Borrowing Private Plane for Costa Rican Presidential Trips Abroad Backfires in Ongoing Plot Suited for Political Thriller

George RodrÃ­guez
Borrowing Private Plane for Costa Rican Presidential Trips Abroad Backfires in Ongoing Plot Suited for Political Thriller

by George Rodríguez
Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2013-06-20

On May 11, the Presidencia de la República issued a brief communiqué reporting that Costa Rica’s President Laura Chinchilla was on her way to a private visit in Peru and was scheduled to meet with that nation’s President Ollanta Humala.

The high-level talks would include strengthening the bilateral diplomatic link and the passage in May by the Costa Rican unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL) of the Costa Rica-Peru free-trade agreement (FTA), according to the official report. The president returned two days later, and 24 hours after that, a series of events began to unfold that would rock the local political scene.

On May 14, several opposition legislators, both rightist and center-left, requested that the Ministerio Público (MP) and the Procuraduría de la Ética Pública, part of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), investigate the trip.

Deputy Patricia Pérez of the rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML) said that, for one thing, the government omitted reporting to the AL in advance that the president would be abroad for a couple of days, a constitutional requirement. Added to that, the trip was made using an airplane borrowed from a private Canadian oil company, the petitioner stated in her request to the head of the MP, Attorney General Jorge Chavarría.

Simultaneously, several center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) deputies made an investigation request along the same lines to the PGR, which immediately replied, in a brief communiqué, that it would carry out the inquiry.

At the same time, criticism began pouring in from local civil society, mainly because of the use of the plane for a presidential trip albeit a private journey.

Communications minister defends use of plane

The government’s reaction came the same day, as then Minister of Communication Francisco Chacón gave a first and lengthy explanation to local Radio AND. Private companies often offer air transportation to the government, just as THX Energy had done for the trip to Peru, Chacón told AND during a telephone interview, adding that the company has no interest in exploring for oil or gas in Costa Rica.

"The people in charge of the president’s transportation have different possibilities, people who have offered on previous occasions to lend the government private airplanes," Chacón said. "Not only this company—THX—but other companies have offered that and have cooperated with the government, with this government and with previous governments. This is a practice that has occurred on previous occasions and with previous governments."
"What has now caused some mistrust is that the company, abroad, deals in oil and gas exploration. However, I want to say—because it’s important that everybody has it clear—that this company has none of those activities in Costa Rica. What it has is a very small service type operation for logistics coordination of all the other operations it does have in other countries in the region," Chacón said.

"It has no interest in exploring gas here or in exploring oil here. The government has been very clear that there won’t be any exploration of that kind in this administration. People shouldn’t worry about that."

About the trip to Peru, Chacón told AND that at first it had been planned as a personal visit, for Chinchilla to be present at the wedding of the son of Costa Rica’s Second Vice President Luis Liberman, but events that occurred the following week "led to the conclusion that it was convenient and necessary for the president to take advantage of her visit to Lima and meet with President Humala."

The Chinchilla-Humala talks had been planned "for a couple weeks earlier, at the World Economic Forum, but madam president could not be at that meeting, and so it was decided to reprogram it taking advantage of the social visit [to Peru]," Chacón said. "And it eventually turned into a visit that was also important for the country," because of the meeting, the week after the trip, "in Cali, Colombia, of the Alianza del Pacífico."

In this regard, the purpose of the presidential meeting was to seek Peruvian support for Costa Rica’s effort to join the Alianza, a regional bloc made up of Chile, Colombia, México, and Peru, Chacón said. The group agreed, during its seventh summit on May 23, to allow Costa Rica to begin the process aimed at membership (NotiCen, May 30, 2013).

A few hours after his interview with AND, Chacón told the weekly government press conference basically the same thing he had said in his talk with the radio station. But local press reports were mentioning that the airplane had been used in March to take Chinchilla to Venezuela for the funeral of President Hugo Chávez.

Chacón resigns
The day after the radio interview and the weekly press conference, Chacón summoned local and international media to announce he had resigned. He said the decision was the result of what he described as "new elements" that had come up regarding the oil company. Chacón told the press conference about the false identity of an alleged company executive and said he had reported this to Chavarría.

Research by local media on the man and on the company, partly supported by Colombian media reports, was then released. The process regarding the airplane—which took place ignoring security protocols—involves Gabriel Morales Fallón, a naturalized Costa Rican originally from Colombia.

Several government officials took part in the process within which a meeting was held that included, among others, Chacón and Morales, who then identified himself as a business man named Gabriel O’Falan. The meeting was held for government officials to learn details about the company that was lending the aircraft.

The Colombian magazine Semana reported in September 2007 about a probable link between Morales and a captured Colombian drug trafficker identified as Juan Carlos "Chupeta" Ramírez Abadía. Semana reported that Colombian authorities found data in a computer belonging to
"Chupeta" that showed "income worth millions of dollars in the trafficker's accounting allegedly involving ... Morales."

"The witness who turned in the laptop said that [Morales] is a high-level Bogotá executive who manages part of [Chupeta's] finances and appears with the pseudonym 'Rimax,'" the magazine added.

The Costa Rican daily La Nación reported last month that Morales first arrived in Costa Rica in December 2005, and in December 2006 in the northern Colombian port-city of Barranquilla he married by proxy a Costa Rican citizen; in January 2011 he became a naturalized Costa Rican, and eight months later he divorced his Costa Rican wife.

La Nación also reported that, according to data from the Costa Rican Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME), Morales shows some 300 entries and exists since 2007.

In the midst of media reports about himself and the company, Morales gave an interview to a Colombian journalist, denying any link with drug trafficking and saying he had to come to Costa Rica and had to change his name because of threats from the Colombian guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Regarding THX Energy, Costa Rican media have reported on the company’s successive names. Local media says it was founded in Panama in January 1995 as Thorneloe Corp., to later become THX Energy, and eventually TXH Oil and Gas SA, based in Colombia, and whose majority stock was bought last year by the Canadian company Birch Island Capital.

Gas Oil and Mining—a name similar to TXH Oil and Gas SA—appears on the business card Morales gave Chacón, which also identifies the Colombian as Gabriel O’Falan. A similar business card identified retired soccer player Rolando Fonseca as Oil and Mining’s manager for business development.

**MP decides to investigate case**

Early on May 24, agents of the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ)—the local judicial police—carried out simultaneous raids in three houses in an exclusive condo in the Santa Ana residential area some 10 km west of the capital San José, and on a yacht, docked at a Pacific port, which was confiscated.

Local media have linked the houses in the condo—which belong to Morales, Fonseca, and Mexican businessman Gerardo Herrera, who was also mentioned by Chacón—and the yacht to Oil and Mining and to Fonseca.

After the searches began, Chavarría told a press conference—during which he did not provide much information on the raids or the case—that Costa Rica is coordinating actions on this investigation—one on money laundering—with at least five other countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, and Peru.

"Besides those actions [the May 24 searches], we hope to carry out others," the head of the MP said. "About this case, I’m not going to provide any more information, to protect the investigation. Respecting the right to information, in due time, we will be providing whatever information we may be able to reveal, further on, when we’ve collected more evidence and when we’ve made more progress in the investigation."
Regarding the yacht, Chavarría later told NotiCen that the vessel had been confiscated because "we’re looking for evidence, as well as trying to nail down assets, that we, in principle, believe could be involved in the activity" under investigation.

The case had two other casualties. The day after Chacón’s resignation, the president announced she had also accepted the resignations of Mauricio Boraschi, presidency vice minister for security matters, as well as director of intelligence and national security and national anti-drug commissioner, and of presidential aide and long-time friend Irene Pacheco.

The president later put into effect government guidelines by which high government officials in her administration are banned from borrowing aircraft from private companies for travel. The exceptions are emergency situations, according to the guidelines released early this month.

-- End --