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LADB Staff

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Ex-Bolivian President Sanchez de Lozada Charged with Human Rights Crimes

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The attorney general of Bolivia formally charged former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) with genocide and eight other crimes and also charged ministers and military commanders in office during his second presidency. The announcement came on the fourth anniversary of Sanchez de Lozada's resignation following violent street protests of plans to export natural gas.

The 77-year-old Sanchez de Lozada continues living in the US, and his legal team has so far been successful in keeping US courts from agreeing to an extradition request, claiming in part that it would be unsafe for the ex-president to return to Bolivia.

Genocide, torture, massacre among the charges
The charges, denied by Sanchez de Lozada, relate to police and military actions that killed 67 protesters and wounded more than 400. Bolivian Attorney General Mario Uribe presented nine charges, including genocide, against Sanchez de Lozada to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) in the southern city of Sucre on Oct. 17.

Eight members of Sanchez de Lozada's government and five high-ranking military officers were also charged with a range of crimes, including murder and torture. Uribe said the crime of genocide occurred in the form of a "bloody massacre." The list of charges also included extremely serious injury, privation of liberty, abuse and torture, attacks on freedom of the press, and making claims and resolutions contrary to the law.

Sanchez de Lozada has denied allowing security forces to use violence against demonstrators. His lawyer in the US, Howard Gutman, told the Spanish news agency EFE that the charges were the result of "the incessant political campaign to punish the political rivals" of Bolivia's President Evo Morales.

On Oct. 17, a group of hundreds of protesters gathered outside the US Embassy in La Paz to demand that Sanchez de Lozada be sent back from the US to face trial. Sanchez de Lozada and two former top officials have resided in the US since 2003 after the citizen's uprising removed them from office.

The gathering in La Paz, which included relatives of the victims, came on the fourth anniversary of the "Black October" government crackdown. Black October victims' attorney Rogelio Mayta said, "[Sanchez de Lozada] is trying to say that the trial for the responsibility of the September and October 2003 massacres is political persecution. But it isn't. This is a cause of justice and four years of justice-in-waiting. It is part of the fight against impunity here in Bolivia and, as we consider it, for the whole American continent."
BBC Mundo reported the number of protestors as "more than 3,000" and said they threatened to attack the embassy building if Washington did not extradite the ex-president. Bolivian Ambassador in Washington Gustavo Guzman said his government would present a formal extradition request to the US authorities at the beginning of November. Sanchez de Lozada fled to the US after the protests brought down his government (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24).

The crisis had grown as more and more people took to the streets to demonstrate against his free-market policies, including plans to export natural gas through Chile. Bolivians have broadly opposed exporting gas to or through Chile until Bolivia regains sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean, lost over 125 years ago during the 1879-1883 War of the Pacific (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23).

The initiative to ship gas through Chilean ports was being pushed by Spanish-Argentine petroleum company Repsol-YPF in partnership with British Gas and British Petroleum. Troops were deployed to help combat the growing civil unrest, including strikes and road blockades, and dozens were killed in several weeks of violence. Goni, as the US-educated president was often called, came to power in August 2002 (see NotiSur, 2002-08-09) with just 22.5% of the vote and remained deeply unpopular.

Morales, the man who came in a surprise second in that election, played a central role in the demonstrations demanding the nationalization of the energy sector. During a September visit to the US, Morales called for Sanchez de Lozada's extradition while speaking to a university audience at Cooper Union in New York City.

Two of the accused ex-ministers, former defense minister Carlos Sanchez Berazin and former hydrocarbons minister Jorge Berindoague, also fled to the US in 2003. Other former ministers charged included Jorge Torres, Eric Reyes Villa, Adalberto Kuajara, and Dante Pino.

Sanchez Berazin, living in Miami, has repeatedly accused the Morales government of being in league with the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. He claimed in an interview with Spanish news service EFE on Sept. 25 that the two countries' governments seek to "destabilize" the democracies of Latin America and set up a "totalitarian regime." He has claimed that the mass uprisings of Black October were funded and driven by Venezuela.

Sanchez Berazin said there is "a regional action [in which] Cuba puts up the technology and [Venezuelan President] Hugo Chavez puts up the money." He added, "Evo Morales and his government are subordinated to the will of Chavez, who openly and directly gives out money among the mayors and the armed forces" of Bolivia, and he called the demands for his extradition "cowardice."

Today's El Alto protests: prostitution, not petroleum On the fourth anniversary of Black October, violent protest was again taking place in the city of El Alto, one of the epicenters of the movement against Sanchez de Lozada in 2003. But this time the protest was not against government economic plans but rather an attack on brothels that have been operating in the city. BBC Mundo reported that the protest, in its second day, began as parents' groups in the city's highest-elevation area the poorest section of the city called for construction of schools and better security for citizens.
The protests turned into fury against bordellos and bars, which rioters held responsible for corrupting their children and housing criminals. At least 50 establishments were attacked as protestors made bonfires in the streets of the city's red-light district with furniture, televisions, clothes, and other objects.

More significant than the El Alto protests against brothels are the ongoing struggles in the country's east, where opposition to the Morales government is strong (see NotiSur, 2007-09-07). Civic groups there are seeking autonomy from the government, leading to accusations from government officials that they are separatists whose demands may lead to civil war. In mid-October, the military struggled to wrest control of the country's most important airport, Viru Viru airport in Santa Cruz, from thousands of protestors who repeatedly took over the transport center.

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