11-16-2007

Bolivian Troops, Pro-Autonomy Groups Battle for Control of Major Airport

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13643
Bolivian Troops, Pro-Autonomy Groups Battle for Control of Major Airport

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Bolivia
Published: 2007-11-16

A struggle regarding the management of one of Bolivia's principal airports has pitted the government of Bolivian President Evo Morales against pro-autonomy groups led by local authorities in the eastern department of Santa Cruz. In October, federal troops tried to retake control of the Viru Viru airport in the departmental capital city of Santa Cruz after autonomist protesters seized control of the facility.

Morales' government accused local aviation administrators of corruption and charging airlines fees that rightfully belonged to the federal government while local officials accused Morales of using Venezuelan troops to suppress the demonstrators.

Following the struggle to control the airport, workers conducted a 24-hour strike Nov. 14-15 to protest the efforts to remove local officials. Morales charges corruption as administrators charge air carriers

The Administradora de Aeropuertos y Servicios Auxiliares a la Navegacion Aerea (AASANA) was at the center of the conflict in Santa Cruz, with local AASANA employees charging international air carriers cash fees.

On Oct. 16, AASANA workers demanded fees of US$2,000 from two flights belonging to Aerolineas Argentinas and American Airlines. The Argentine carrier acceded to the demand and paid, while US-based American Airlines refused and took off to Miami without its 140 passengers on board. This sparked the crisis, with Morales ordering troops to take over the airport and claiming that local officials' demand for landing-fee payments was illegal.

Thousands of local residents occupied Viru Viru, after troops sent in by President Morales withdrew. An estimated 7,000 protesters armed with clubs and waving flags rallied at the airport on Oct. 19. The troops, numbering about 220, pulled back to avoid clashes with protesters.

Demonstrators had responded to a call from Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas for people to turn out in huge numbers to wrest back control of the airport. But the troops withdrew before protesters reached the site.

"This has been a victory for the people of this town, and it has been a defeat for the wicked," said Costas, a fierce opponent of President Morales. The soldiers left "with their tails between their legs," he said. Most flights at the Viru Viru airport, Bolivia's busiest, were running normally despite the dispute, reports said.
Correspondents for the BBC reported that security had worsened in recent weeks in Santa Cruz. The gas-rich department, Bolivia's most wealthy department, is seeking autonomy from the federal government (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12, 2007-09-07 and 2007-10-26).

On Oct. 18, Morales defended the action of troops who had fired tear gas at hundreds of protesters as they tried to storm the airport a first time. He said it was unacceptable that airport workers with AASANA had tried to force airlines to pay landing fees to the local rather than federal authorities. Morales said he had ordered the military intervention to prevent the airport from losing its good reputation. This brought several hundred people back to the airport who tried to break through the gates but were forced back by the troops.

The local airport authority used to appoint its own directors, but three months before this incident federal officials installed their own person to lead the agency, the Associated Press news agency reported. The province has rich farmlands and is the center of Bolivia's energy industry. Santa Cruz leaders want not only autonomy from the central authorities but also a bigger share of natural-gas revenues. They also oppose attempts by Morales to nationalize key industries and redistribute land, key planks in his presidential platform, for which voters gave him a strong mandate (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06).

Vice President Alvaro Linera Garcia attacked the autonomist movement for covering up for corrupt officials, saying in an interview with Santa Cruz newspaper El Deber, "The noble flag of autonomy has been used to cover up scandalous corruption." He alleged a "semi-criminal gang that used public money as a petty-cash box" at the airport.

Costas denied those allegations, saying in a press release that "audits are not done at gunpoint!" He added, "It is the government of Evo Morales that comes making a frontal war" against the autonomy movement in the region. Governors of other departments in the region, allies in the autonomist movement, signed a communique that "repudiates the aggression and [expresses] solidarity with Santa Cruz."

Signatories included Govs. Manfred Reyes Villa of Cochabamba, Mario Cossio of Tarija, Ernesto Suarez of Beni, and Leopoldo Fernandez of Pando.

**Governors allege intervention by Venezuelan troops**

The autonomy movement alleged interference in Bolivian sovereignty was occurring and accused Morales of allowing Venezuelan soldiers to help in the effort to regain control of Viru Viru. The same five governors said they repudiated the "unconstitutional use of the armed forces and the meddling of the Venezuelan government in the militarization of the departments and the repression of civilians."

The governors signed the joint declaration on Oct. 22, claiming that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez assisted Morales in the operation to take over the airport. The president of the autonomist group Comite Civico de Santa Cruz, businessman Branco Marinkovic, alleged that Venezuelan soldiers were present at Viru Viru.
The statement demanded the expulsion of "foreign soldiers" from Bolivia. Defense Minister Walker San Miguel said in a television interview, "In Bolivia, groups of foreign soldiers do not exist," adding that Venezuelan troops who were previously in the country were there to give assistance in flooded regions in the department of Beni. He said in the early months of the year 100 Venezuelan volunteers and soldiers were working in Beni but most had already left, with three remaining in Beni's capital of Trinidad to work on preventing similar disasters.

According to San Miguel, there was an academic exchange with five Venezuelan soldiers at the Escuelas de Comando y Estado Mayor de las Fuerzas Armadas, and 12 pilots and technicians were operating helicopters that Chavez had given Morales. Those twenty soldiers, said San Miguel, did not include the soldiers at the Venezuelan Embassy. He denied that Venezuelan troops participated in the operation at Viru Viru, saying that a military plane from Venezuela had arrived to pick up the exchange students who were there by "coincidence" and did not participate in the intervention to control the terminal.

**Bomb goes off at Venezuelan consulate**

As Costas increased his rhetoric against Chavez, Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana accused the Santa Cruz governor of showing himself to be a "racist and xenophobe." In a speech on Oct. 20, Costas called Chavez the "major ugly runt" (macaco mayor) and Morales the "minor ugly runt" (macaco menor), as well as calling the Venezuelan president a "rat," "dictadorzuelo," "coup-maker," "shameless person," and "a coward."

The government sought to link Costas to the planting of explosives at the Venezuelan consulate in a residential building housing a Cuban medical mission in Santa Cruz in the early morning hours of Oct. 22. The two explosions were reportedly low power and did not kill or injure anyone, nor did they cause significant structural damage.

The government alleged that the harshness of the Costas speech was an "provocation" for the attacks against the Venezuelan consulate and the medical mission. Quintana said, "Since the prefect [governor] believes that our government depends on Venezuela, it is logical to make that extrapolation." "The Spanish conquistadors robbed the indigenous people of their humanity," said Quintana, and five centuries ago they had "the same mentality as the prefect of Santa Cruz."

The autonomist governors responded by criticizing the "totalitarian obsession" of the Morales government, a government they claim "is seeking the institutional subjugation of the country."

-- End --