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Paraguayan Dictator Ousted: Summary Of Events, Statements, Feb. 2-feb. 6

by John Neagle

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Feb. 2: On Thursday evening, 40 to 50 Sherman tanks supported by Gen. Alfredo Stroessner's second-in-command, Gen. Andres Rodriguez, fired on the headquarters of the police and the presidential guard. Rodriguez headed the First Army Corps, the biggest and best-equipped military unit in the country. Paraguay's armed forces number 12,500. The coup followed a dispute within the ruling Colorado Party between a pro-Stroessner faction known as the "Militants," and the "Traditionalists," who wanted to distance the party from the dictator. Rodriguez was identified with the traditionalists. Firefights involving cannon, recoilless rifles and heavy machine guns began at about 9:45 p.m. local time. Shooting was first heard in front of the First Army Corps' base in Loma Pyta, about four miles north of Asuncion. Some residents fled their homes, and witnesses reported seeing dozens of tanks leave the base and rumble downtown. Fighting continued for about eight hours. In a statement broadcast several times by Radio Primero de Marzo, Rodriguez asked citizens to remain calm. "Dear countrymen, appreciated comrades of the armed forces, we have left our barracks in defense of the dignity and the honor of the armed forces, for the full and total unification of the ruling Colorado Party, for the initiation of democratization in Paraguay, for the respect of human rights, and for the defense of our Roman Catholic religion," he said. Unnamed diplomats and political sources cited by AP said earlier Thursday that Rodriguez apparently was ordered to resign and retire, or accept the post of defense minister. He refused. According to a report by AP on Feb. 4, Rodriguez apparently tried to arrest Stroessner on Thursday as he dined at the home of a friend near the corps' base. Stroessner's bodyguards resisted and he escaped to the escort battalion, according to a witness who saw the exchange of gunfire. An unnamed witness told AP that after a battle at the barracks, he saw Stroessner being driven off in his black Chevrolet between two tanks. TV stations abruptly ended transmissions at 11:45 p.m., more than an hour early. All but two radio stations also ceased transmitting. [Earlier in the week, police arrested 21 opposition activists and beat Roman Catholic religious leaders trying to attend a mass in Coronel Oviedo, east of the capital.] Stroessner was put under house arrest at a residence pertaining to the 1st Army Corps in Asuncion. Feb. 3: Early Friday, the Roman Catholic station Radio Caritas reported that heavy smoke could be seen from the quarters of the presidential guard. Later, the station reported that electricity was cut in its sector of town, and that fighter aircraft were observed flying over the city. Rodriguez was sworn in as president, as was a new nine-member cabinet, consisting of seven civilians, a general and a retired general. Referring to press reports that Rodriguez had promised to restore democracy, White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said, "We certainly would hope that he would move in that direction." Fitzwater refused to comment on charges by international jurists' organizations that Gen. Rodriguez had been involved in drug trafficking. On Friday, press reports citing military sources said that some 100 people, mostly police and soldiers, were killed in the coup. Most of the victims, according to the sources, were killed in fighting around the army general staff and the police headquarters. Meanwhile, several eyewitnesses cited by AFP and other news agencies said there had been civilian casualties. Throughout the day, Asuncion residents filled the streets, celebrating the fall of Stroessner. Chilean Foreign Minister Felipe

Errazuriz denied that his government had received a request for Stroessner's political asylum. Several political and civic organizations in Chile expressed outrage at the possibility of Stroessner residing in their country. Meanwhile, several unofficial sources reported the imminent arrival of Stroessner in Santiago. Errazuriz added that the question of political asylum must first be analyzed before any decision could be adopted. Local radio stations reported that the foreign ministry had already analyzed the request. On the same day, Del Cobre airline's regular flights to Asuncion were canceled. In a comment to the local press, Chilean Defense Minister Patricio Carvajal said that his government would be disposed to extend political asylum to Stroessner. Local radio station Gigante reported that the Carabineros Hospital in Santiago was prepared to receive the former Paraguayan president. In Asuncion, radio stations Caritas and Primero de Marzo reported that Rodriguez had given Stroessner until 9 p.m. local time on Saturday to leave the country. Congresspersons from 33 nations meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica, unanimously approved a resolution offering support for the Paraguayan people, and calling for the restoration of civil liberties at the earliest possible time. Feb. 3 was the fourth and final day of the 9th European-Latin American Parliamentary Conference. The resolution called for the immediate release of political prisoners, and participation by democratic opposition parties in discussions and decisions regarding Paraguay's future. In Caracas (Venezuela), three presidents and two foreign ministers said that any reactions regarding the future of Paraguay would be premature. The coup, they said, could eventually lead to the restoration of democracy in Paraguay. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that Paraguay could construct democracy little by little. However, he added, "We have the Haitian example where Jean Claude Duvalier was deposed, and the generals remained who massacred their own people." Ortega said that the reactions of the Paraguayan people will determine to what point democracy can be achieved. Ecuadoran President Rodrigo Borja said that Stroessner's fall could lead to the return of democracy in Paraguay. "It was time for the Paraguayan general, in power since 1954, to fall." Portuguese President Mario Soares asserted that the coup may be beneficial for a democratic opening. However, he added, "we lament the deaths" that occurred during the takeover. Argentine Foreign Minister Dante Caputo said that Argentina and Latin America in general continue to encounter the "phantasm of authoritarianism on one or the other extreme." Mexican Foreign Minister Fernando Solana Morales stated that the facts received from Paraguay were at the moment incomplete. He added that Mexico hopes to see democratic systems installed in all of Latin America. Feb. 4: Citing military sources, political opposition leader Domingo Laino told reporters that street fighting left between 250 and 300 people dead. Laino, president of the Authentic Radical Party, was frequently imprisoned and exiled by Stroessner. He also heads a four-party opposition coalition known as the National Accord. Radio Caritas, also quoting military sources, earlier put the toll at around 200. As of Saturday, there was no official announcement on the number of casualties. Chilean radio stations reported that Stroessner was in a coma, and thus could not leave Paraguay. The US State Department denied that Stroessner had been granted political asylum in the United States. In Asuncion, former head of the national electoral commission, Juan Esteche Fanego, said that the new government will hold presidential elections within three months, and that the current parliament may be dissolved next week. Esteche is close to the traditionalist faction of the congress that took control of the ruling Colorado party in the wake of the coup. Esteche did not say if opposition political parties proscribed by the Stroessner regime would be permitted to participate in the new elections. Speaking at his home in Buenos Aires, Paraguay's Ambassador to Argentina, Miguel Angel Bestard, told reporters that Stroessner is heading for exile in the US. According to Bestard, Stroessner "should already be en route with his family" to Miami. Bestard said the Stroessner's ouster was not a coup, but rather that the general had resigned from the

presidency. He added that he was authorized to announce Gen. Stroessner's flight to the US by Gen. Andres Rodriguez. Forces loyal to Rodriguez rounded up about 20 Stroessner followers and aides, raising the total to about 50, according to an unnamed anti-Stroessner political leader cited by AP. Officers of Stroessner's presidential escort, who defended the general during the fighting were also arrested. No number was given. Roofs of the escort battalion's headquarters were collapsed, and its brick walls had been damaged by mortar shells. A high-ranking foreign diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity to AP, said when asked for an estimate of casualties, "We have 300." Chief of operations at Paraguay's international airport, identified only as Maj. Sanabria, said Saturday that Stroessner so far had not left the country. He denied a rumor that Chile had sent a plane to pick up Stroessner. Local radio stations reported that soldiers raided the house of Stroessner's justice minister, Eugenio Jacquet, where they seized boxes of documents. Radio Caritas said that Jacquet was en route home from Caracas, where he represented Stroessner at the inauguration Thursday of President Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela. The former interior minister and leader of the ruling Colorado Party, Sabino Montanaro, was reportedly given shelter at the Honduran Embassy. Feb. 5: Early Sunday, Virgilio Moretzsohn, a councilor at the Brazilian Embassy in Asuncion told reporters that Brazil had agreed to Paraguay's request that it accept Stroessner. He said, "We are studying with the new Paraguayan government the conditions for this exile as well as the city in Brazil where he will go." He refused to name the cities under consideration. According to local press reports, Stroessner had previously requested asylum from the governments of the US, Chile, Bolivia, West Germany and South Africa. On Sunday afternoon, Stroessner and about 20 family members and aides boarded a Boeing 707 at President Stroessner International Airport. The two black limousines that carried the fallen dictator's entourage to the airport were accompanied by truckloads of soldiers in combat gear. Radio stations in the capital reported that Stroessner was accompanied by his two sons, Gustavo, an air force lieutenant colonel, and Alfredo. Dozens of protesters who turned out at the airport clapped and chanted, "Go away dictator!", "Democracy and liberty that is what Paraguay wants!", and "Adios, adios!" Shortly after Stroessner left Asuncion, the Brazilian Foreign Ministry said that granting the general asylum was in accordance with Brazil's constitution and international humanitarian requirements. Chief of the Brazilian Embassy's political section in Asuncion, Jose Roberto Pinto, told AP Sunday afternoon that temporary asylum was granted to Stroessner and his son, Gustavo, who was considered Stroessner's successor. Also granted asylum were Gustavo's wife, Maria; six security guards, and ex-Foreign Minister Rodney Elpidio Acevedo. Pinto said that while Stroessner eventually will have to find a permanent home in another country, no limit was put on how long he might remain in Brazil. Stroessner's son Alfredo, and his wife Marta, who is Rodriguez's daughter, were vacationing in Uruguay at the time of the coup. They returned on Feb. 4, and decided to remain in Paraguay. Conflicting reports on Stroessner's destination in Brazil were issued throughout the day. Radio Caritas reported that Stroessner would go to the Atlantic coastal resort of Guaratuba, in the Brazilian state of Parana. Stroessner, who owns a mansion on the island, has vacationed there often. According to Brazilian press reports, Stroessner was to land in Curitiba, capital of Parana state, about 550 miles south of Rio de Janeiro. From there he was to travel to a beach house owned by the Stroessner family in Guaratuba, according to TV Globo, the nation's principal private network. Other press reports said Stroessner would land in Sao Paulo and undergo medical treatment there. According to Notimex, Stroessner and entourage arrived on the island of Guaratuba at 3:48 p.m. local time. Unnamed diplomatic sources in Asuncion were cited by AFP as saying that Stroessner would travel first to Sao Paulo for a medical checkup before arriving in Guaratuba. The general underwent prostate surgery last August and rarely appeared in public after his operation. Citing unnamed Brazilian sources, AP reported that Stroessner and his

entourage landed at 5:55 p.m. in Campinas, Sao Paulo state, 290 miles southwest of Rio de Janeiro, on a Paraguay Airlines Boeing 707, then left on another aircraft for the small town of Itumbiara in the central Brazilian state of Goias. A Brazilian foreign ministry source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AP that Stroessner, who has property in the area, was to stay in Itumbiara "only temporarily." Shortly before Stroessner took off, Gen. Rodriguez, a 65-year-old cavalry general, told reporters at the airport that he planned to "guarantee all freedoms and total democracy." Asked how, he replied, "I will call general elections in 90 days." Paraguay's new Foreign Minister Luis Maria Argana informed Argentine Ambassador Raul Quijano that congressional elections would be held within three months and presidential elections within six months, a radio station in Buenos Aires reported Sunday. On Sunday at Paraguay's Campo Grande army base, Argana told reporters that general elections will be held within three months: "Within a few days, we will decree a new election law and a new electoral system which will dissolve both houses of Congress, and call for elections within three months dating from last Friday." It was not clear if Rodriguez would run in the elections. The Argentine government recognized Gen. Rodriguez' government one day after the coup, a Buenos Aires newspaper reported Sunday. Paraguayans were already busy removing all vestiges of the "Stroessner era" from public buildings, facilities and streets. The port city, Ciudad Stroessner, on the Parana River on Paraguay's border with Brazil will be renamed "Ciudad del Este." Domingo Laino was cited by the New York Times as saying, "The coup has further weakened the system as we knew it. Rodriguez is in a cul-de-sac, and democracy is the only way out. It's the only way he can whitewash himself ethically, economically and politically." Laino said the opposition was more interested in looking to the future. In this regard, he asserted that prosecution of those responsible for human rights abuses and corruption could destabilize the process. Feb. 6: President Rodriguez announced an unprecedented news conference, but his aides failed to inform the president's military police. When the reporters arrived at a palace ballroom for the conference, the MPs chased them away. After the mixup was resolved, the guards led the correspondents into the ballroom. According to AP, Paraguayans have no memory of any leader taking direct, uncensored questions from reporters. Gen. Rodriguez denied links with drug trafficking, calling drugs the "scourge of mankind." He said, "I detest drugs. I swear as a Catholic and as a family man; I swear on my children, I have no connections with drugs." Rodriguez has been linked with the traffic by foreign diplomats, media reports and academics. However, no conclusive evidence has been presented, and no charges have been filed. When asked whether he would cooperate with the US Drug Enforcement Administration, he said Paraguay "will cooperate with all foreign governments and agencies, including the United States, and the more help we get the better. We will fight together." Rodriguez announced that elections will be held May 1. Only communists will be prohibited from participating in the elections. In response to questions by reporters on casualties during the eight hours of fighting, Rodriguez said, "Believe me, total casualties dead plus wounded do not exceed 50." Rodriguez said Congress has been dissolved and that the new president would take office immediately upon election. According to the new president, Stroessner "was not a dictator...If the Colorado Party elected him for so many years, it must have been because of confidence in him." Reporters pointed out that the elections were considered fraudulent by the Paraguayan opposition and most foreign observers. Rodriguez replied that in his view, the elections were democratic. Paraguayan Foreign Minister Luis Maria Argana said that the country's constitution will not be modified, although the electoral statutes restricting free organization of political parties would be "reformed." Brazil's TV Machete network said Stroessner was planning to move to Guaratuba from his temporary exile in Itumbiara, Goias state, where he has been given a guest house of the Furnas electricity company. Meanwhile, governor of Parana state, Alvaro Dias,

has declared Stroessner persona non grata. Spokesperson for Chile's Foreign Ministry, Uldaricio Figueroa, announced that his government has recognized Paraguay's new government. Former interior minister Subino Montanaro, 63, has requested political asylum from the government of Uruguay. Montanaro is considered the principal person responsible for political repression in Paraguay. At present, the former minister remains a guest of the Honduran Embassy in Asuncion. AP reported that as of Feb. 6, Montevideo's response was unknown. In Santos, Sao Paulo state, Jair Meneguelli, leader of the Workers Central (Central Unico dos Trabalhadores- CUT), said Stroessner should be sent back to Paraguay to be prosecuted for all his crimes. Meneguelli asserted that in giving political asylum to the former dictator, Brazil permits Stroessner to live a dream. CUT, said Meneguelli, will organize protests against President Jose Sarney's decision. CUT members are concentrated in Brazil's "industrial triangle" (comprised of workplaces located in and around Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state). The Central is affiliated with the Workers Party (PT). Former governor of Rio de Janeiro state, and head of the Democratic Labor Party (Partido Democratico Trabalhista- PDT), Leonel Brizola, said that Stroessner's destiny should be decided by the Paraguayan people. Former PDT deputy, Mariano Goncalves, said he did not agree with the government's decision to provide Stroessner asylum. He said that on Feb. 9 he would submit a suit before the judiciary challenging the decision. He added, "Brazil cannot accept this trash (lixo) from Latin America." (Basic data from AFP, 02/02/89; AP, Xinhua, AFP, Notimex, 02/03/89; AFP, Notimex, AP, New York Times, 02/04/89; AP, AFP, DPA, Notimex, New York Times, 02/05/89; New York Times, AP, AFP, Xinhua, DPA, 02/06/89)

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