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Paraguayan Government Formally Requests Oviedo's Extradition

by Guest

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[The author, who lives part time in Paraguay, is the editor of Borderlines, a publication of the Interhemispheric Resource Center in New Mexico.]

On Aug. 4, the Paraguayan government officially submitted an extradition request for exiled former army general Lino Oviedo to the government of Argentina, where Oviedo currently enjoys political asylum. The disgraced political boss has resided in a large ranchhouse outside Buenos Aires since late March, when the previous Paraguayan government, headed by supporter Raul Cubas Grau, came crumbling down after the massacre of eight anti-Oviedo protestors (see NotiSur, 1999-07-02).

Paraguay's Vice Minister of Foreign Relations, Carlos Mateo Balmecelli, personally handed over the extradition request in a two-hour meeting with Argentine officials. "All the evidence demonstrates that the moral author of the killing of [Vice President Luis Maria] Argana was Oviedo," said President Luis Gonzalez Macchi. "We know that Argentina has the sovereign right, as an independent state, to grant political asylum," Macchi said in an Aug. 5 television address, "but we also know Gen. Oviedo and his eel-like slipperiness and his faculty for lying." No one knows how long it will take Argentina to respond to the request.

With presidential elections in October, it is a distinct possibility that the task of evaluating Paraguay's petition will be left to the new government, which will assume power in December 1999.

Oviedo's return to power unlikely

Just four days after the extradition request was handed over, a cache of arms was discovered in the home of an Oviedo supporter in Asuncion, lending credence to rumors that the disgraced strongman is coordinating a destabilization campaign from abroad.

Outrage at the discovery was allayed somewhat by news reports that Oviedo had undergone hair-transplant surgery at an expensive Buenos Aires clinic, giving Paraguay's satirists a field day.

But members of the Comision Bicameral de Investigacion, the body heading the investigations into the events of last March, caution that Oviedo's alleged destabilization campaign should be taken seriously. "It's worrisome, the information that's coming not just from one source but from several," warned commission president Sen. Luis Alberto Mauro prior to the discovery of the weapons.

Mauro expressed concern about the continued existence of "pockets of Oviedismo" in the armed forces and the national police. "What's worrisome is that money is entering the country to stir up peasants and unions to conduct anti-government protests, prompting police repression so there are deaths, producing an anti-government public reaction," he said. But the odds are long that

Oviedo might somehow affect a triumphant return to Paraguay. He was officially expelled from the Asociacion Nacional Republicana (ANR, Partido Colorado) in mid-July. Soon after, a federal judge issued a warrant for his arrest for conspiracy and terrorism and levied a "preventative embargo" of US\$30 million against the ex-general, which prevents the sale or transfer of his funds or property. A day later, prosecutors in the Argana investigation said they had gathered all the evidence necessary for an extradition request naming Oviedo as the moral author of the assassination.

Additionally, popular sentiment remains anti-Oviedo, despite worries expressed by some commentators that economic woes and growing dissatisfaction with the current government might work in the ex-general's favor. General also has problems in Argentina. In Argentina, Oviedo faces problems as well, despite his reported friendship with Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem.

Even if the extradition request is denied, Argentina's October presidential elections will likely bring a new government to power that will not look favorably on the Oviedo's presence in the country. "My position is well known," says Fernando de la Rúa, presidential candidate for the opposition Alianza. "I think [Oviedo] needs to find another place of residence. I want to see Paraguayan democracy consolidated, and I want Argentina to give all possible support for peace and security in that democracy."

Eduardo Duhalde, presidential candidate of the incumbent Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ), has also stated his opposition to Oviedo's continued presence in Argentina. Oviedo is reported to be looking into exile options elsewhere. A request made to the German government in late March was denied.

Paraguayan press reports say that Oviedo is engaged in discussions with Israel regarding possibly winning political exile there. He is rumored to have close ties with the Mossad, that country's security agency.

Oviedo charged with violating conditions of asylum

In late July, both the Argentine and Paraguayan press published stories detailing alleged political activity by Oviedo. An article in the Asuncion-based daily Noticias was accompanied by a copy of a fax sent by Pablo Bolchon, self-identified as "the coordinator for the triumphant return of Gen. Lino Oviedo," which described meetings with Oviedista politicians in the interior of Paraguay. "

At every meeting, the leaders of UNACE and other movements understood very well the importance of this political work to prevent the consolidation of the badly-named coalition government," read the fax. These stories prompted the Macchi government on July 27 to officially request that Argentina confine Oviedo in a more remote area and strictly monitor his activities. "These allegations, which coincide with information received at our embassy in Buenos Aires, indicate that Mr. Oviedo frequently receives political leaders and activists, who have admitted that they have had conversations with him regarding the internal politics of Paraguay and activities that they should undertake in the country," said a spokesperson for the Paraguayan Foreign Ministry.

A key condition of Oviedo's asylum is that he cannot engage in any political activities. On Aug. 2, Argentina's Secretaria de Seguridad Interior Miguel Angel Toma personally visited Oviedo to

remind him of the terms of his exile. "If and when [the charges of political activity] are verified, sanctions are gradual, beginning with confinement and including the possibility of his expulsion from the country," Toma said afterward. "It was logical that we take the precaution, even if the charges were just made by journalists, of informing him of the situation and reminding him what the limits of the right to asylum are."

But media accounts report that Oviedo continues to violate the conditions of his asylum. On Aug. 9, Paraguayan authorities learned that an army major under military arrest for having participated in the deadly attacks on pro-democracy demonstrators in March had been using the cell phones of visiting relatives to communicate regularly with his exiled leader. A Noticias report quoted a source in the armed forces as saying that "various officers forced into retirement by the new government who were loyal to Lino are regrouping and are receiving direct orders from him."

A few days later, on Aug. 12, the Buenos Aires daily Pagina 12 reported that Oviedo meets with "70 to 100" people each week "to discuss politics, culture, poetry, and history." The story quoted Oviedo follower Conrado Martinez, who said, "They're all political leaders, not just Colorados, but from all parties, since Oviedo is a national patrimony." In the wake of these allegations, the Partido Colorado announced the creation of a special office in Buenos Aires. Although party president Bader Rachid Lichi has denied that the move has anything to do with the exiled military strongman, his political assistant has publicly admitted that the goal is to "put the brakes on" Oviedo.

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