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WikiLeaks Cables Affect U.S. Relations with South America

by Andrés Gaudín

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The remaining US diplomatic cables with which the organization WikiLeaks and five leading US and European newspapers kept government leaders and political figures worldwide on their toes have arrived in Latin America and have so far cost the US ambassadors in Mexico, Ecuador, and Panama their jobs as well as the jobs of other Latin American friends, including Paraguay's foreign minister.

Last November, the Web site created by Australian Julian Assange signed agreements to turn over tens of thousands of confidential or secret State Department documents to five top-tier newspapers: (Germany), (Great Britain), (France), (Spain), and (US). Publication of the cables captured public interest during the first weeks, but by February the newspapers had exhausted what, in their judgment, was the information that most attracted avid readers of political scandals.

In March, WikiLeaks began releasing cables to at least 10 Latin American dailies. All announced the agreements with great fanfare and even created special logos to present the new feature. For news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) and analysts from Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, it was no coincidence that the South American editors received the avalanche of documents just days before US President Barack Obama began a round of visits to Brazil, Chile, and El Salvador.

Ambassador to Mexico forced to resign

On March 19, interestingly a Saturday and the day Obama arrived in Brazil, the State Department expressed its "regret" at US Ambassador to Mexico Carlos Pascual's decision to resign (SourceMex, March 23, 2011). Pascual had headed the US diplomatic mission in Mexico since August 2009. Various newspaper accounts said Pascual's fate had been sealed two weeks earlier, when, on an official visit to the US, Mexican President Felipe Calderón expressed to Obama "words that in the end were scathing," according to the AFP.

On March 3, Calderón had told that working with Pascual was difficult. By that time, WikiLeaks had published a cable in which the diplomat made criticisms as strong as they were contemptuous of Mexico's drug-trafficking efforts and the lack of coordination among its various security and military agencies.

Although the State Department limited itself to expressing regret at Pascual's decision, his departure is no small loss. The Cuban-American diplomat, who graduated from Stanford and received a master's degree from Harvard, headed one of the largest US embassies in the world. The embassy's Web site lists nine US consulates and more than 40 agencies and says it employs more than 2,300 civil servants in Mexico.

Leaks set off row in Ecuador

The most prickly situation, however, was in Ecuador, where on April 5 Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño summoned US Ambassador Heather Hodges to his office to tell her that President Rafael Correa's administration had declared her persona non grata and asked her to leave the country "as
quickly as possible." The reason: a WikiLeaks cable in which Ambassador Hodges reported to the
State Department about allegations of rampant corruption in the Policía Nacional.

The cable, signed by Hodges, referred expressly to former police commander Gen. Jaime Hurtado
Vaca, who it said had used his power "to extort cash and property, misappropriate public funds,
facilitate human trafficking, and obstruct the investigation and prosecution of corrupt colleagues."
The cable also said that Hurtado's corrupt activities were so widespread and well-known that "some
Embassy officials believe that President Correa must have been aware of them" when he appointed
Hurtado Vaca police commander.

Patiño called Hodges to his office to ask her to clarify her accusation of the president's complicity
with a corrupt police commander. The ambassador, whom the State Department described as "one
of the most experienced and talented [US] diplomats," declined to respond, arguing that she would
not speak about the matter because the WikiLeaks cables were "stolen documents."

Two days later, on April 7, the US responded in kind, declaring Ecuador's Ambassador to the US
Luis Gallegos persona non grata and asking that he immediately leave the country.

US Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), ranking Democrat on the House foreign affairs subcommittee on the
Western Hemisphere, threatened to broaden the punishment, saying in a statement, "Tens of
thousands of Ecuadorans depend on the Andean Trade Preferences (ATPDEA) for their livelihoods.
At a time when ATPDEA has lapsed and there is still a chance that Congress could renew the
preferences, President Correa has seriously undermined the possibility that these preferences will
be reinstated in the foreseeable future. Correa's irresponsible expulsion of Ambassador Hodges is
both whimsical and impulsive, and comes at a great cost to his own people."

Under the ATPDEA, which expired in February, 72% of the South American country's exports were
allowed to enter the US duty free. The economic consequences of the diplomatic episode provoked
by WikiLeaks are "frankly devastating" for the Ecuadoran economy, said Patiño.

Other fallout from cables
Phyllis Marie Powers replaced former US ambassador to Panama Barbara Stephenson in mid-2010,
before WikiLeaks documents appeared in regional newspapers. Nevertheless, thanks to the cables,
it is now known that Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli had expressed his displeasure to
the Obama administration when he learned that Stephenson had reported to the State Department
his request for technology assistance to set up wiretaps on opposition political leaders (NotiCen,
April 14, 2011). Martinelli felt betrayed. The now-public documents say that very clearly, as well
as describing the president as "authoritarian" and "almost certain to spell trouble for Panama's
democratic institutions."

The firing of Paraguay's former foreign minister Héctor Lacognata is another ramification of the
WikiLeaks cables, although because of Lacognata's longtime friendship with President Fernando
Lugo, the dismissal was made to appear as if it were tied to an internal dispute.

No critical situations arose in the rest of South America, but ministers and important political, union,
and business leaders throughout the region were cited in the cables as assiduous visitors to the local
US Embassy, a circumstance not viewed favorably in any of the countries.
Colombia compromised

In Colombia, so far, no heads have rolled. The country has an inexhaustible capacity to absorb any type of scandal. But the WikiLeaks cables with details regarding the involvement of many well-known figures—among them former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010)—in drug-trafficking and paramilitary groups and their responsibility for human rights violations have rekindled a dangerous generalized mistrust of the political leadership.

A March 10 editorial in the daily illustrates that situation. After pointing out that "the US Embassy has become a hotbed of rumors" and denouncing "the managed subordination of national affairs to US interests," the traditional Bogotá paper said, "Many private-sector figures are also beginning to show their true face, friends of former presidents...who have dangerous ties to money laundering and drug trafficking. That necessary revelation has not failed to produce a deep sorrow and reaffirm the premise that Colombia has a severe leadership crisis."

The newspaper went on to say, "Thanks to the social visits to the embassy, the US knows very well exactly what it takes to get things done in the country." The editorial concluded, "They have still not published four years of cables, specifically those of Uribe's second term. God help us, but it would be great if this disclosure were the end of so many leaders with feet of clay."

Uribe's two terms were marked by corruption and human rights violations, but defined the second term (2006-2010) as "disastrous."

Brazil and Venezuela have unique approach

The last of the cables that began to be unleashed in November 2010 by WikiLeaks and the five influential papers are being published by Latin American newspapers (Colombia), (Ecuador), (Peru), (Chile), (Bolivia), (Paraguay), (Uruguay), (Argentina), (Costa Rica), and (Mexico). Until mid-March, the information was also received by (Brazil).

While the first five newspapers received tens of thousands of US Embassy cables from around the world, the Latin American papers receive cables only relating to their respective country, "never more than 5,000," said Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA).

The AFP reported that Brazil’s O Estado de São Paulo was negotiating with Assange but did not come to an agreement to access the WikiLeaks services. In Venezuela, no newspaper was interested in receiving the cables.

Government leaders and officials try to play down the phenomenon. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is an exception. "The empire is left naked," he said. "It doesn't matter much to them, it doesn't worry them that their disrespectful treatment of their allies has been uncovered, but they will have to be more careful in spying on us."

Arturo Valenzuela, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, tried to minimize the effects of WikiLeaks. "Rather than upsetting our relations with Latin America, this shows their renewed strength," he said.

Michael Shifter, head of the Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue (IAD), said, however, "One should not take the matter lightly." In an interview with the AFP, Shifter said that, among the negative effects of the WikiLeaks publications, "it is necessary to consider the possibility
that the situation will end up undermining Obama's strategy of maintaining a good dialogue with governments such as Ecuador's "that have not been too friendly to Washington." He said that would "strengthen skeptics of that strategy in Washington."

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