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Venezuelan Cauht in Argentina with Large Sum of Cash Linked to PDVSA

by LADB Staff

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Argentine authorities detained a Venezuelan businessman traveling in Argentina with US$800,000 in undeclared cash in August aboard an executive jet charted by Argentina's state energy company, Energia Argentina S.A. (ENARSA). The scandal around the man, Guido Antonini Wilson, forced Claudio Uberti, the chief aide to Argentina's Minister of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services Julio De Vido, to resign and led to opposition-led criticisms against the government of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez and the state owned petroleum company Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA).

ENARSA and PDVSA implicated? Antonini was detained early Aug. 4 by customs authorities at the Jorge Newberry Airport in Buenos Aires after they found the cash in one of his suitcases. He arrived from Caracas aboard the chartered jet with officials from ENARSA, which paid for the flight, and PDVSA. ENARSA issued a statement Aug. 8 saying it rented the plane to ferry the company officials between the two capitals as they worked out the details of a liquid natural gas (LNG) supply agreement.

On Aug. 6, Chavez said Venezuela would invest in a regasification plant for LNG in Argentina, which is weathering an energy crisis. Chavez was in Argentina as part of a regional tour (see NotiSur, 2007-08-24).

The Venezuelan president later denied Argentine media reports that Antonini was part of his delegation. Argentine authorities said they were investigating whether Antonini committed a simple customs violation for not declaring the cash or if some other crime may have been committed.

On Aug. 16, an Argentine judge issued an international warrant for the arrest of Antonini, who was presumed to be at his home in Miami, Florida. Judge Marta Novatti, at the time, called only for charging a fine for an "infraction against customs regulations" for attempting to smuggle contraband.

As of Sept. 5, the US was analyzing a formal request for his extradition from Argentine authorities. The 46-year-old businessman also has US citizenship. On Aug. 11, the press reported that Antonini had traveled to Miami from Montevideo, Uruguay.

Argentine authorities had not then charged him with a crime, regarding the undeclared cash as a "luggage infraction" since he had not tried to hide the money. Antonini became a liability to the many businesses with which he was associated, such as Banco del Sol in Argentina and oil company Venoco, which acknowledged working with him but denied links to the case.
Within two weeks of the incident, the general manager of PDVSA-America, Diego Uzcatequi Matheus, had resigned over the scandal. His son, Daniel Uzcategui Spetch, was named in Argentina as the person who invited Antonini to travel to Argentina on the private flight. Before Uzcatequi's resignation, Argentina's President Nestor Kirchner had urged the official's removal from his PDVSA post, saying it would be a "strong gesture" on Chavez's part, the Argentine press reported. An official release stated that he resigned as the company tried to "determine the circumstances that relate the employees of the industry with the incident."

The communiqué also said, "PDVSA reiterates its willingness to give all collaboration that the competent authorities may require to definitively clear up the facts." In Argentina, the scandal cost Claudio Uberti his post under Planning Minister de Vido. Uberti was considered the minister's top aide and was one of the officials traveling with Antonini on the flight. He was considered the one who was "politically responsible" for the flight.

Kirchner's firing of Uberti comes not long after Economy Minister Felisa Miceli had to quit after a security search found a paper bag full of cash in her office bathroom (see NotiSur, 2007-07-20). The perception of corruption could damage the campaign of Kirchner's wife, Cristina Fernandez, to win the presidency in the Oct. 28 election.

**Opposition protests in Venezuela**

Venezuelan Energy Minister and PDVSA President Rafael Ramirez accused local and Argentine media of using the briefcase affair to "mount a media lynching" against the company and the Chavez government. In a television broadcast, Chavez said, "Now they are trying to stain us with this unfortunate episode of a Venezuelan with a briefcase and some dollars. Fine, now they're saying it was me....They are trying to stain the Argentine government, the Venezuelan government."

Opposition groups conducted protests and marches "against state corruption," although they called off an Aug. 18 march that planned to go to PDVSA headquarters. Chavez supporters gathered there and march leaders called off the procession "to avoid confrontations."

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