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Massive Protests Demand Extradition of Ex-Bolivian Minister from U.S.

by LADB Staff
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Former Bolivian defense minister Carlos Sanchez Berzain has claimed he will not be extradited back to Bolivia, where he faces charges of mass murder for the deaths of dozens of protestors in 2002, because he has been granted political asylum in the US. After Sanchez Berzain's claims were made public, protests at the US Embassy resulted in Washington recalling US Ambassador Philip Goldberg.

Thousands of Bolivians marched to call for Sanchez Berzain's extradition, saying he along with ex-President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) and other officials from the Sanchez de Lozada administration were responsible for the military crackdown in 2003 that resulted in about 60 deaths (see NotiSur, 2003-02-07, 2003-02-21, 2003-09-26 and 2005-06-24).

Sanchez Berzain has political asylum in US

Thousands of demonstrators marched on the US Embassy in La Paz on June 9 to demand that Washington extradite Sanchez Berzain, now a resident of Key Biscayne, Florida. The former official told La Paz-based Radio Fides in the first week of June that the US granted him political asylum more than a year ago. Sanchez Berzain received political asylum in April 2007 after telling US authorities that he feared he would be "persecuted and tortured" by the government of Bolivia's newly elected socialist President Evo Morales, according to documents later released by the Bolivian Embassy in Washington.

"I have endured numerous unfounded allegations against me by Morales in the past, and now I fear that his new powers as president will allow him to silence me once and for all," Sanchez Berzain wrote in his asylum petition. The former defense minister added that Morales was particularly opposed to his efforts to combat drug trafficking, in a country known for its cultivation of the coca plant used in the production of cocaine.

Protesters swarm US Embassy

The revelation caused outrage in El Alto, a sprawling satellite city outside La Paz where dozens of anti-government rioters were gunned down by soldiers in 2003, during a period known since as Black October.

On June 10, residents streamed down the hills into La Paz to demand justice for the killings. Authorities did not release estimates on the crowd's size, but reporters at the scene put the throng at 15,000 to 20,000. "We've come to the doors of the embassy to say 'Enough with the impunity,'" said Edgar Patana, head of an El Alto labor union leading the protest. "The United States has to prove that they have the justice they're always showing off in their media and movies. Bolivia wants that justice."
Protesters shot fireworks at a US flag flying just beyond the compound's concrete wall, as helmeted Marines looked on from the embassy's roof. News reports from La Paz said protesters broke through police security cordons made up of vehicles. The demonstrators also voiced their anger at Washington's sheltering of Sanchez de Lozada, who is now living in the US. "Free Bolivia, no Yankee colony," shouted the rock-throwing demonstrators, who fought running battles with riot police. When crowds tried to push through a police line, officers cleared the street with tear gas. Bolivia's government called the use of tear gas excessive. "Security is one thing, repression is another," Government Minister Alfredo Rada told reporters.

La Paz department's police commander was fired the night of June 10 along with top police officials in Bolivia's eight other departments. But government officials said the change had been planned since a new national police chief was named in May. The 2003 Black October protests were initially a response to a government plan to sell Bolivian natural gas to the US by building a pipeline through neighboring rival Chile.

The plan angered El Alto's poor, who often struggle to obtain their own gas for cooking and heating. Bolivia's lack of sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean since the War of the Pacific (1879-1883) has also been a key point of nationalistic tension between the neighboring countries (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23), leading many Bolivians to object to selling natural gas Bolivia's prime natural resource to Chile.

The 2003 protests quickly snowballed as the city's largely Aymara Indian population vented their anger at centuries of bitter poverty and political marginalization. The uprising eventually drove Sanchez de Lozada, known by the nickname Goni, from office, fortifying a growing indigenous political movement that brought President Morales to power two years later (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06).

Sanchez Berzain's lawyer Howard Gutman declined June 10 to confirm whether his client had been granted political asylum. But he and other lawyers acknowledged and cited Sanchez Berzain's asylum status in a motion filed in May in a Miami federal court to dismiss a US civil case against him.

Plaintiffs, including families of the 2003 victims, accuse the former defense minister and the ex-president of authorizing the use of deadly force against protesters and say they are liable for the deaths.

Lawyers for the two exiled politicians say that protesters instigated the violence and that their blockade of La Paz, which cut the capital off from food and fuel, justified a military response. Their legal team includes Washington attorney Greg Craig, an adviser to Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

Asked for comment, Ambassador Goldberg said the legal proceeding is "not a political matter, it's a judicial matter, and we have to respect the independent judicial branch in the United States."
President Morales repeated his demand that Washington send the two men home to face trial. "We want the United States to help us to bring to justice those who have done so much harm to Bolivia," Morales said on June 8. "We would like the US government, not only the US ambassador, to help us seek justice against those who committed a lot of crimes in Bolivia. It is unimaginable that the worst political figures can be protected by the US government."

The US Embassy in La Paz, which says Sanchez Berzain's immigration status is his private affair, had neither confirmed nor denied whether the US has granted him political asylum before the Bolivian government released his asylum documents. Rogelio Mayta, lawyer for the dead and injured victims in the 2003 conflict, said that, if the US had granted asylum to Sanchez Berzain, the extradition of both Sanchez Berzain and Sanchez de Lozada would be complicated.

In September 2007, Bolivia's Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) asked the government to start the process to extradite Sanchez de Lozada (see NotiSur, 2007-10-26). On June 10, La Paz daily newspaper La Razon quoted Goldberg as saying that Washington had yet to receive a formal extradition request from the Bolivian government.

**Goldberg goes home**

The US said June 16 that Ambassador Goldberg would return to Washington to discuss security. "US Ambassador to Bolivia Philip S. Goldberg will return to Washington for consultations on embassy security in the wake of violent protests in La Paz on Monday, June 9," said Gonzalo Gallegos, a State Department spokesman.

The State Department did not allude to the Sanchez Berzain controversy, however. "The ambassador's consultations will provide an opportunity to explore measures to enhance security cooperation with the government of Bolivia," said the statement attributed to Gallegos. "We appreciate the efforts of the Bolivian National Police to protect our embassy and our personnel. At the same time, we are concerned by the recent statements of some Bolivian government officials that cast doubt on Bolivia's commitment to fulfill its Vienna Convention obligations to protect diplomatic staff and facilities in the future."

Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca saw nothing wrong in Goldberg's recall. "Normally, ambassadors are recalled, as we did with ours, because it's not the same talking by telephone or exchanging emails. There are issues that have to be dealt with personally. That's normal," he told Bolivia's Erbol radio in a telephone interview from Lima. Bolivia recalled its Ambassador to Washington Gustavo Guzman the week before Goldberg returned to the US.

Choquehuanca said Goldberg was unable to explain why Berzain was granted political asylum. Goni may also enjoy asylum from human rights charges Ambassador Guzman said the revelation about Sanchez Berzain's US asylum "complicates" already strained bilateral relations. "It is irritating, it complicates relations between Bolivia and the United States," he said.

Guzman added that his government had summoned Ambassador Goldberg to a June 10 meeting about the matter. "We are not satisfied with the explanations the ambassador gave this morning,"
Choquehuanca told reporters in La Paz afterward, adding that his government would seek further clarification.

Guzman said it was "very likely" that Sanchez de Lozada, who currently lives in the Washington suburbs, had also received asylum. The US State Department would not immediately confirm whether the two Bolivians had received asylum and calls to Sanchez de Lozada from Agence France-Presse were not returned.

However, Yerko Kukoc, Sanchez de Lozada’s former interior minister, said that his ex-boss asked for political asylum in the US five years ago and it has already been granted, according to state news agency Agencia Boliviana de Informacion (ABI).

Kukoc, speaking in the city of Santa Cruz, said he did not know if Sanchez Berzain was granted political asylum. Kukoc said that the ex-president’s political asylum case was filed during the administration of President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005), not under Morales, "and was probably concluded in 2006 during the presidency of Eduardo Rodriguez Veltze (2005-2006)."

-- End --