Oviedo Says He Will Return to Paraguay

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Oviedo Says He Will Return to Paraguay

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Paraguay
Published: 2004-06-25

Paraguayan Gen. Lino Oviedo, a former military strongman and coup leader, says he will return to his home country on June 29 from Brazil, where he has lived as a fugitive for the past four years.

On his return he faces a ten-year jail sentence for his 1996 attempted coup against then President Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993-1998) and a trial for his responsibility for the March 1999 assassination of Vice President Luis Maria Argana. Oviedo and his supporters, however, don't seem to think of his announced return as judicial self-imperilment but rather as an opportunity for the general to relaunch his political career in Paraguay.

General faces massacre charges, 10-year sentence

Oviedo will have to turn himself in to the Paraguayan justice system if he does re-enter the country, where he has an unserved 10-year prison term for his attempt to overthrow Wasmosy, a powerful businessman who ran the country for five years (see NotiSur, 1996-05-03). He also faces trial for his alleged supervision of the assassination of Vice President Argana and the killing of seven youths protesting outside the Plaza del Congreso the day after the Argana assassination (see NotiSur, 1999-03-26).

Defense Minister Roberto Gonzalez told reporters that Oviedo was exhorting his followers to protest to block his imprisonment. Gonzalez said there is "a recording we have obtained where Oviedo asks his people to impede his arrest with demonstrations, but he has no alternative but to submit himself to justice." Gonzalez said the site of Oviedo’s detention will be the military prison of Vinas Cue, but he warned that, at the first effort of his sympathizers to congregate at the site, Oviedo would be taken to a military unit 800 km northeast of the capital of Asuncion.

The president of the Tribunal Militar, Porfirio Ramirez, said he thought Oviedo should serve his term in a military facility because at the time of his prosecution he was under military jurisdiction. The Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) agrees with that determination, Ramirez said.

Oviedo escaped to Argentina in 1999, but the next year took clandestine refuge in Brazil, where he was detained on June 11, 2000, in Foz de Yguazu. After 18 months of detention, he was freed in Dec. 2001. Oviedo claims that the death of Argana "was never clarified," and he points to new testimony in the case that says Argana was supposedly already dead when assailants opened fire on his car, having died of a heart attack in the apartment of his mistress.

Oviedo calls for reopening the investigation into the March 1999 murder and says the murders of the protestors was carried out by his political enemies. Argana's family and the attorney general's office accuse Oviedo of paying witnesses like the former vice president's chauffeur and bodyguard...
to come forward and say the assassination was staged by people close to Argana to save the family from public shame while getting rid of a political rival, Oviedo.

Five people were sentenced as the material authors of the assassination, while Oviedo and then Sen. Victor Galeano were charged with orchestrating the crime. Galeano, also a fugitive from justice, is living in Uruguay.

"According to Paraguay's legislation, a case cannot go to the plenary phase [of trial] as long as the accused is on the run, so we are praying Oviedo will keep his promise and come back," said Sen. Nelson Argana, one of the late vice president's sons. The senator refuted statements by one of the men convicted of the murder, Luis Alberto Rojas, who accused him of paying one of the other convicts to plead guilty.

Additionally, Raul Barrios, the former chauffeur who miraculously survived the attack, accused Attorney General Oscar Latorre, a former lawyer for the Argana family, of pressuring him in 1999 to lie about Argana’s death and to positively identify four suspects arrested by the police as the perpetrators of the attack. The former chauffeur "is a fraud," Latorre said in an interview. "He is lying when he says I pressured him, because when he testified for the first time, I wasn't the Argana family's lawyer yet."

**Oviedo seeks political rebirth**

Oviedo announced the June 29 return date at the convention of the Union Nacional de Ciudadanos Eticos (UNACE), where the main theme of the political entity that he founded was the "return operation" of the strongman who belonged to the Paraguayan military until his attempted 1996 coup.

During the UNACE convention, 300 delegates agreed that the ex-general should return on a commercial flight, which will leave Foz de Yguazu and arrive in Asuncion. Oviedo supporters say he is a popular figure, and they anticipate that he will be a strong opposition force to the ruling Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR).

UNACE Sen. Enrique Gonzalez, one of Oviedo's strongest allies, said that "in the political history of Paraguay, the exile of popular leaders has been repeated many times. Hopefully, this case will be the last." UNACE broke off from the Partido Colorado, which has held power since 1947, in 2002.

President Nicanor Duarte's government has said categorically that Oviedo should serve his prison term and that he is guaranteed to face trial. In an interview with Inter Press Service, Oviedo said his objective in returning was "to collaborate in the patriotic task of bringing about the socioeconomic, juridical, and infrastructural vindication of my country, to achieve unity and harmony among all Paraguayans, and to consolidate democracy, for which I risked my life on the historic night of Feb. 2, 1989, which put an end to the dictatorship [of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner, which began in 1954] in Paraguay" (see Chronicle, 1989-02-07 and 1989-02-14).
Oviedo told the Brazilian newspaper Valor that his first objective was to recover the political right to be a candidate in the 2008 presidential elections. "Things have their proper times," he said. "The first is to demonstrate my innocence. Once I recover my political rights, I will work in our party and, if the party has confidence in me, it will make me its candidate." This is not the first time Oviedo has said he would return to Paraguay. He made similar claims in 2001 while imprisoned in Brazil and facing extradition from that country's highest court (see NotiSur, 2001-12-07).

Vice President Luis Castiglioni called the return of Oviedo "only an anecdote" that represented no danger to the country.

-- End --