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Bolivian Government Makes Further Allegations of U.S. Spying

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The government of Bolivian President Evo Morales has accused the US Embassy in La Paz of spying, making allegations beyond charges that an embassy official asked Peace Corps volunteers and visiting scholars to report on Venezuelans and Cubans living in Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2008-02-29).

Morales has accused the embassy of maintaining an intelligence network in the country for 15 years. The spying claims followed other rocky spots in the tenure of US Ambassador Phillip Goldberg, who appeared in a photograph with a Colombian man who later went to prison for being part of a ring of thieves.

Bolivian media outlets reprinted that photo in December. Intelligence unit alleged In February, ABC News revealed a Fulbright scholar's accusations that an embassy employee repeatedly asked him and Peace Corps volunteers to spy in Bolivia. That same month, in The Progressive magazine, Benjamin Dangl reported that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) were giving funding to groups that oppose the Morales government.

The US Embassy denies funding opposition groups and points to the allegedly benign intent of "democracy promotion" and other similarly-named programs. Goldberg said on Feb. 25, "If the government [of Bolivia] doesn't want us to continue certain programs, it never told us that."

Bolivian newspaper El Deber reported that Goldberg admitted that there were problems in several programs, but he said he preferred to discuss them with the Morales administration and not in the press. Goldberg rejected Bolivian government accusations that USAID was financially supporting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the aim of debasing the Morales government. "We do not support those groups," said Goldberg.

Two weeks earlier, the US government had decided to withdraw funding for the Organismo de Desarrollo de Estudios Policiales (ODEP), a police-intelligence unit that the Morales administration shut down. That unit had reportedly received US$300,000 annually. Morales' accusations that Goldberg has sought to subvert the Morales government both domestically and abroad have complicated US-Bolivian relations.

Morales says the US motivation for "conspiring" against his government has to do with the frequently deadlocked effort to rewrite the nation's Constitution (see NotiSur, 2006-08-04 and 2007-12-14), including prohibitions on foreign military bases being placed inside Bolivia.
Morales' accusations also include charges that the embassy supports former union leaders turned opposition leaders and pro-autonomy movements that seek to give provincial or departmental governments greater power and independence from the central government (see NotiSur, 2007-09-07).

Morales: US trying to discredit new Constitution
On Feb. 24, Morales told indigenous union representatives that he would "report truthfully on how some internal and external agents led by the US ambassador are conspiring to reject the profound changes in the new Constitution." He claimed that Goldberg engaged in constant and open interference in Bolivia through political actions designed to discredit the constitutional draft approved in December by the Asamblea Constituyente.

The "gravity" of Morales' accusations "could generate a serious diplomatic conflict" with the US "if they aren't convincingly proven," said an editorial in Cochabamba daily Los Tiempos in February. While some analysts cited by Miami-based newspaper El Nuevo Herald said the allegations could be enough for the US to recall its ambassador, the US diplomats had so far limited themselves to expressing their "support for democracy" in Bolivia and guaranteed that the country worked to "back the strengthening of democratic institutions throughout the world."

The Bolivian government said that the US had backed several "irregular" intelligence groups for years, making its denunciations after local press published a report about the "following" of journalists and politicians. On Jan. 25, local media published reports that several politicians, both opposition and official party members, and journalists were supposedly followed by agents linked with government security services. Vice President Alvaro Linera Garcia denied that the executive branch had ordered the following of politicians and civilians, claiming the reports could be attributed to "a dirty war to sully the government."

Goldberg denied that the US was conducting "domestic espionage" and said that there had been a "long history of support" for the Policía Nacional de Bolivia and it had been carried out "always under the full knowledge and control of the governments" in charge of the country, including the current government. Interior Minister Alfredo Rada told the newspaper La Prensa that the administration had detected at least two "irregular" intelligence structures operating in the country. One of them was within the Comando de Operaciones Especiales (Copes), which Rada said was created 15 years earlier with logistic and technological support from the US.

In January 2006, coinciding with Morales inauguration, the group changed its name to ODEP. "But we have discovered that Copes continues to function under than name," said Rada, claiming the group was trying to harm "the efficiency of the intelligence service." The other group he mentioned was the Grupo Especial Tactico de Investigaciones de Delitos (Getide), a "more regular" group that gives the government information to fight criminal activity. He said it was necessary to "eliminate" groups working "parallel" to governmental intelligence services.

While both parties said the matter had been closed in January, the revelations that an embassy official named Vincent Cooper was asking Peace Corps volunteers and academics to report on Cubans and Venezuelans in Bolivia reignited the issue. But even under these tense conditions, said
El Nuevo Herald, trade negotiations seeking the prolongation of trade preferences for Bolivia had moved forward, along with delivery of US humanitarian aid to combat massive flooding damage done by La Nina weather phenomenon. Nevertheless, relations continue to swing back and forth as new accusations or criticisms become public.

**Morales criticizes US report**

The president, a former cocalero or coca-leaf farmer and leader within the cocalero movement, said in March the US seeks to destabilize his government with reports on the supposed growth of coca plantations in Bolivia. "The issue of the fight against narcotrafficking has always been handled politically [by the US]," said Morales on March 3.

The Bolivian president compared the report to pretexts Washington used in the buildup to its invasion of Iraq. "When we denounce that the conspiracy against Evo Morales is the ambassador's doing, it comes out that coca production has increased," said Morales. He accused Goldberg of being the "top opponent" of the government after he participated as a guest at a public meeting with popular movements.

Morales said that Washington sought to link him with terrorism and referred to a recent broadcast by a US television network in which the chief of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the US military unit charged with overseeing the Latin America region, talking about "narcoterrorism" and showing a photo of Morales with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Goldberg's photographic appearances became an issue in November 2007, when he was shown posing with an alleged Colombian criminal and an opposition businessman from the eastern department of Santa Cruz, Gabriel Dabdoub. The photo came from a session of the Ibero-American Summit and the Colombian was John Jairo Banegas, jailed for allegedly being part of a group of thieves and kidnappers.

US State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack denied Morales' accusations that Goldberg was involved criminally with the individuals. "As far as I know, our ambassador was found at a well-attended public event where many photos were taken," said McCormack.

"I don't think our support for constitutional and democratic governments can be questioned." He called accusations of subversion "unfounded." Morales, when the photo was made public, alleged that Bolivian oligarchs had formed "an alliance with the US ambassador and Colombian paramilitaries" to fight his government.

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