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Honduras: Slow Progress In President Porfirio Lobo's Efforts To Gain International Recognition

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Nineteen countries, less than 10% of the UN's total of 192 member states, attended Honduran President Porfirio Lobo's inauguration on Jan. 27. Among those present at the swearing-in ceremony at the Estadio Nacional Tiburcio Carias Andino Tegucigalpa's main soccer field, named after one of Honduras' most notorious dictators (1932-1949) were three heads of state, Presidents Leonel Fernandez of the Dominican Republic, Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan, and Ricardo Martinelli of Panama. Fernandez was instrumental in solving a major bottleneck for getting past the collapse of this Central American nation's constitutional structure as a result of the June 28 coup that toppled then President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya and began a seven-month crisis (NotiCen, July 02, 2009). The international community with the basic exceptions of Israel and Taiwan condemned the coup, which included Zelaya being captured at dawn by Army troops, huddled into a small jet, and dropped off a few hours later at Costa Rican police Base 2 inside Juan Santamaría International Airport on the outskirts of the capital San Jose. After three months of exile and efforts from Nicaragua, where later that day he set up camp, to get the international community, including the US, to reverse the coup by, among other measures, reinstating him, Zelaya made a surprise return by land to Honduras, taking cover in the Brazilian Embassy in one of Tegucigalpa's elegant districts (NotiCen, September 09, 2009). From what was to become his lodging for the following four months, and within a framework of constant military and police repression by the de facto regime against the sustained popular movement against the coup, Zelaya kept his efforts going, to no avail. Despite the constitutional crisis and the constant clashes between security forces and unarmed members of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia contra el Golpe de Estado, elections were held on Nov. 29 and won by "Pepe" Lobo as the country's new president is known (NotiCen, December 03, 2009). Carrying out its warning, the international community as well as internal opposition denounced the elections and again stated it would not recognize the government emerging from a vote held under circumstances contrary to carrying out free elections.

Lobo enlists help from Dominican Republic

As president-elect, Lobo visited the Dominican Republic, accompanied by his former presidential rivals, and, with Fernandez as witness, signed an agreement that included elements from two previous and failed accords (NotiCen, February 04, 2010). The first was the Acuerdo de San Jose, named after the Costa Rican capital where it was hammered out in July during two lengthy sessions of a failed mediation by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, at the head of state's residence, between delegates representing both sides in the Honduran crisis, Zelaya's toppled government and the de facto regime that replaced it via the coup. The second was the Acuerdo San Jose-Tegucigalpa, signed, like the previous document, by delegations of both sides, this time in the capital of Honduras. Among other points, the two texts called for Zelaya's restoration, a political amnesty for those involved in the coup, and the appointment of a Truth Commission to determine responsibility in the events prior to and following June 28, but none was complied with. The document signed in Santo Domingo, in the presence of the Dominican head of state, marked the
third attempt to set up basic rules for a way out. One of its main components allowing Zelaya, his wife Xiomara, his daughter Hortensia, popularly known as "La Pichu," and his aide Rasel Tome to leave the Brazilian Embassy as well as Honduras was met. After the Jan. 27 swearing-in ceremony, Lobo arrived at the embassy with Fernandez and Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom, who arrived in Tegucigalpa following the day's main event, to escort Zelaya and his party to the capital's Toncontín International Airport. Also at the airport was Gen. Romeo Vasquez, who was still head of the Estado Mayor Conjunto de las Fuerzas Armadas, one of the leaders of the civilian-military coup that deposed Zelaya. Vasquez, who arrived with then head of the Honduran Air Force Gen. Luis Javier Prince, told reporters that, "as a soldier," he wanted to both greet Zelaya and accompany Lobo "at a time when national reconciliation is sought." "I greeted him and we came to see him off because at a personal level we have been friends," he said. "These are situations that have nothing to do with the personal level." "He greeted me very cordially, we talked and had a very enjoyable conversation and both regarded the future for Honduras to go forward," added Velasquez, who retired last week and was replaced by Gen. Carlos Cuellar, formerly armed forces inspector general and member of the Junta de Comandantes de las Fuerzas Armadas at the time Zelaya was toppled.

Call for reconciliation among Hondurans

Asked about the former president's departure, Lobo said, "If there's anything very important for Honduras it is for peace to come to the nation and that we manage to have international relations go back to normal." He added, "Nothing is more important to Honduras than peace. Honduras is all of us, and we must all reconcile, because internal confrontation harms us internationally." In his first speech as president, as he referred to countries refusing to recognize his administration, Lobo assured them of "our wish to hold the best relations with all of them within the norms of mutual respect and civility." "We are firm in the principle of peoples' self-determination," he emphasized and went on to add that "Honduras opens its friendly arms to all the peoples throughout the planet, whatever their political orientation, their race, or religion." "We wish national reconciliation to extend to reconciliation with the international community," said the new president. Among the steps taken to that effect, besides the new government allowing Zelaya to leave the country, which the de facto regime had refused to do, the unicameral Congreso Nacional passed the political amnesty, which Lobo described as "the state's pardon to all" involved in the coup. "I very clearly state the amnesty refers only to political events," Lobo said. The Truth Commission will be appointed "as soon as possible," said the president, "because it is fair for the people and the world to know the reality of events prior to, during, and following June 28.

International recognition coming slowly

One month after the inaugural speech before delegations of only 19 members of the international community and three presidents, new Foreign Minister Mario Canahuati proudly told journalists that close to 30 nations have now recognized the new government. Since Lobo took office, relations have been restored with at least 29 of the 38 countries Honduras has historically held diplomatic ties with, according to Canahuati, a textile maquila entrepreneur and former head of the Consejo Hondureno de la Empresa Privada (COHEP). Cooperation relations are also being restored with international financial organizations such as the Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCIE) and the World Bank, he said. "We are very happy in the sense that there is a recognition that allows us to at least start getting rid of the [external] political pressure. But, logically, we still have the commitment with Honduran reconciliation and unity," Canahuati said.
"Our problems are not with the US, with the European Union (EU), or with other countries or blocs, but with us Hondurans, who through dialogue must overcome the differences that sprang from Zelaya's toppling and [must] thus contribute to improving the country's climate for investment."

However, before boarding the small jet that took the former president's group and Fernandez from Tegucigalpa to Santo Domingo, where the toppled leader and his family settled in an exclusive sector of the Dominican capital, Zelaya assured those present, "I shall return."

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