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Autonomy Protesters Clash with Bolivian Government

by LADB Staff

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Bolivia's political conflict between President Evo Morales and the pro-autonomy opposition resulted in dozens of deaths and disappearances in September. Opposition protests and blockades cut off international exports of natural gas as dialogue between Morales and protest leaders repeatedly broke down. The conflict also caused a rupture in diplomatic relations between Bolivia and the US, with Morales throwing US Ambassador Philip Goldberg out of Bolivia for allegedly supporting the separatist or anti-centralist opposition groups.

Violence at political clashes led to reports of dozens of deaths and dozens more missing, with the final death toll still unavailable at time of publication. Morales ordered the military to arrest the governor of Pando department for the "massacre" (genocidio) during the clashes. Autonomists blockade the east Morales had won a major electoral victory early in August, prior to the opposition blockades, when more than two-thirds of Bolivian voters rejected a recall referendum against the president (see NotiSur, 2008-08-15).

The referendum also unseated two autonomist governors, but it strongly affirmed the rest, leading many analysts to conclude that the referendum would harden divisions in the nation.

Opposition leaders were seeking greater autonomy from the central government and gubernatorial-level control of the Impuesto Directo a los Hidrocarburos (IDH), a major source of government revenue that Morales has planned to use to redistribute wealth in the extremely poor nation (see NotiSur, 2008-04-11).

Also at issue was right-wing opposition to the draft Constitution that Morales has sought to present to voters in a national referendum (see NotiSur, 2007-12-14). The opposition says the draft charter is illegitimate, while Morales wants the voting public to decide on it. Shortly after the recall referendum, opposition groups, often known as "civicos," voted to launch mass protests and blockades against the Morales government.

There is some irony to the move in that Morales, in his days as a coca-growers-union leader with the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), led such strikes and roadblocks against former Bolivian presidents. The civic leaders in the nation's gas-rich east extended blockades in the first days of September, cutting off highways in Santa Cruz department for a 72-hour period.

The government increased the military presence in Santa Cruz and other eastern departments like Beni, Pando, and Tarija to strengthen security at petroleum facilities and state institutions. The blockade precluded travel from Brazil and Paraguay.
On Sept. 4, groups took over a gas-compression and electricity-generating station in Tarija. Pro-Morales news network TeleSUR claimed the groups were violent and supported by the governor's administration in that department.

The government and military also accused authorities in Beni of supporting violence. As further incidents occurred, Morales alleged that a "civil coup against the state" was underway and that "the first chapter is the takeover of public institutions by shock groups financed by the prefectures [governor's offices]."

**Cabinet shuffle**

On Sept. 9, Morales renewed his Cabinet, replacing the minister who oversaw energy production and four other Cabinet members. Saul Avalos, a former member of the Asamblea Constituyente from Santa Cruz, replaced Carlos Villegas as hydrocarbons minister.

Villegas was appointed to head the Ministry of Development Planning. Morales also replaced the ministers of health, rural development and small businesses, but the Cabinet shuffle did little to take attention away from blockades at border crossings and takeovers of gas facilities.

**Gas pipeline sabotaged, gas delivery to Brazil blocked**

Saboteurs damaged a natural-gas pipeline that delivered gas to Brazil, with officials saying on Sept. 11 that it could take 10 to 15 days to repair it and fully restore shipments to Brazil. Finance Minister Luis Alberto Arce said military security for Bolivian natural-gas operations was being doubled, after a blast by saboteurs forced a 10% cut in natural-gas exports to Brazil. Half of Brazil's natural gas comes from Bolivia and the gas powers the larger country's energy grid and fuels its cars and residential stoves.

Brazil planned to use diesel fuel to counter the shortage. Even as the government said exports to Brazil were being restored, demonstrators shut valves delivering gas to Argentina. Border crossings to the three nations that border Bolivia's east were frequently blocked. Authorities reported that eight were dead and 20 injured on Sept. 11 after opposition protestors fought Morales backers with machetes and guns.

**US ambassador expelled**

As violence increased, Morales sought to make public his allegations that the US had a hand in the unrest. On Sept. 11, Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca told reporters he had requested Ambassador Goldberg's expulsion from Bolivia but said that he had written Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to say Bolivia "wishes to maintain bilateral relations."

Morales accused Goldberg of conspiring with the civic groups. Goldberg had met a week earlier with Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas, the president's most prominent and vociferous critic.

In Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez showed solidarity with Morales by giving US Ambassador to Venezuela Patrick Duddy three days to leave Caracas. Chavez also announced that he was recalling Venezuela's ambassador to Washington.
In fiery speeches, Chavez accused the US of backing overthrow plots against him and Morales. "That's enough...from you, Yankees de mierda," Chavez said during a televised rally. Waving fists in the air, he said, "I hold the government of the United States responsible for being behind all the conspiracies against our nations!"

The Washington Post, in an editorial quoted throughout the Latin American media, attacked Morales for attempting to "import Hugo Chavez's model of authoritarian socialism to Bolivia," which "had polarized his country along ethnic and geographic lines."

Authoritarian and anti-majoritarian behavior among the civic groups' leaders came under much milder criticism from the Post, "Opposition governors deserve blame for tolerating at least violence by their supporters." The US and Bolivian governments had made gestures to attempt to repair strained diplomatic relations with an August visit by Thomas Shannon, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs (see NotiSur, 2008-08-22).

But Morales alleged that Goldberg and US agencies were lending material and political support to the opposition. Meanwhile, the Peace Corps has announced it has suspended operations in Bolivia, the US Embassy has authorized the departure of all nonessential personnel, and the US State Department has advised US citizens not to travel to Bolivia and those already there to consider leaving the country.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, generally more moderate than Morales and Chavez, said on Sept. 17 that Goldberg's expulsion was justifiable if there was US interference in Bolivian politics.

"If it is true that the US ambassador was meeting with the opposition to Evo Morales, he is correct in expelling him. The role of an ambassador is not to conduct politics within a country," said Lula in an interview with public television station TV Brasil. "I believe there was a diplomatic incident. If the ambassador was conducting interference in politics, Evo did the right thing."

Lula recalled an incident when he had to ask his Foreign Relations Minister Celso Amorim to communicate to the US ambassador in Brazil the administration's unhappiness with the diplomat regarding some criticisms she had made of some of Lula's statements. Military arrests Pando governor for massacre The government declared martial law in Pando after it alleged that 30 or more people had died in clashes there on Sept. 11.

A government report released on Sept. 15 said 15 people had died on Sept. 11 in the town of Porvenir, with 37 wounded and another 106 missing. Government Minister Alfredo Rada announced at a press conference that there were "15 confirmed and identified dead; 37 wounded confirmed and identified at this moment; 106 disappeared, who according to reports may be wounded and at risk of losing their lives. It is a worrying figure."

On Sept. 13, Rada had said that, because of "the magnitude of the massacre that took place in Porvenir," the number of dead was approaching 30. With respect to the missing people, Rada said that police and military officials had started their search "in the zone around Porvenir to find
bodies. It must be taken into account that control [of the area] by armed groups who attacked the campesinos in Porvenir was maintained for at least 30 hours after the massacre had occurred."

Soldiers dispatched to Pando detained Gov. Leopoldo Fernandez on charges of "genocide" on Sept. 15. Morales claimed he had organized the armed ambush of pro-Morales demonstrators that ended in the deaths and injuries. "I hope...that I never feel unaccompanied by Bolivian justice," said Morales, saying the arrest was "legal and constitutional."

The Union de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) convened more than a half-dozen South American presidents to try to find a solution to the ongoing violence in Bolivia. The Bolivian crisis was arguably the first major emergency that UNASUR has had to tackle since its inception earlier this year (see NotiSur, 2008-05-30). The Roman Catholic Church also sought to mediate in talks.

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