all kinds of messages," he said, "but unless they want to send in troops, no one is going to impose anything on us." Sending an armed force has not been reported to be an option the OAS is considering, even in the face of serious allegations of rampant human rights abuses against citizens, mostly Zelaya supporters. But Micheletti did offer a counterproposal. He said he had not sought this presidency and would be willing to step down in favor of a third person, which position the San Jose accord does not contemplate. The third person, according to reports, would be coup supporter and CSJ president Jorge Rivera Aviles. Costs going up While not steep enough to change Micheletti's mind, the international community is exacting a price for his recalcitrance, and that price, if it is to be taken seriously, is rising. Honduras relies in great measure on its membership in the Central America

Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) of which all Central American countries and the Dominican Republic are part. At the 18th Conferencia Centroamericana y del Caribe de Partidos Politicos, Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez called the mission failure "unfortunate and lamentable" and called for Honduras' suspension from CAFTA. Fernandez argued that this is not simply a problem with Honduras but rather one for the world and for Latin America, "with the fall of democratic governments that threaten the social stability of our peoples." Fernandez was host to the Conferencia in Santo Domingo. The US, first among purported equals in CAFTA, has been slow to act decisively in the standoff despite urging from proponents of Zelaya's return, but it recently muted the regime's voice in Washington by canceling visas and "non-emergency, non-immigrant visa services in the consular section." Meanwhile, there have been reports that an embargo would be placed against business dealings. This came from regime supporter Adolfo Facusse, who said he got it from Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa, who said she got it from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Mexico's Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) denied this. Zelaya's people fight on. Fleeting time has not deterred Zelaya forces. His Foreign Minister Patricia Rodas is still recognized internationally and has told the media from her embassy in Costa Rica that the "men and women of the fatherland of Morazan" will fight on. She reiterated that her government still exercises authority within the Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) and said "no fewer than 20,000 Hondurans mobilize daily in every corner of our country," adding, "These people are seeking something of which they have been robbed their democracy, their liberty and they will keep on seeking it in corner after corner despite the repression, and they are going to get it back." Evidence is accumulating that repressive measures have not abated in Honduras. Recent reports have it that Catholic priest Andres Tamayo has been threatened with expulsion from the country for his support of Zelaya and his denunciation of repressive measures taken against others. He has charged that the media have been silenced, reporting only what the regime wants reported. He said that violence increases daily, the military acts against anyone who protests publicly, trying to keep people indoors to avoid street demonstrations. Tamayo was a Salvadoran who took Honduran citizenship to legally militate against environmental depredation. He is in no mood to cease speaking out against the regime now, claiming that the political persecution will not stop him and that he would like to tell the regime, "If it is a crime to accompany the people, I feel sure of what I'm doing, I feel firm, I'm not going to falter, I'm not going to turn back. These threats are not going to weaken me either. Far from that, they make me stronger." The priest is far from alone in his fervor. The 20,000 adherents daily are consolidating, even within organized groups. Within the Frente Nacional contra el Golpe de Estado en Honduras (FNGE), women have organized a separate organization, Feministas de Honduras en Resistencia (FHR), to mobilize women in the popular movement against the regime. They have started a letter-writing campaign to international organizations to gain support. Leader Sara Elisa Gonzalez said, "The participation of women has been fundamental and will continue being so, in the struggle of the Frente...." She said the women's group would retake the Zelaya initiative to reform the constitution, to enhance social justice and participatory democracy. Zelaya was accused of backing the reform to allow him a second presidential term, even though the measure would not have been completed until well after his term expired. In other matters, the FNGE agreed in a national assembly to continue street demonstrations regardless of the repression. The repression has been particularly severe for women, according to the FHR. They charge police with rape and other sexual assault against leaders. In solidarity, the United Steelworkers Women of Steel in the US has called on Secretary of State Clinton to "denounce this violence just as you have recently denounced such violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." The letter they sent asked President Barack Obama to do

likewise and "to take all steps necessary to restore President Zelaya including the withdrawal of the US ambassador to Honduras, the end of all economic assistance to the coup regime, including monies granted by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the freezing of all assets of the coup leaders." Zelaya has also been active and vociferous in his own behalf. He peppers his discourse with promises to return and criticisms of international mechanisms and those he deems not doing enough to restore him. Chief among his targets are the OAS and the US. He finds the OAS toothless, lacking a legal basis for stronger action. "There are no international penal codes to sanction coup plotters," he said. "Here we have the OAS charter, which is now at risk. The OAS has already sanctioned the de facto government but now the OAS itself, its charter, and the international penal law is under threat." The coup has played havoc with member-state relations as they take different and opposing positions with regard to Honduras. Some are forthcoming, like Argentina, which expelled the Honduran ambassador, opening the door to expulsion of its own ambassador from Honduras. Chile has, at Zelaya's request, likewise withdrawn its ambassador. Some, not so much, like Peru, where President Alan Garcia backs the San Jose accord, but goes no further. Weak as the OAS may be, Zelaya met with officials of the organization in Washington on Sept. 2 and received assurances the OAS would not recognize a government emerging from the coming elections. And then there is the US, which Zelaya criticizes gingerly, but pointedly. He gives a nod to measures so far taken but has not changed his opinion that "the United States could do more." In a move the Zelaya forces found irritating, a Micheletti delegation met with State Department officials, leading to an afterward disclaimer that the meeting "does not under any circumstance imply recognition of the de facto government." For many observers, this was a "the lady doth protest too much, methinks" moment, while others take the more benign view that the delegation included no actual members of the regime. It comprised what Micheletti called "prominent citizens." These included former CSJ president Vilma Morales, politician Arturo Corrales, and jurist Mauricio Villeda. The three were members of Micheletti's mediation team at the ill-fated negotiations led by President Arias in Costa Rica. The US has also indicated it would apply more stringent sanctions if the coup turned out to be a coup by its standards, but the foot-dragging clearly works to the Micheletti advantage. On Sept. 2, a couple of weeks after the meeting, Secretary of State Clinton announced she would meet with Zelaya the following day, Sept.3. Her spokesman said she "plans to meet with him to discuss the best way forward on the situation in Honduras." The US comes around partly when the meeting took place, Zelaya struck partial pay dirt. He did not get a withdrawal of the US ambassador in Tegucigalpa, but he did get the long-awaited aid cutoff that he and supporters have called for. Micheletti will now have to deal with the loss of more than US\$200 million in aid. "The secretary of state has made the decision, consistent with US legislation, recognizing the need for strong measures in light of the continued resistance to the adoption of the San Jose accord by the de facto regime and continuing failure to restore democratic, constitutional rule to Honduras," said a State Department spokesman. The aid would be restored if constitutional rule were restored. Zelaya also got a commitment from the US not to honor the November election and not to recognize the incoming government. Agonizingly for the Zelaya side, the statement stopped short of a US decision to call the Micheletti takeover a military coup, even though, say reports, the takeover was the result of such a coup. That decision would cause the US to cancel even more aid and presumably mean the withdrawal of US troops stationed in the country. The exiled president thanked the US but appears to be sticking to his view that the US still "could do more." He remarked, "The de facto regime is even more isolated," by the measures, noting, "There are many works of infrastructure that are today being suspended." A further measure, a trade cutoff along the lines suggested by Dominican president Fernandez, would have counted greatly as "more," but that did not happen because, said

the BBC, the treaties themselves forbid it. Some members of the US Congress commented that the legislature could yet act independently on the trade question.

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