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President Duarte Faces Campesino Protests Among an Assassination Plot

by LADB Staff

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Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte Frutos is feeling pressure from indigenous and campesino organizations after national police fired upon a truckload of people in an agricultural region of the country. This comes as Duarte supposedly avoided assassination at the hands of mafia killers armed with anti-aircraft missiles.

Resignations demanded after police kill workers

Various organizations said they would hold the government of President Duarte responsible for the deaths of two workers shot by police at a Jan. 21 protest in the department of Caaguazu. The shooting occurred in Ypekua in the Caaguazuan district of Repatriacion, about 170 km from the capital Asuncion, where a truckload of some 30 campesinos were on their way to a protest against the chemical fumigation of genetically modified soybean fields. Police fired on the vehicle when it did not stop at a police checkpoint, killing two and wounding eight, two of them gravely.

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Campesinos and agricultural workers demanded the dismissal of Interior Minister Orlando Fiorotto and police commandant Juan Umberto Nunez before they would come to the negotiating table with the government. The Frente Nacional Campesina (FNC) and the Mesa Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (MCNOC) mobilized protests in various sites around Paraguay after the shooting.

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A week after the protests began, Duarte traveled to interior of the country to Ypekua to promise victims' relatives that the "killers" of their children would be prosecuted and go to prison. "Death cannot be undone, but the moment will come in our land when the law will fall on the police who abuse their charges," said Duarte, speaking in Guarani to the family members. "Despite our [the government's] efforts," he acknowledged that there are still "many police who continue serving the powerful and firing their weapons against the people."

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Interior Minister Fiorotto called the police reaction "negligent" and "disproportionate," and the public prosecutor's office charged and jailed four lower-ranking police. Fiorotto and Nunez later announced the arrest and indictment of two police chiefs who were at the head of the group of uniformed officers that fired on the truck. Fiorotto said at a press conference that discontented police groups were trying to undermine the credibility of the current administration.

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Ibanez emphasized that the government does not share the workers' commitment to impede fumigation of large-scale soy crops with fumigants that are considered toxic and harmful to people. "It's impossible to put the brakes on the development of mechanized agriculture in the country," Ibanez said. "We will not initiate conversations on the basis of impeding fumigations. It is a firm posture of the president and the economic team."

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Espinola countered, saying that the executive should give priority to a model of national development where not only agriculture but also industrialization are considered, along with the generation of jobs and the halting of the latifundio system. "Everyone assures us that soy generates millions of dollars of currency," argued Espinola, "but the effects go unseen because misery broadens, and poverty in this country has already advanced to extreme poverty." Campesino leaders have criticized the set of issues that the Duarte government is willing to discuss with them and have threatened not to attend dialogues.

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A spokesperson said the government's proposed agenda does not include themes like economic reactivation through productive-development plans for the agricultural sector, nor does it address solutions for the thousands of workers who are "sin tierras." Responding to the shooting of Jan. 21, the MCNOC and the Coordinadora Agrícola de Paraguay (CAP) announced they would not dialogue until Fiorotto and Nunez presented their resignations.

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Brazilian intelligence reported that plotters had obtained anti-aircraft missiles to attack the presidential plane. Duarte returned to the capital using ground transportation and traveling under heavy security the next day. He refused to confirm or deny the reports of a plot, first carried by leading newspapers ABC Color and Ultima Hora. He did, however, tell reporters that US Ambassador John Keane in Asuncion had told him weeks ago that the US had increasing concerns for his safety. The report of the plot meant the threat of assassination had returned to Paraguayan politics.

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In 1999 Vice President Luis Maria Argana was murdered, leading to the resignation and exile of President Raul Cubas Grau (1998-1999) and triggering a political crisis that left four dead and more than a hundred wounded (see NotiSur, 1999-03-26). Angel Roberto Seifart, vice president under Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1994-1998), was also the target of a failed assassination attempt in 1996. Some opposition party members denied that the plot against Duarte's life was real, saying it was a scheme to distract public attention from news like the campesino shootings and recent revelations that war materials had been stolen, possibly by members of the armed forces.

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The reported plot "is a possible farce," said former Paraguayan vice president Julio Cesar Franco, current head of the leading opposition group, the social democrat Partido Liberal Radical Autentico (PLRA). "Until there is a detailed report on the situation" from the government, we cannot know for sure what happened." But political scientist Sergio Britos said the existence of a plan to assassinate the president is plausible because, since Duarte took office in August, "there are people who are losing power and money."

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In the latest Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by TI, which classifies 133 nations, the country comes in at 129th place, just above Haiti, Nigeria, and Bangladesh, and tied with Myanmar (see NotiSur, 2003-10-17). One of the poorest countries in South America, Paraguay teeters on the brink of an economic precipice, though it may be edging away from disaster. It showed a negative GDP growth rate in 2002, and it is believed that the trade of illicit contraband and counterfeiting exceeds legitimate economic activity.

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