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Chilean Minister Attacks President Kirchner

by LADB Staff
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An article that Chile's new foreign minister wrote five months ago attacking Argentine President Nestor Kirchner's ruling party has frozen diplomatic relations between Chile and Argentina.

Kirchner has cancelled a trip to Chile scheduled for November and his foreign minister has expressed offense to his counterpart in Santiago. The incident is the result of fallout from Argentina's decision to stop natural-gas deliveries to Chile last spring (see NotiSur, 2004-04-30), with the offending article having been published in the hostile context that followed the delivery cancellation. Opposition forces in Chile have used the affair as grist for criticisms that recent changes in President Ricardo Lagos' Cabinet were carried out haphazardly.

Minister’s article called Peronists "fascistic," "authoritarian"

Newly appointed Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker had not been in office a day before Argentine daily Clarin reprinted an article Walker had written five months prior for the Chilean newspaper El Mercurio. In the article, Walker, who was then a political scientist and lawyer, said Kirchner's Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ), founded by Juan Peron in 1945, showed "fascistic" and "authoritarian" tendencies and had always functioned according to a "perverse logic."

Walker, in an article titled Our Argentine Neighbors, wrote that PJ members, also known as Peronistas, would not respect treaties or contracts "if they would put their popularity at risk." Walker paraphrased Chilean writer Alejandro Magnet, calling Peronism a movement with "authoritarian, corporative, and fascistic traits."

"In the end, one of the legacies of the 'Peronist doctrine' would appear to be their ignorance and disregard not only for the most elemental norms of economics, but also for law," wrote Walker in the May 6 El Mercurio article. "The true wall that arises between Chile and Argentina is not the Andes mountain range, but the legacy of Peronism and its perverse logic."

Walker, who was a deputy from 1994-2000 for the Partido Democraa Cristiana (PDC), telephoned Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa to express his apologies, just one day into his role as foreign minister. His predecessor, Soledad Alvear, also of the PDC, found herself back on duty, making calls to Bielsa in an effort to smooth relations. "If anyone felt offended, I offer my sincere apologies," said Walker to the Argentine press and Bielsa. Clarin reported that Bielsa said that, yes, both he and Kirchner had felt offended by the article.

Walker said that he wrote the article in the context of the terminated gas deliveries from Argentina, which put a crunch on Chile's energy network, and added that he wrote it speaking as a political scientist, not as a statesman. "I am not here as an essayist or political scientist, but as a foreign
minister for the government of President Lagos," said Walker. He expressed a personal affection for the Argentine people and "complete respect for its institutions and government."

Although Walker and his fellow Cabinet members said they thought the impasse would be overcome, Argentine senators rejected the article. Bielsa said that "it will not be possible to work" with Walker and that Kirchner "will not extend his hand" to the minister. Bielsa did say, however, that the government would "make the efforts necessary to re-establish channels [of communication] rapidly." The incident led to the suspension of a Nov. 30 trip to Santiago that Kirchner had planned and set back economic and trade talks between the two countries.

President Lagos, nevertheless, minimized the event, saying, "The relations between Chile and Argentina are more than gas, the relations between Chile and Argentina are more than an article, and I would like to say, therefore, that the relations are being maintained at exactly the level they should be."

**Chilean opposition attacks "improvised Cabinet changes"**

Walker joined the Lagos Cabinet to replace Soledad Alvear, one of several Cabinet members to resign in preparation for next year's presidential election. The resignations, which totaled sixteen, made for the fifth Cabinet rearrangement under Lagos' watch. Alvear, former defense minister Michele Bachelet of the Partido Socialista, and Joaquin Lavin, who represents the Alianza por Chile, are currently the front-runners for next year's presidential race, with Bachelet leading the pack and Lavin trailing a few points behind her.

Alvear and Bachelet had become targets for the right's attacks on the Lagos administration, and they resigned to "free themselves" for campaign preparations. Lavin called the Walker incident a reflection of the "government's improvisation" and said that "the Cabinet change was made too rapidly." "To me, it doesn't seem good that a new foreign minister should have to commence by asking forgiveness from Argentina, I don't think it's appropriate to be apologizing," said Lavin. "In 15 days or less two situations have happened: the closing of the consulate in La Paz and now this new occurrence with Argentina."

Chile's consul to Bolivia was recalled in September after he told the Bolivian press he had a personal desire to see the country recover some coastland. Bolivia's consul to Chile said the abrupt removal reflected "inflexibility and intolerance" on the part of Santiago authorities. But Lavin blamed the incident on Lagos and his Concertacion de Partidos por la Democracia governing alliance. The incident, he said, "is a problem that is a consequence of this improvisation and I think the president of the Republic, who is the one who manages Chile's foreign policy, has to search for solutions." Lavin is mayor of Santiago and is running in second place in the race to be president for the 2006-2012 term.

An El Mercurio poll placed Lavin behind Bachelet, giving Bachelet 45.7% support and Lavin 43.7% support. Alvear had 39.6% backing from the Chilean electorate in that poll, which surveyed 400 residents of greater Santiago and had a margin of error of 5 points