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## **Former Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez Arrested Again**

by LADB Staff

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Venezuela's former president Carlos Andres Perez (1974- 1979 and 1989-1993) has been arrested on charges of illegal enrichment. The 74-year-old Perez completed a 22-month sentence for embezzlement in September 1996 (see NotiSur, 10/11/96). Following widespread social and economic upheaval, Perez was forced from office in 1993 (see NotiSur, 01/19/93 and 09/10/93). He was later tried and convicted of misappropriation of funds involving US\$17 million from a presidential discretionary account.

Since completing his sentence, Perez has dedicated himself to recapturing a place in national politics. His criminal conviction prevented him from becoming a senator for life, a privilege awarded former presidents (see NotiSur, 06/07/96). He was also expelled from his party, Accion Democratica. Perez formed a new political movement and vowed to enter Congress via the ballot box. He is running for senator in the December elections from his home state of Tachira, near the Colombian border. With these new charges, however, Perez's candidacy will depend on the decision taken by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) in the next few weeks.

If the CSJ upholds Perez's arrest, he will be barred from participating in the December elections. The arrest warrant for Perez was issued April 14, 19 months after he completed his earlier sentence. Illicit enrichment carries a penalty of between three and ten years in prison. Perez turned himself over to judicial authorities and was placed under house arrest, a provision of the Venezuelan judicial system for prisoners over 70 years of age.

At the same time, the court issued a warrant for the arrest of Perez's longtime mistress, Cecilia Matos, on conspiracy charges. Matos, who has two children with Perez, lives in New York. Perez is in the process of divorcing his first wife, Blanca Rodriguez. Venezuelan authorities said they will request Matos' extradition. "The court has sufficient evidence to initiate extradition proceedings against Cecilia Matos," said Attorney General Ivan Dario Badell. Lawyers for Matos said on April 23 that their client has left New York to avoid extradition. Perez cautioned Matos not to return to Venezuela to face charges because, he said, she could not be guaranteed a fair trial.

### ***Perez admits bank accounts in New York***

In February, Perez admitted that he opened a bank account in New York with Matos in 1985, but said the money was used for campaign contributions and did not involve criminal activity. Perez's admission came after the US Department of Justice sent Venezuelan authorities information on the accounts, which Venezuela had been requesting for two years.

According to the Justice Department report, the joint account was opened on April 16, 1985, at the Republic National Bank of New York, with a deposit of more than US\$551,000. The report

also detailed activities in several other accounts held by Matos or administered by her for their daughters. The amount of money Perez and Matos kept in the accounts far exceeded their earnings as public officials, said Judge Edith Cabello de Requena at a news conference. She did not disclose the amount of money or its origin. Badell said the diversion of funds began in February 1989, after Perez began his second term. Perez said President Caldera is out to get him Perez strongly denied the accusations, calling them a "political move in an election year." He said they are part of a campaign by President Rafael Caldera and the general secretary of Accion Democratica (AD), Luis Alfaro Ucerro, to keep Perez from being elected to the Senate in December.

Perez said his lawyers will appeal the arrest order, which, he said, shows the contradiction of Venezuelan justice. "Perez, who saved Venezuelan democracy from the coup attempt by Hugo Chavez, is again in jail," said the former president, "while Chavez is shining like a star aimed at the presidency of the Republic." Perez was referring to former Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez, who led an unsuccessful coup attempt in February 1992 during Perez's presidency. Chavez was later sentenced to prison, but was pardoned by Caldera when he assumed office (see NotiSur, 02/25/94). Chavez is running for president, and is slightly ahead in most polls against Irene Saez, a former Miss Universe and mayor of a Caracas suburb (see NotiSur, 02/20/98).

Perez's lawyers said they will also bring the case before the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission. Rafael Arteaga, one of Perez's lawyers, said the arrest was "premature" because it did not allow Perez to explain where the money in the New York accounts came from. "The crime is not to have wealth, it is in not being able to explain how you acquired it," said Arteaga. "For that reason, the court should have given the former president the opportunity to explain the origin of his assets and then, if reasons existed, ordered his arrest."

Meanwhile, Perez's former son-in-law, Antonio Maria Hernandez Aranguren, was found dead in his car, along with a woman companion, Soraya Beatriz Vara. Police said a preliminary investigation indicated that Hernandez Aranguren shot Vara and then committed suicide. Hernandez had been divorced from Marta Perez Rodriguez, daughter of the former president, for about a year, but his business cards still identified him as the son-in-law of Carlos Andres Perez. It is unclear whether any connection exists between Hernandez Arangueren's death and the charges against Perez. [Sources: Associated Press, 04/14/98, 04/15/98; Clarin (Argentina), 04/15/98; Notimex, 04/14/98, 04/16/98; The Miami Herald, 04/15/98, 04/16/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/05/98, 04/15/98, 04/16/98, 04/23/98]

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