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Venezuela: Notes On Actions To Prosecute Former Senior Officials

by John Neagle

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On April 22, Venezuelan newspapers reported that Judge Luis La Riva, currently investigating allegations of foreign-exchange fraud, issued an order April 21 barring former finance ministers Manuel Azpurua and Hector Hurtado from leaving the country. According to congressperson Carlos Tablante, whose accusations led to the investigation, the case involves overbilling and grants for dollars for non-existent imports that could amount to more than \$4 billion. The alleged fraud occurred during the administration of Social Democrat President Jaime Lusinchi, when the government was implementing a differential dollar exchange rate system. The system was abolished shortly after the Feb. 2 inauguration of Lusinchi's successor, Carlos Andres Perez, also a Social Democrat. The current single exchange rate arrangement is based on the free market rate, which averaged about 36 bolivars per dollar last month. Azpurua served as finance minister during the first three years of Lusinchi's five-year administration. He was replaced by Hurtado, who had previously served as minister of development. Also named in the prohibition order were former deputy finance minister Jorge Garcia Duque; Egdalia Bastardo, who had been the director of Recadi, the government agency in charge of granting preferential exchange for certain imports; and an unspecified number of other individuals who the judge did not identify. The investigations by a congressional committee and Judge La Riva are focused on Recadi. According to an April 12 report by Notimex, former president Lusinchi could be charged with conspiracy in mass murder in a suit brought before unidentified international tribunals by former military intelligence legal adviser, Randolf Rosal. The incident in question occurred last Oct. 29 when 14 fishermen were killed at El Amparo, located in southwestern Venezuela near the Colombian border. In December, two survivors of the massacre, Wolmer Pinilla and Augusto Arias, reportedly sought asylum in Mexico where they remained for one month. At present, Pinilla and Arias are residing in Peare, west of Caracas, under protection of Venezuelan clergypersons. When the two men returned to Venezuela, a military court ordered the arrest of 19 members of the army and police force who were involved in the El Amparo massacre. At that time, an order for the arrest of Pinilla and Arias was revoked. (Basic data from Notimex, 04/12/89; AP, 04/22/89)

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