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Ecuadoran President Correa Names Cabinet; Defense Minister Dies in Crash

by LADB Staff
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Incoming Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa swore in his 17-member Cabinet during his own Jan. 15 inauguration (see NotiSur, 2007-01-26). He reserved more than 40% of the posts for women. There was a controversy when his first pick for the Agriculture Ministry refused the post. Ecuador's first female defense minister, Guadalupe Larriva, died in a helicopter crash days after taking the position, leading Correa to say he would name another woman as Larriva's replacement.

Seven of 17 ministers women

In naming his Cabinet, Correa seems to be taking a lesson from Chile in name a large number of women. In Chile, the ruling Concertacion coalition has made it a policy to appoint a large number of women to the Cabinet, contributing to the rise of the continent's first elected woman president, Michelle Bachelet (see NotiSur, 2006-01-20 and 2006-03-17). Bachelet first became a national political figure as health and defense minister in Chile, paving the way for a strong presidential candidacy.


The Defense Ministry was under Larriva until her death Jan. 24, and Economy Minister Patino took interim charge of the post until Correa appoints a permanent replacement. Three ministers Raul Vallejo, Ana Alban, and Maria Isabel Salvador remain in their posts from the government of outgoing President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007). "We have more than 40% of women" in the Cabinet, said Correa, "to vindicate the Ecuadoran woman." "We have here in the Cabinet, with pride, men and women who have not fought a few days, a few weeks, but all of their lives for this country," said Correa at the inauguration.

The president immediately signed a decree reducing the salaries of high public officials. He said the move sought not only to reduce the public budget but also to diminish the differences between the remuneration public administrators receive and the wages of the popular classes.

Six dead in two-helicopter crash

Defense Minister Larriva and her 17-year-old daughter Claudia Avila were killed when two helicopters collided during maneuvers to mark the 53rd anniversary of army aviation in Ecuador at a base near Manta. A colonel, three captains, and a lieutenant also died in the crash. "We know that we are not going to find anyone to fill the void that Guadalupe has left behind. However, we
will look for another Ecuadoran woman to take over the post of defense minister," said Correa, who attended Larriva's funeral in the southern city of Cuenca and declared three days of national mourning.

Larriva, 50, and her daughter were buried amid military honors and the red flags of Larriva's Partido Socialista-Frente Amplia (PS-FA). A teacher by vocation who rose through her party's ranks and served in Congress, Larriva had been the first defense minister to have never served in the military.

Correa has ordered a special commission to investigate the collision, including outside experts from the makers of the French-designed Gazelle helicopters involved in the crash and from Chile's Air Force. Vice President Lenin Moreno has said the helicopters were performing a night-flight test, "and in a bad maneuver it appears that the blades collided and the helicopters fell to the ground." No top ranking commanders were on board the helicopters, he said.

On Jan. 26, government spokesperson Monica Chuji said the country was going through a "delicate" time and advised against speculation, saying, "It causes damage." In a region with a history of questionable air crashes involving politicians critical of US and multinational corporations' influence, there has been some suspicion. Inter Press Service reported that the crash raised suspicions among government representatives and political and social organizations, who do not rule out possible foul play. They point to the apparent opposition by some senior military officers to the appointment of a civilian Socialist woman to head the Defense Ministry. They also recall earlier accidents that were never clarified, such as the plane crash in which former leftist President Jaime Roldos (1979-1981) was killed in 1981.

Former vice president and presidential candidate Leon Roldos, Jaime's brother, said the Ecuadoran people "do not want explanations; they want serious investigations." Interior Minister Gustavo Larrea told the media, "It is not normal for two helicopters to be traveling together, especially not at night, which makes an in-depth, exhaustive investigation doubly necessary."

Another Socialist leader, Victor Granda, said, "We find it strange that an accident like this could occur so close to a large, heavily monitored base that is so well-equipped, not only by the Ecuadoran Air Force but also by the US Air Force." Before her death, Larriva shook off concerns about resistance from the military to her appointment. Before taking office, she said she expected more curiosity than animosity from Ecuador's military brass "regarding whether a woman can lead in this role."

Apart from the speculation regarding the crash, the incoming government had a verifiable moment of intrigue when Energy Minister Acosta found hidden cameras in his new office, including one located above his desk. First pick for Agriculture Ministry refuses post A minor controversy followed the decision of Correa's pick to head the Agriculture Ministry, Jorge Encalada, to resign the post before being sworn in.

Daily newspaper El Universo reported that the decision came from differences Encalada had with the new government's appointments to national development banks and other positions, alleging that the appointees were too tied to the government of ex-President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005).
Carlos Vallejo took the agriculture job, getting whistles of disapproval from opposition figures as he swore in.

The opponents of Vallejo also booed Trajano, claiming that the ministers were not "new" enough and would not renovate Ecuador's political culture. Palacio claims legacy Correa accepted the presidential sash from his predecessor and former boss, Alfredo Palacio. Correa took the economy minister's post under Palacio after the ouster of Gutierrez in 2005 but soon clashed with him and was asked to resign (see NotiSur, 2005-08-26).

Correa's repudiation of Palacio was arguably his first big step on the road to the presidency. In his outgoing speech, Palacio argued that he had left the government better than he had found it in 20 months of governing. He said he had reformed the system that distributes funds from petroleum extraction, signed laws governing hydrocarbons, and had recovered Bloc 15, a petroleum field formerly operated by Occidental Petroleum Corporation (see NotiSur, 2006-06-02). [Sources: www.presidencia.gov.ec, no date; Inter Press Service, 01/25/07; www.telesurtv.net, 01/19/07, 01/22/07, 01/24-26/07; The Miami Herald, Los Tiempos (Bolivia), 01/26/07; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/19/07, 01/26/07, 01/30/07; El Tiempo (Colombia), 01/30/07; El Comercio (Ecuador), 01/19/07, 01/22-26/07, 01/29-31/07; El Universo (Ecuador), 01/25/07, 01/26/07, 01/29-31/07; Associated Press, 01/25/07, 01/27/07, 01/28/07, 01/31/07]