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Venezuela: Army Intervenes In Caracas Police Walk-out; Police Refuse To Drop Demands

by John Neagle

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On June 8, the 10,000-member Caracas police force walked off the job after 10 officers were disciplined for demanding a reorganization that would remove National Guard officers from the police hierarchy and replace them with career police officers. By Sunday morning, Venezuelan army troops had stormed Caracas police stations to quash the strike and disarm the police. According to Pastor Heydra, head of the official Central Information Office, on June 11 Caracas police stations were back to "normal." On June 11, Defense Minister Italo del Valle Alliegro said the Caracas police chief had been replaced and about 20 police officers were under arrest for insubordination. The new police chief, National Guard Gen. Gonzalo Bajares Colmenares, told reporters that a commission including the heads of three police precincts had been established, and would present an overall police force reorganization project in 15 days. The Metropolitan Police demonstrated in downtown Caracas on June 12 to renew their demands and protest excesses committed when troops took over police stations in and around the capital. An estimated 1,000 policemen chanted, "Death to the National Guard," "We want justice." In Guarenas, 40 km. east of Caracas, four policemen and two Guardsmen were injured by gunfire June 10 when security forces stormed a police barracks. Local press reports said the clash lasted two hours, and that an armored vehicle crashed through the door of the station. Police said about 36 of their number were arrested for insubordination over the weekend. Demonstrators said the appointment of Gen. Bajares as police chief violates constitutional law prohibiting anyone from simultaneously holding both military and civilian posts. Caracas department Governor Virgilio Avila called for the military intervention. In order to placate the police, he is pressuring the government to authorize higher wages for policemen. Avila and Gen. Bajares visited police headquarters in northern Caracas early on June 12 to request that officers put their uniforms on and return to work. Police told reporters that most officers refused. Doris Gonzalez, an attorney for the strikers, told AFP that the policemen were demanding an immediate withdrawal of security forces from police precincts and a commission to mediate the dispute. She said strikers also demanded that all police fired for striking be reinstated, an end to persecution of strikers and raids on their homes, and that authorities rescind arrest orders for strikers. (Basic data from AFP, 06/11/89, 06/12/89) ***** SUMMARIES & ANALYSIS

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