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Paraguay: Summary Of Events & Statements Following Ouster Of Stroessner, Feb. 5-feb. 13

by John Neagle

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Feb. 5: Paraguay's new president, Gen. Andres Rodriguez said he was willing to be the ruling Colorado Party's candidate in the elections scheduled for May 1. (See LADC 02/07/89 for summary of military coup resulting in the ouster of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner.) Feb. 6: An unnamed foreign diplomat cited by Alan Riding of the New York Times (02/07/89), said that Rodriguez has a strong personal reason to disapprove of drugs: His daughter, Marta, is married to Stroessner's son, Alfredo, who is known to be addicted to cocaine. "Freddy's mistreatment of Marta was another reason for tension between the two generals," the diplomat said. Unnamed opposition leaders cited by the Times said Rodriguez was anxious to avoid investigation of the past because he and many others in the new government became quite wealthy through their involvement in rackets and businesses tolerated by Stroessner. Rodriguez, for instance, owns the country's largest foreign exchange house, several farms and cattle ranches, a brewery and shares in several banks and construction companies. He resides in a huge mansion modeled after a French chateau. Feb. 7: New foreign minister, Luis Maria Argana, who was considered the most likely civilian candidate for the Colorado Party's presidential nomination, endorsed Rodriguez's unofficial candidacy. Argana told reporters: "It is best for Paraguay because General Rodriguez has achieved national conciliation. He has the vision to carry out the real democratization of Paraguay thanks to his moral antecedents." According to Argana, "The government of General Stroessner had different stages. There were 32 or 33 years of great government. Stroessner was a great president during many years. Unfortunately, during his last two years, he was surrounded by a group of irresponsible and greedy politicians with no sense of nationalism." Argana, who is leader of the traditionalist faction of the Colorado Party restored to power by the coup, said the problem of past corruption had to be handled with "great prudence" because "more than revenge and punishment, we want to project Paraguay toward a new democracy." Opposition parties were dismayed by Argana's endorsement of Rodriguez's candidacy and alarmed by the prospect of trying to organize an effective campaign for the general elections in only three months. Among other things, the Authentic Radical Liberal Party said it wants a new voters' list drawn up that does not contain the names of tens of thousands of dead people who would magically come alive to vote for Stroessner. If Rodriguez wins the election, he would serve out Stroessner's current term until August 1993. He would have to wait five years before running again. Rodriguez ordered a major reshuffling of the armed forces, resulting in the replacement of 11 generals with his own supporters. Some officers were retired, and others transferred. Next, the president ordered the arrest of former officials on charges of embezzling public funds. Detained were former education minister Carlos Ortiz Ramirez and Stroessner's private secretary Mario Abdo Benitez. Domingo Laino, an opposition leader who was arrested 10 times in 1988 for participated in prohibited protests, said police surveillance of him was lifted for the first time since he returned from exile in 1987. He told reporters that he had been summoned to meet new Interior Minister Orlando Machuca Vargas to discuss the new regime's pledge to return the country to democracy. Laino reiterated criticism that Rodriguez' plan to hold elections May 1 did not give the opposition enough time to prepare. He recommended that the elections

be postponed 10 months to a year. Paraguay's best-known novelist, Augusto Roa Bastos, has been informed that he can return home after years in exile. El Pueblo, the newspaper of the Revolutionary February Movement Party, was on sale for the first time since Stroessner ordered it shut down in August 1987. Feb. 8: According to judicial sources cited by AFP, police arrested more former associates and supporters of Gen. Stroessner, including three of his senior aides and journalists in the official media. Police also searched the former officials' homes and seized arms and valuables in the capital and in Ciudad del Este, formerly Puerto Stroessner, some 330 km. east of Asuncion. Included among the detained were former education minister Carlos Ortiz Ramirez and Antonio Colman Rodriguez, an advisor to former interior minister Sabino Montanaro, who took refuge in the Honduran Embassy following the coup. Also detained was the former director of the national postal system, Manuel Modesto Esquivel, who was grabbed by police as he tried to commit suicide by shooting himself in the mouth. Cesar Romeo Acosta, former president of the Central Bank, and Cameron Montanaro, the cousin of the former interior minister, were also arrested, police sources said. All have been accused of misusing public funds, some of which was allegedly used to support Stroessner, who is in exile in Brazil. Police also arrested deputies Enrique Reverchon, Gregorio Samudio and Raul Ernesto Villalba, who were Stroessner supporters in the "militant" faction of the ruling Colorado Party. Police sources told AFP that journalists at the official newspaper Patria who have written attacks against the opposition during the Stroessner era were fired and some were arrested. Radio Nacional director Alejandro Caceres, a strong supporter of political propaganda under Stroessner, was dismissed. The daily newspaper ABC Color, which had been closed for five years, has announced plans to resume publication within 30 days. Radio Nanduty, which was also closed under Stroessner, will go back on the air within a week, said owner and director Humberto Rubin. Feb. 10: At a press conference in Mexico City, Oscar Llanes, first secretary of the Paraguayan Embassy in Mexico, said that beginning in 1987, the Stroessner regime was weakened by allegations "assaulting the nation." Persons rightfully accused of corruption and stealing the nation's resources, said Llanes, committed the "most cruel of crimes, betrayal of the fatherland." Llanes said Stroessner accomplished much for his country, and was blameless. Some of his aides, said the diplomat, were engaged in corruption. Llanes described the coup as an attempt by certain sectors of the military to accelerate the democratic process. He said he disagreed with Paraguay's opposition parties who have argued they need more time to prepare for presidential elections. He said, "They have had 35 years to organize themselves. What did the opposition do in all that time?" In an exclusive interview with Brazilian TV network O Globo, Stroessner said that he had not yet decided on his permanent residence. Regarding accusations of corruption launched against his government, the deposed leaders said that he had a tranquil conscience. Referring to problems his administration had with the Catholic Church in Paraguay, Stroessner pointed out that similar problems exist in other countries: "We fulfilled our duty, and so did the Church." In response to a question on the fighting which took place late Feb. 2 and early Feb. 3, Stroessner laughed and said: "I do not wish to appear courageous, but at no time was I afraid." Feb. 11: Thousands of Paraguayans participated in a rally in Asuncion to demand postponement of the May 1 elections so as to permit the opposition adequate time to launch an effective campaign. Domingo Laino, leader of the Authentic Radical Liberal Party, said: "The people demand an authentic democracy and not a mere facade." Opposition leaders have argued that the Colorado Party, in power for 42 years, is too wealthy and entrenched to be effectively challenged at the polls at such short notice. Local radio reports indicated that the crowd numbered 50,000 to 60,000. Witnesses told foreign reporters that 10,000 attended the rally. The demonstration was organized by the National Accord, an opposition coalition consisting of four small opposition parties. It was broadcast live by one of Asuncion's two television stations. Feb. 13: In a statement,

the AFL-CIO said that if the new Paraguayan government acts to implement mechanisms toward respecting labor rights, Washington's suspension of benefits to Paraguay under its Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) would likely be removed. Paraguay was removed from the list of GSP beneficiaries on April 1, 1987, result of labor rights violations by the Stroessner regime. Opposition leader Domingo Laino told reporters that the National Accord had submitted a formal request to the Interior Ministry for the postponement of the May 1 general elections. He said the request was signed by representatives of three of the Accord's four parties. The fourth, the Colorado Popular Movement (Movimiento Popular Colorado-MOPOCO) supports the provisional government's faction of the ruling Colorado Party. The request contained the following points: postponement of the elections, reform of electoral legislation, dismantlement of the repressive apparatus created under the Stroessner regime, and a call for a constitutional convention with the objective of updating the country's magna carta. Former governor of Arizona and US presidential candidate, Bruce Babbitt, told reporters in Asuncion that Paraguayan officials had assured a US observer delegation that the upcoming elections would be fair and wholly democratic. Babbitt said members of the delegation were very hopeful concerning the regime's respect for human rights. He pointed out that police behaved calmly during an opposition demonstration on Saturday in the capital city. Among others, the US delegation included Rep. Bruce Morrison (D-Conn.), and Robert White, former ambassador to Paraguay during the Carter administration. The delegation, which visited Paraguay on the invitation of the National Accord, met with representatives of opposition parties, and of the Colorado Party. Morrison told reporters that he supported the opposition's request for postponement of the general elections. According to Morrison, the Rodriguez government had not yet delivered a request for the resumption of US economic aid to Paraguay. He added that a resumption of aid would be natural once evidence existed that human and labor rights were no longer being violated. Babbitt said he was concerned by the opposition's demand to postpone the elections. (Basic data from New York Times, 02/07/89; AFP, New York Times, Washington Post, 02/08/89; AFP, 02/10/89; Xinhua, 02/12/89; AP, AFP, 02/13/89)

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