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Recommended Citation
Honduran President Porfirio Lobo Reveals Assassination Plot but Human Rights Activist Says Facts Are Unclear

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Category/Department: Honduras
Published: Thursday, August 25, 2011

Honduran President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo has said groups "high up" that disagree with the security tax he promoted, which was recently passed by Congress, are talking about killing him.

The president made the allegation on July 18, during a press conference at a military facility in Tegucigalpa, the country's capital, where he headed the main official celebration marking the 42nd anniversary of the end of the Soccer War between El Salvador and Honduras. The war (July 14-18, 1969), which started after a soccer match between both nations’ national teams aiming at the 1970 World Cup, was caused by a massive deportation of Salvadoran farmers and workers from Honduras.

After the celebration, Lobo told journalists, "They’re going around threatening that ‘this guy must not be removed, because there’s too many problems, so we’re going to kill him.'"

"Just like that, and I know who they are, too," added the president, who went on to say, "They're not from down under, they’re from up high. Regrettably, I’m very sorry, but I must take some measures. I know the president’s security has a cost, but I must not sleep on these indications."

Gen. René Osorio, Honduran armed forces chief, said, "What we do in cases like these is to double security....There’s a strategy for the president to be able to move about, always taking different routes, alternate routes. We’re loyal to our commander-general...and we’ll comply with the law, providing him with security."

Regarding the security tax, Lobo told the press conference that he would charge the rich, because "I have nothing to take from the poor."

The unicameral Congreso Nacional passed the tax in June for a five-year period during which the Honduran state is supposed to collect 7.5 billion lempiras (close to US$398 million) for the struggle against crime.

This is one of the issues confronting Lobo and the country’s conservative sectors, which backed the June 2009 bloody coup that toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya and expelled him from Honduras (NotiCen, July 23, 2009).

Opposition to converting Palmerola Base into international airport

Other issues are initiatives Zelaya was promoting, such as turning the Comandante José Enrique Soto Cano Air Base—better known as the Palmerola Base—a military facility some 82 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, just outside the city of Comayagua, into the country’s future international airport.

Dating from 1982 and expanded with US funding in the mid-1980s within the framework of the Cold War, it then housed up to 5,000 US troops and is now headquarters to just above 500 troops making up US Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B), which includes Honduran personnel. JTF-B’s mission
is to take part in humanitarian and emergency operations, as well as in operations against drug trafficking in Central America.

Historically opposed by grassroots and other civil-society organizations both in Honduras and throughout the region, Palmerola was targeted by Zelaya as the site for a new international airport, replacing the unsafe and accident-prone Toncontín International Airport on Tegucigalpa’s southern outskirts.

Four days after telling journalists about the assassination plan, Lobo said, while attending a Central American summit meeting in El Salvador, that "they’re not threats, they’re expressions. So, we know who are making these expressions."

Regarding measures such as the security tax, the president said, "Some sectors reacted too angrily, and in those meetings there were very direct expressions by some people we’ve identified, and when we say it publicly we do so to dissuade them."

Other measures passed by Congress on June 23 include taxes on certain banking services, mining, and mobile-telephone communications.

Rights activist questions allegations

Local human rights activist Bertha Oliva told NotiCen, "There’s no doubt that here, in Honduras, all of us are at risk as a result of impunity...fostered by those who’ve had the historic responsibility to apply justice. What we’re living in Honduras is a policy of the state. The allegations made by Lobo Sosa really worry us...because we don’t doubt they’re true. But the way he has said it and how he’s been handling it since look very sloppy."

"First, he says he knows them and knows who they are, and that they’re up high—those who want to kill him," but a few days later "he says his remark was misinterpreted," added Oliva, the coordinator of the human rights nongovernmental organization Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH). "So, he shows a terrible weakness, and contradictions, and that lack of seriousness in the message...makes us think of a slip-up, when he said it, and it makes us think that we’re facing a...president with a terrible weakness. And that renders us defenseless."

The activist pointed out that Lobo "is a man who claims to...have a profound respect for human rights, reconciliation, and peace. That’s what he tells us, but what we’re seeing inside [Honduras] is contrary to that."

Oliva said that Lobo has to tell Hondurans whether he has the power to implement peace and reconciliation or whether those are his wishes but he lacks the power to act on what he publicly says.

"I think what is missing is a definition, for him to clearly tell us if he’s representing the people or obeying the groups that have this country the way they have it now, meaning with a broken rule of law."

In Oliva’s view, Hondurans were surprised to hear their president’s remarks about power groups wanting to kill him, and Lobo’s lack of clarity has prevented massive shows of support from happening. The Honduran people do not want another coup, because they are the ones suffering the effects from 2009, which Oliva listed as "lack of security...persecution, the levels of poverty, the opposition being followed by state-created groups."
The activist voiced concern for what she described as the massive militarization taking place nationwide in Honduras, including two new US bases, one on the northeastern Caribbean coastal sector of Caratasca Lagoon and another in the northern Bay Islands, in the Caribbean.

Oliva also referred to Lobo’s human rights record, pointing out what she saw as contradictions. “He speaks of his interest in respect for human rights, and that it’s his fundamental guideline, and that because of this he’s created spaces and instances for human rights policies to be drawn up and for those rights to be protected,” she said, and went on to admit that such spaces exist. “But laws against human rights are being passed in Congress, where he has control.”

As part of such legislation, Oliva mentioned "the law against maras (youth gangs made up of hundreds of members)," and the concession of natural resources, which brings with it deep violations of human rights in communities." In addition, a law that extends the allowed arrest period from 24 to 74 hours makes way for "deep violations of human rights," already happening, to worsen, she warned.

Lobo has not vetoed nor proposed legislation, acting "in favor of human rights, but also not allowing things such as those I’m telling you about," the COFADEH leader pointed out. She went on to warn that "it’s a risk, because we’re facing an exercise of double standards, and while this happens, all of us are at risk, in a defenseless condition."

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