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President Manuel Zelaya Back In Honduras, Surrounded In The Brazilian Embassy

by LADB Staff

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Politically, he is on Brazilian sovereign territory. But, in the real world, President Manuel Zelaya is home in Honduras, holed up in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa and, in the first moments after his return, surrounded by chaos in the streets outside. Eighty-seven days after his abduction at the hands of the Honduran military (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02), an inept though supportive international community had failed to return him to the office it insisted was his, so Zelaya took matters into his own hands...and feet. He walked home. The de facto government vowed to arrest and try him if he exercised his right to return from exile, so the journey required more than a little stealth. "I had to use various strategies; I had to avoid a lot of obstacles. I had to avoid military checkpoints, crossing very close to the mountains, sometimes through the valleys," he told Al Jazeera by phone from the Brazilian Embassy. Zelaya said the head of the Army was allied with regime leader Roberto Micheletti, but the rank and file, he believed, was on his side. "There is a rupture in the morale of the Army; this will help in our quest for peace and dialogue." Brazil stands in bold relief against the backdrop of timidity exhibited by many individual states and international organizations in offering Zelaya safe haven inside his own country. Lacking a tradition of unwanted intrusion in foreign affairs, Brazil could afford the certain-to-come charge of interference from the de facto government but still faced significant risk to its embassy and personnel. It would also shoulder some blame for the consequences of violent outbreaks that might be precipitated. Clashes between Honduran security forces and Zelaya supporters came swiftly, with a couple of civilians reported killed and many wounded as masked soldiers used clubs, rubber bullets, and tear gas against the thousands of Zelaya supporters. The Army and police then began tightly patrolling the periphery of the embassy and, say reports, cut electricity, phones, and water to the building, leaving only cell phones for communications. Zelaya, from within the embassy, made clear that violence was no part of his strategy to return himself to office. He said on the phone, "I have come here to solve problems, in an attitude of peace, without weapons, without violence. I hope that the international community will support me." But at the same time, he was asking the people for concerted action. "I am calling on the people of Honduras to come to the embassy to protect me because there is word that [the regime] will arrest me and there is word that they will try to assassinate me." The Micheletti regime went into deep defense, declaring a countrywide curfew. It had used the tactic from time to time during the three months of its existence to establish and maintain control. This latest edict was more extensive though, from 4 p.m. to 6 a.m. It also appeared destined to be less effective, as supporters remained at the embassy loudly encouraging their president. Lula counsels Zelaya, blasts Micheletti Well-aware of the destructive potential of Zelaya's return, his host, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, had a phone conversation with Zelaya and cautioned him against provocation. "This morning I spoke to President Zelaya simply to ask him to take care to give no pretext to the coup leaders to engage in violence," Lula said. He said that, in inviting Zelaya to use the embassy, he was only doing what any democratic country ought to do. "We can't accept that for political differences people think they have the right to depose a democratically elected president," he said. Lula counseled that political differences should be changed through the vote and that "what you cannot do is

accept a coup leader who thinks he has the right to be president." The regime was clearly caught unaware by Zelaya's return and place of refuge. As part of the hasty defense, Micheletti's vice chancellor Martha Lorena Alvarado took to the media to claim that Zelaya's only viable option was, in effect, to come out with his hands up and face justice. She denied damaging utility lines to the embassy, "despite the diplomatic headquarters being used as general quarters by Zelaya, calling for insurrection from there and compromising Brazil." She said she expected Brazil either to give Zelaya up or grant him asylum in short order. Alvarado was especially vexed at Brazil. She charged that Lula was in league with Venezuela, whose President Hugo Chavez the Micheletti forces have blamed everything on from the beginning. If Zelaya had not turned to the socialists for help in the economic crisis, they have said, the coup would not have been necessary. They repeatedly expressed the fear that the president's turn toward the *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas* (ALBA) would anger their major trading partner and all-around benefactor, the US. Zelaya has repeatedly pointed out that he approached ALBA only after the US ignored his pleas. Hardship inside the embassy Embassy life for the fugitive, his friends, and hosts has been anything but pleasant. Within the besieged compound, some 300 people began to feel the desperation of dwindling food supplies and lack of water and power. Most occupants, including Zelaya partisans, journalists, diplomats, and embassy staff, had not eaten since noon on the previous Monday. Initial word was that troops outside were not even allowing the Red Cross to enter, lest they smuggle in food. Among the increasingly desperate guests, about ten were small children, who had not eaten. Lack of sleep heightened the tensions inside the compound. The guest of honor spent the night in an armchair, while most of his supporters slept as they could on the floor. Partisans and embassy staff both maintained a wakeful vigil against an attack by regime forces. Morning brought worsening creature comforts against a background of mass arrests outside, but also the first glimmers that the regime was relenting. Micheletti signals major change Micheletti announced, "I am ready to talk with Mr. Zelaya, as long as he explicitly recognizes the presidential elections." Making no mention of Zelaya's arrest or facing charges and demanding only a concession that would occur on its own if Zelaya were reinstated, Micheletti essentially gave up the game; the regime had effectively backed down. The previous week, most of the six presidential candidates concluded a session in Costa Rica with mediator President Oscar Arias without committing to Zelaya's return to power under the terms of Arias' San Jose Agreement, but the prospect of winning an illegitimate presidency would have been enough to place great pressure upon Micheletti (see *NotiCen*, 2009-07-09, 2009-09-17). Micheletti's reversal came in the same time frame that President Mauricio Funes of neighboring El Salvador was addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, telling the body that was already in agreement that, without a prior return to constitutional government in Honduras, no recognition of a government resulting from the November elections would be possible. But it may be too late to confer legitimacy on the elections under any probable circumstances. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said following the Funes speech that conditions for an election do not exist and that the UN was therefore withdrawing electoral assistance. More signs of flagging enthusiasm for the coup leaders appeared in the legislature, where deputies of Micheletti's own party and others in the body he once presided over demanded an end to the systematic repression they saw happening all over the country. Solidly against the coup, these deputies demanded the immediate signing of the San Jose Agreement and a guarantee of safety for Zelaya, his family, and all those accompanying him in the embassy. In the streets of the capital, thousands marched demanding Zelaya's return to office. Organizers from the *Frente Nacional de Resistencia contra el Golpe de Estado* said nearly all the marchers in the very long line were local to Tegucigalpa, since the curfew and other restrictions had kept citizens from rural areas from getting to the capital. These people have drawn the attention of

human rights organizations worldwide as they have withstood three consecutive days of tear-gas bombing, beatings, and other repressive acts.

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