11-21-2014

Killing of Two Paraguayan Journalists Highlights Narco-Corruption Issue

Andrés Gaudán

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

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Killing of Two Paraguayan Journalists Highlights Narco-Corruption Issue
by Andrés Gaudín
Category/Department: Paraguay
Published: 2014-11-21

The double assassination of two Paraguayan journalists reporting on connections between drug traffickers and the government of President Horacio Cartes and other top political leaders highlighted Paraguay’s problems of a society forced to live with corruption. Ever since Oct. 16 when Pablo Medina and Antonia Almada, correspondents for the newspaper ABC Color in Canindeyú department, some 300 km northeast of Asunción on the Brazilian border, were riddled with bullets, the word narcopolítica, a neologism born in Colombia to dramatically paint that country’s reality, has become part of the daily lexicon.

Since then, in rapid succession, high-ranking government officials, ministers, legislators, union leaders, and Catholic bishops have added new elements daily, forcing President Cartes, a man accused of having amassed a fortune by negotiating with drug traffickers, and his Partido Colorado (PC) to say they will thoroughly investigate the situation and will push for impeachment of four of the nine Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) justices (NotiSur, Jan. 17, 2014). People openly say that at least 25% of the country’s judges are on the payroll of drug traffickers and that one-third of the senators and deputies finance election campaigns with mafia drug money.

The day after the double crime in Canindeyú, Luis Rojas, the government’s anti-drug czar, told the Associated Press (AP) that "more than 100 violent gangs that sell marijuana and are associated with similar Brazilian groups" exist in northern Paraguay. Rojas admitted that these gangs have intimate relations with political leaders.

In Canindeyú, the country’s greatest hotbed of drug trafficking, there are only eight anti-drug agents, not enough for a region with dozens of small clandestine landing fields and more than 8,000 hectares of marihuana under cultivation. Rojas couldn’t explain why the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) recalled specialized agents who three years earlier had been spread throughout the area. It was in this region where the two journalists were killed.

Aníbal Gómez, another journalist working in Pedro Juan Caballero, a town near Canindeyú, said, "The work of the press in the border areas is very risky because all news is related to cocaine and marijuana. I received death threats and was given police protection, but after two months they took it away without telling me why, leaving me on my own, leaving me exposed to whatever the drug dealers want to do to me. Perhaps this is what happened to Medina and Almada."

Rampant criminal activity and corruption
On Oct. 22, Interior Minister Francisco de Vargas surprised the public during an interview on Asunción’s Radio Ñandutí when he said that drug mafias are acting in full force and have taken over several areas of the country. "There’s sustained activity by criminal groups connected with drug trafficking," the minister said, confirming rumors about Cartes and many of the legislators from the ruling PC being involved with drug traffickers. De Vargas was compelled to respond frankly to an accusation by Sen. Roberto Acevedo two days earlier. Acevedo had said, "There are between
five and six members of the Senate and a large number of deputies who receive salaries from drug mafias."

Following a common practice in Paraguay in which serious allegations are repeated cyclically without additional proof, detail, or any legal action, Acevedo said, "Many politicians finance their candidacies with drug money." He also said that there are corrupt police chiefs, military officers, mayors, judges, former ministers, and many deputies.

Several PC leaders and the judiciary later seemed offended by the allegations, though at first only Cartes seemed to be affected. On Oct. 21, Cartes said, "To safeguard our moral integrity, my government will order a full investigation of these assassinations and charges."

Cartes—the owner of the country’s largest tobacco company, Tabacalera del Este, who has been under investigation in Brazil, Venezuela, and Aruba for connections to drug trafficking and selling contraband cigarettes and repeatedly accused of those crimes by ABC Color—said that he is not willing to live with narcopolitics. But he did not address statements by Acevedo or the accusations that linked the assassinations of the two journalists in Canindeyú to his Partido Colorado (NotiSur, April 4, 2014).

In 2010, when the president was only a powerful businessman, he gained notoriety after ABC Color reported on a WikiLeaks cable dated Jan. 5, 2010, in Washington, DC, that said the DEA was investigating Cartes for having used Banco Amambay to launder drug money (NotiSur, Jan. 18, 2013).

Church leaders speak out

On Nov. 6, the Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya (CEP) denounced the "overwhelming advance of drug mafias into the country’s institutions" and expressed concern for a growing infiltration into the country’s political life. A document signed by all bishops in the country said, "The traffickers pervert and co-opt all political sectors in all branches of government, something we have not yet seen in its entirety. The Catholic hierarchy, immersed in its own corruption scandal and who asked Pope Francis on Sept. 25 to dismiss the bishop of the Diocese of Ciudad del Este (NotiSur, Sept. 26, 2014), expressed the opinion that there is an "exponential growth in drug trafficking."

Finally, on Nov. 10, the president of the Consejo de la Magistratura Enrique Riera joined the chorus, saying that "at least 25% of the judges, including members of the CSJ, have some connection with drug traffickers in the Brazilian border area."

With this new element, the ruling Partido Colorado—in some areas the mafia’s greatest ally—had no option other than to announce it would be willing to impeach the judges. Riera, head of the group that supervises the conduct of all judges, including those on the CSJ, did not name names. But his denunciations correspond with an accusation drawn up by leaders of the opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), which three days earlier had announced it would call for the impeachment of Victor Núñez, an associate justice linked to the PC. Asunción daily Ultima Hora reported that President Cartes’ administration and his party decided to not leave the "task of judicial cleanup" in the opposition’s hands. On Nov. 12, an announcement was finally made that Núñez and three other associate justices would face impeachment.

Even if the "cleanup" promoted by the PLRA were to begin with the judiciary, "it can’t end there," Santiago Ortiz, secretary of the Sindicato de Periodistas de Paraguay, said several days earlier. 
following a meeting with Interior Minister de Vargas. "What should be investigated is drug trafficking as a whole."

Ortiz had asked, "How can there be an image of a person suspected of drug trafficking and homicide smiling in a posed photo next to the president?" The union leader was referring to a widely circulated image of Cartes next to fugitive Vilmar Acosta, suspected of ordering the killing of Medina and Almada, and Colorado Deputy Cristina Villalba, Acosta’s mentor and, until last August, president of the PC bloc in the lower house.

Everyone knows that the cycle of information and accusations will continue to escalate and that in time it will be possible to prove some of the accusations now thrown about. The damage can’t reach any higher now that the president is in the eye of the storm. For the time being, what’s left on the plate is an accusation by Julio Colmán, former Colorado deputy and current council member in Canindeyú, who Nov. 10 made a surprising statement on Radio Ñandutí placing Cartes in the middle of the worst of the accusations. Colmán said that former President Nicanor Duarte Frutos (2003-2008) and Cartes "know very well who the narcopoliticians in the region are, who the drug dealers are who corrupted them, and how the clan headed by Vilmar Acosta operates."

Colmán explained that the region bordering the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul doesn’t represent much electorally. "When candidates come here they don’t come in search of votes; we’re very few here. They come looking for something else—to negotiate with the mafia, who give money instead of votes. Nicanor and Horacio know that very well, and that’s why they came here and continue to come regularly."

That same day, Radio Ñandutí reporters pressured César Benítez, a member of the PC’s Tribunal de Conducta, asking him if "any drug dealer can be a Colorado candidate." Benítez responded tersely, "If they comes with money, yes."

-- End --