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On Jan. 18, Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso called for the resignation of Defense Minister Elcio Alvares. Alvares said he was stepping down at Cardoso's request, which followed a persistent scandal linking a close Alvares aide to drug trafficking as well as friction between the minister and the armed forces, especially the Air Force. Geraldo Quintao, the country's attorney general, was named to replace Alvares. "I perfectly understand the president's action," said Alvares. "Our conversation was as cordial as possible, a conversation between friends."

Alvares' firing comes just seven months after Cardoso created the Defense Ministry and for the first time named a civilian to lead Brazil's armed forces. The smooth transition to a civilian-run military was seen by some analysts as an important test of Cardoso's political credibility.

But they said Cardoso erred by choosing a person for the sensitive post who was politically inept. Naming Alvares, a former senator with the Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL), as the first minister of defense riled the military brass, who saw it as evidence that the ministry would serve political interests. Alvares' assumption of the post was delayed because of the military's resistance.

Congressional inquiry casts shadow on minister

Alvares' departure had been expected for some time. Besides insisting on keeping a top aide with a questionable past, Alvares failed to resolve a dispute with air force commander Brigadier Walter Brauer and other air force officers regarding the sale of a 20% stake in Brazil's airplane maker Empresa Brasileira de Aeronautica (EMBRAER) to a French aviation group.

Moreover, in October, the magazine IstoE reported that Alvares had links to death squads and headed a crime organization controlling drug trafficking and gambling in the southeastern state of Espirito Santo. Alvares denied the charges (see NotiSur, 1999-10-08, 1999-11-05). In December, Cardoso ordered Alvares to fire Brauer for insubordination after the general made public comments about the congressional investigation's tying Alvares' office to drug trafficking. Brauer said public office requires a transparent, unblemished lifestyle, referring both to Alvares and his top aide, Solange Antunes Rezende.

In December, the congressional committee (Comissao Parlamentar de Inquerito, CPI) named Antunes as a suspect and authorized opening her bank, tax, and telephone accounts. Evidence uncovered in the CPI investigation has linked several politicians to organized crime in Espirito Santo, including the president of the state legislature, Jose Carlos Gratza. Organized crime and death squads are major problems in the state, and the capital, Vitoria, had the highest murder rate in Brazil over 60 per 100,000 inhabitants last year.

At the same time that Cardoso forced Alvares to fire Brauer, he also insisted that Antunes be dismissed, ending her 20-year working relationship with the minister that dated back to when he
was a senator. Antunes is also Alvarez's partner in a law firm in Vitoria. Besides his inability to shake the suspicions surrounding Antunes, Alvares further damaged his position when, on Jan. 16, the magazine Epoca published his criticisms of fellow Cabinet members Minister of Health Jose Serra and Minister of Justice Jose Carlos Dias.

**Cardoso has more problems with the military**

The generals have been unhappy with their diminishing role in Brazilian economic and political life. With the creation of the Defense Ministry, the heads of the three military branches lost their Cabinet-level status and with it much of their influence. They especially lost influence in determining their share of the national budget, which was cut under an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The Air Force has had the most complaints about the Cardoso administration, including that its functions have been reduced with the transfer of several services to the private sector or to civilian chiefs. The Department of Civil Aviation, for example, which controls air transport in Brazil and is under the jurisdiction of the air force, is being replaced by a regulatory agency in which the air force will not have decision-making power.

Other complaints include a lack of funds for upgrading airplanes and equipment and government efforts to privatize the airports. Air force chiefs are also angry at the privatization of EMBRAER, a successful aviation company created by the military in the 1970s. Air Force officials contend the sale could restrict its military options when selecting suitable replacement aircraft. Brauer, a staunch opponent of privatization, publicly criticized the sale of 20% of EMBRAER shares to the French companies.

A confidential report by Brauer, leaked to the daily Folha de Sao Paulo, accused the Brazilian consortium that purchased EMBRAER in 1994 of negotiating with the French companies for the acquisition of a controlling stake in the company during the next few years. The new defense minister, Geraldo Quintao, said that, beyond seeking increased funding for the armed forces, he would help move the military into a new mission fighting the growing drug trade and illegal clear-cutting of the world's largest rain forest. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 12/21/99; The New York Times, 01/01/00; Reuters, 12/19/99, 12/20/99, 01/18/00; Associated Press, 01/02/00, 01/18/00; CNN, 01/18/00; Clarin (Argentina), 01/15/00, 01/19/00; The Financial Times (London), 01/19/00; Spanish news service EFE, 12/18/99, 01/04/00, 01/11/00, 01/18/00, 01/24/00]

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