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LADB Staff
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The government of Peruvian President Alan Garcia went through its first Cabinet crisis in February when Interior Minister Pilar Mazzetti resigned amid corruption allegations. Accusations that the ministry overpaid for 469 police patrol cars and other official vehicles led to Mazzetti's resignation.

The revelations brought congressional inquiries and criticisms from opposition groups and from Garcia's Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) party. Accusations of overpayment for ambulances and police cars Cabinet chief Prime Minister Jorge del Castillo told Peruvian news station Radioprogramas that Garcia accepted Mazzetti's resignation, which she handed in late Feb. 23.

APRA lawmakers accused the ministry of failing to obtain a discount for the fleet of police cars. The president had supported Mazzetti during calls for her resignation in the previous month and has said he does not believe she is responsible for any wrongdoing. Mazzetti is also under investigation for allegedly purchasing nearly 60 ambulances that were in poor condition when she served as health minister under former President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006). Mazzetti has faced criticism for failing to curb corruption in the Interior Ministry, and especially within the country's police force.

Mazzetti is the first minister in Garcia's seven-month-old government to resign. Del Castillo announced that legislator and economist Luis Alva Castro would replace Mazzetti on Feb. 26. "We have made an evaluation of several personages and Dr. Alva Castro is the person in whom we have confidence," said del Castillo, citing Alva Castro's political and administrative experience. Castro was prime minister and economy minister in the previous administration of Garcia (1985-1990) and, until his appointment, was chair of the congressional Budget Committee.

Incoming Minister Alva promised what he described as "an implacable fight against corruption" and transparency after being sworn in. "Citizens' security is fundamental and will be our main concern," Alva said. "And there is no doubt that I will implacably fight corruption." Alva said that he would form committees to guarantee the legality of all purchases to avoid the situation like the allegedly illegal purchase of the squad cars.

Alva, 65, a former APRA deputy, also said that he would support a political reform in the ministry. On Feb. 26 the Contraloria General de la Republica (CGR) began an inquiry into vehicle purchases under the Toledo government. On March 5, Garcia ordered the heads of all of Peru's ministries to investigate purchases from the past 10 years to determine if there were corrupt overpayments during that period.
On March 7, Garcia ordered a halt to the purchase of ambulances for the Health Ministry "because that is the only way to show there is not corruption." Political analyst Augusto Alvarez pointed out that the current Cabinet crisis highlighted the administration's image of inability to confront corruption.

**Deadly prison riot in Tacna**

One area of state corruption where Mazzetti had faced earlier criticism was the prison system after a Jan. 29 prison riot in the southern city of Tacna left two prisoners dead and nine wounded. The Tacna riot came after another prison uprising one day earlier in Lima's Miguel Castro Castro prison left one inmate dead and five more with bullet and fracture wounds.

The former head of the Instituto Nacional Penitenciario (INPE), Rosa Mavila Leon, claimed that she had attempted to tell Mazzetti and Justice Minister Maria Zavala about the presence of "weapons, indiscipline, and corruption" at the Castro Castro prison. Mavila said she sent DVDs with proof of problems in the prison to her higher-ups, claiming they did not act on her requests for support to remove dangerous individuals from the prisons in question and secure penal facilities.

Mavila said she resigned in frustration at the unresponsiveness of her superiors. After Mavila made her complaints public following the death at Castro Castro, ex-interior minister Fernando Rospigliosi accused Mazzetti of having "an extraordinary ability to blame others and deflect attention from her responsibilities." [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/30/07; El Tiempo (Colombia), 02/19/07; International Herald Tribune, 02/24/07; www.bbcmundo.com, 02/25/07; Xinhua, 02/27/07; Associated Press, 02/16/07, 02/21/07, 03/03/07; El Comercio (Peru), La Republica (Peru), 02/01/07, 02/26/07, 02/27/07, 03/01/07, 03/05/07, 03/06/07; www.telesurtv.net, 02/26/07, 03/06/07]