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Ex-president Grau's Daughter Found Dead

by LADB Staff
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The discovery of the body of 31-year-old Cecilia Cubas Gusinsky, daughter of ex-President Raul Cubas Grau (1998-1999), led to national mourning in Paraguay. Cubas had been missing since she was kidnapped in a commando-style raid in September 2004, and family members were negotiating ransom demands with her captors. When police found her dead in a tunnel behind an abandoned house in the Nemby neighborhood on the edge of Asuncion, the ensuing national outcry led President Nicanor Duarte to conduct a large-scale purge and order several arrests in the national police, remove his interior minister, and prepare a new security plan to send to the legislature.

The nation's top prosecutor, Attorney General Oscar Latorre, accused the Colombian rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) of being involved in the kidnapping, and he was holding several members of the left-wing Partido Patria Libre (PPL) in custody on charges related to the crime.

Forensic investigators said Cubas had been dead from 30 to 60 days before she was found on Feb. 16. Preliminary autopsy reports said she died either from an accidental or purposeful drug injection or asphyxiation tape covered her nose and mouth when her body was discovered.

Cubas Grau, who served as president for six months in 1998-1999 before resigning under pressure following the shootings of several protestors (see NotiSur, 1999-04-09), has said that he paid at least US$350,000 in ransom soon after her Sept. 21 abduction. Some reports said he had paid US$800,000.

Top prosecutor alleges FARC link

Attorney General Latorre said investigators had discovered email exchanges between prominent FARC rebel Rodrigo Granda and Paraguayan leftist Osmar Martinez in which they allegedly discussed the kidnapping. Granda was kidnapped by bounty hunters in Caracas, Venezuela, in December 2004 and transported across the Colombian border, sparking the worst diplomatic crisis in decades between Venezuela and Colombia (see NotiSur, 2005-01-28, 2005-02-18).

Prosecutors accused PPL politician Osmar Martinez of being the intellectual author of the kidnapping and murder. On Feb. 28 they charged him, along with other members of the party, with homicide and criminal association. Latorre said that cell-phone records and email communications linked several members of a dissident wing of the PPL with the kidnapping. Microsoft, owner of Hotmail, gave him access to email accounts since it was part of a criminal investigation. Shortly before the discovery of Cubas' body, Latorre had arrested seven PPL members, and he ordered a nationwide hunt for five more after her body was unearthed.

The PPL national leadership has disavowed the arrested individuals and said that they had been thrown out of the party in late 2004 for deviating from party principles. PPL head Juan Arrom said
that prosecutors and top authorities were seeking to "criminalize a political institution." In a radio interview, Arrom, now living as a political refugee in Brazil, accused what he called ultraright and fascist sectors led by Latorre of trying to attack his party. "We are not in favor of violence," he said.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe echoed Latorre's accusation against Granda, saying that Granda's alleged involvement in such crimes made negotiations to exchange hostages the FARC is holding for rebel leaders impossible.

At a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Colombian government promised to give Paraguay "all the judicial and other types of cooperation" necessary to clear up the details behind the kidnapping and murder. Cubas' death brought US comments stressing the alleged kidnappers' links to the FARC, which is on the US State Department's list of international terrorist organizations.

"We certainly support the government of Paraguay in their concern about the FARC impacting the security of Paraguay," Asa Hutchinson, undersecretary at the US Department of Homeland Security, told the Associated Press during an OAS conference in Trinidad. "Historic purge" in national police, 12 arrested President Duarte removed 52 officials from their posts in the Policia Nacional, among them chiefs, officers, and commissioners.

Duarte said that the "historic purge" of the police would eradicate "the organized crime and criminality that has filtered into public institutions." The shake-up was one of the biggest since the 34-year military dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner ended in 1989. Duarte also had Interior Minister Nelson Mora resign, replacing him with Rogelio Benitez.

The 43-year-old Benitez, Duarte's fourth interior minister since coming to power in 2003, is a former business executive and mayor of the southern city of Encarnacion, and he is seen as a newcomer to such duties. Prosecutor Nestor Suarez was assigned to investigate why police failed to respond to reports of "strange movements" at the house near where Cubas was found. Twelve police officers were arrested for negligence in the investigation of the kidnapping, including assistant commissioner Mercado Palacios.

Among the officers removed from the National Police were the directors of the Criminal Investigation, Intelligence, and Anti-Kidnapping units. Duarte left Commissioner Carlos Zelaya, who is a personal friend, at the head of the institution. Critics attacked Duarte's decision to promote Basilio Pavon, who was tried for torture in 2000, to be chief of police in the city of Amambay.

At the funeral, thousands of Paraguayans chanting "Justice! Justice!" crowded a cemetery Feb. 18 to say farewell to the former president's daughter. Hundreds more lined streets of the capital, reaching out to touch the hearse. Police on motorcycles led the funeral cortege. Cubas Grau said he hoped his daughter's death would help draw attention to the country's increasing lawlessness. "Cecilia is a symbol of what is happening today in Paraguay," he said. "But let's use her memory to work to build a better country." His voice shaking, he added, "Your death will help us make that a reality."
Her death, in the midst of a spiraling crime wave, has deepened feelings of insecurity in this South American country, plagued by organized crime, drug trafficking, and corruption. Her death heightened concerns that well-known and wealthy families would be increasingly targeted by kidnappers. In the past four years, 24 people have been abducted, with common criminals blamed for nearly all of the abductions.

"There's a fear that we're becoming like Brazil and Argentina, where there are lots of kidnappings," Carlos Martini, a professor at the Universidad Catolica in Asuncion, said in an interview. "It appears that the kidnapping industry has installed itself in Paraguay." But Martini said many people doubt that Duarte can do much because the problem is so deep-seated. "Corrupt police sell information to criminals," Martini said.

Chilean newspaper El Mercurio had a headline calling Paraguay "The great paradise of kidnappers" after Cubas was found.

**Death penalty debate revived, security plan prepared**

Duarte began work on revisions to the nation's Penal Code shortly after the discovery of Cubas' body. One proposal he mentioned would call for 40-year sentences for convicted kidnappers. Some members of Cubas' family told the press that the death penalty should be reinstated in Paraguay, which two members of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) echoed. Jose Altamirano of the court's Sala Civil said that those who kill for money should not be allowed to live, and he called on the Catholic Church to review its opposition to capital punishment, saying, "Jesus himself accepted crucifixion."

Another court official, Victor Nunez, said he opposed the punishment and said that, if the Paraguayan public demanded it, it would require changing the Constitution to implement such a reform. In late February, Duarte hurried the proposed changes to the Código Penal to the Senate, including expanding sentences for kidnapping to 25-40 years. Opposition party members said they would look at Duarte's proposals.

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