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## **‘Fifagate’ Unleashes Third Straight Corruption Scandal in Honduras**

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Last year was prolific in large-scale corruption scandals in Honduras. The first was the scam that collapsed the impoverished Central American nation’s social security system ([NotiCen, July 2, 2015](#)). Then came the arrest, in the United States, of a member of the powerful Rosenthal family accused of involvement in money laundering ([NotiCen, Dec. 3, 2015](#)). More recently, “Fifagate” has sent shock waves through the country.

The scandal within the top—and, until recently, seemingly untouchable—echelons of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) did not take long to unveil Honduran participation in a high-level bribery network involving mostly Latin American soccer officials, including a former president of Honduras.

May 27, 2015, saw the arrests, in Switzerland, of 18 FIFA officials, mostly Caribbean and Central and South American soccer chiefs ([NotiCen, July 9, 2015](#)). New detentions took place on Dec. 3, again in Switzerland, and this time a Honduran was detained. The charges include bribery, fraud, money laundering, and racketeering.

The news broke in Honduras on that same day: Alfredo “El Turco” (“the Turk”) Hawit, the president of the Federación Nacional Autónoma de Fútbol de Honduras (FENAFUTH) and of the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF), was in custody and about to be extradited to the United States.

Local media reported that Hawit, as well as Rafael Leonardo Callejas-----a former Honduran president (1990-1994) and Hawit’s immediate predecessor as head of FENAFUTH (2002-2015)—were on a list of 16 Latin American suspects in a US Justice Department investigation into a corruption mega-scandal in world soccer’s top institution. US authorities requested their extradition, according to the reports.

After having initially said he was not accepting extradition, Hawit was flown directly from Switzerland to the US on Jan. 13. Callejas had taken the lead a month before when he boarded a private airplane to the United States and turned himself in, voluntarily. In separate court appearances, they pleaded not guilty.

According to local media reports, the men are accused of having received some US\$600,000 in bribes for marketing and broadcast rights of qualifying games for the 2018, 2022, and 2026 World Cup championships.

### ***Many casualties***

Callejas and Hawit are two of many casualties in an ongoing investigation of what, according to The New York Times, US officials have described as “two decades of corruption in which officials rigged World Cup bids and steered marketing and broadcast contracts in exchange for bribes—paid out through convoluted financial deals and briefcases full of cash.”

The Times reported on Dec. 3: "F.B.I. and United States tax agents, along with federal prosecutors in New York, have spent years building the case against FIFA. They promised this spring to rid the organization of corruption."

The daily added that the federation's longtime head, Joseph "Sepp" Blatter—who is expected to be replaced during an election scheduled for next month—had argued that "the charges were retribution for United States' not being chosen to host the 2022 World Cup."

The Times went on to explain: "More broadly, the case raised questions about how the American government interprets its own authority to prosecute people for crimes committed overseas. To do so, the law requires some link between the crime and the United States. In the FIFA case, the government said American banks were used in the scheme. That has been enough to establish jurisdiction in other cases, a precedent that has been particularly useful in prosecuting international terrorism suspects..."

"Whether or not an American courthouse was the ideal venue for the case, Justice Department officials have said, it became clear that FIFA was operating corruptly for years and no other country was doing anything about it," according to The Times, which quoted US Attorney General Loretta Lynch as having recently said that FIFA officials "clearly thought the US was a safe financial haven for them."

### *'A corrupt network'*

Meanwhile, the Honduran morning daily El Heraldo commented, "That two Hondurans, one of them a former president, are part of a corruption network that shames soccer's top organization worldwide, highlights that corruption is a global phenomenon, and also reminds us of the impunity that corrupt persons and other criminals have enjoyed in Honduras."

In a December editorial titled "FIFA and corruption in Honduras," El Heraldo noted that on the day the second set of arrests occurred, Lynch had announced "another list of sports authorities from different countries worldwide against whom arrest warrants had been issued, and among them appeared Hawit, in FENAFUTH, and former President (...) Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero..."

And it added: "As if that were not enough... a few hours later the United States officially requested the extradition of the former president, whose entry visa it had withdrawn, precisely, for 'official public corruption.'"

According to a La Prensa article quoting the US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, Hawit successfully negotiated a US\$250,000 bribe with top executives of the Argentinian sports promotion company Full Play to influence the granting of media marketing rights for CONCACAF competitions, the Gold Cup among them.

### *A meeting in Buenos Aires*

Hawit, someone identified only as "co-conspirator 6," and other CONCACAF officials at the time—including Ariel Alvarado of Panama and Rafael Salguero of Guatemala—were invited by Hugo Jinkis and his son, Mariano, the owners of Full Play, to a meeting in Buenos Aires in 2011, expenses covered by the owners of the company, La Prensa reported.

From there, the group was flown on a private plane to a property owned by the Jinkises in the exclusive eastern Uruguayan coastal resort of Punta del Este, where the men agreed to use their influence to have CONCACAF sell media marketing rights for regional CONCACAF tournaments to the Full Play company, the Honduran daily wrote.

"According to the Attorney's Office in New York, before their departure, 'co-conspirator 6' 'helped to make trip arrangements for Hawit and his wife,'" La Prensa reported.

In Callejas' case, the corruption allegations came after he successfully supported a drive to eliminate the constitutional ban on presidential re-election in an effort to return as a four-year tenant to the Casa Presidencial.

His supporters within the ruling Partido Nacional (PN), of which he is a top leader, argue the incident should not undermine Callejas' bid for the country's top job in next year's election.

In a five-point communiqué issued on Dec. 7, the Movimiento Nacional Rafael Callejas (Monarca)—an acronym that forms the Spanish word for "monarch"—called on cachurecos, as PN members are known, to maintain their "cohesion and reasoned discipline," adding, "In light of the situation that citizen Rafael Leonardo Callejas is going through, which demands attention for his defense, it is necessary not to halt our movement's organizational and political-electoral aspects... It is imperative to continue the actions that will allow our participation in next year's Partido Nacional primary elections as a fundamental condition to ensure this great party's third consecutive triumph, which equally demands that this process be participatory and transparent."

The communiqué was alluding to the electoral victories of Presidents Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014) and Juan Orlando Hernández (2014-2018), both cachurecos.

In his immediate reaction to reports of Hawit's arrest in Switzerland and of his own inclusion in the list of suspects, Callejas denied, in statements to local media, involvement in the soccer corruption network.

"Why me, if I was never a member of CONCACAF or FIFA? ... There are some who have much evil in their soul, but there's no reason to be associated with those issues," he said, adding that the reports had taken him "by surprise."

"What I need is that there be an understanding of due process, and that the people who love me, support me," he said.

In his Dec. 15 court appearance in New York, Callejas pleaded not guilty, and now awaits a hearing scheduled for March 16, when charges are to be formally filed, the Honduran daily La Tribuna reported last month.

Callejas' defense is being conducted by the Washington-based law firm Retureta & Wassem, which is also representing Fabio Lobo, the son of former President Lobo. The younger Lobo was arrested on May 20 in Haiti in a joint US-Haitian operation, under charges of drug trafficking. Lobo was flown to New York and indicted on charges of conspiring to smuggle cocaine into the US.

Callejas and Hawit are both out on bail, La Prensa reported on Jan. 21. Hawit, who posted bail set at US\$290,000, must remain in his daughter's house in Miami and wear a monitoring electronic bracelet. He is able to leave the house only under previously cleared circumstances, such as court appearances or medical appointments.

Callejas is in New York, where he must wear a monitoring electronic bracelet with a GPS device, and remain within a 32.18-kilometer (20-mile) radius of a friend's apartment that has been established as his lodging. In addition, Callejas must report his daily movements and sign a register once a week, La Prensa added.

According to La Tribuna, bail in his case was set at \$US4 million, of which he initially paid US \$810,000.

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