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Congress Resurrects Committee to Investigate Fraud at Food Agency

by LADB Staff

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The opposition-led Chamber of Deputies has decided to resurrect the special committee to investigate recent mismanagement of the state food distribution agency (Compania Nacional de Subsistencias Populares, CONASUPO). The authority for the special commission expired during the last session of Congress, and there were some questions about whether the new Congress would place a high priority on bringing back the commission because of resistance from legislators from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "The only purpose of renewing the commission would be for the opposition to achieve its political ends," said PRI Deputy Ricardo Monreal in early October.

The commission was originally established to examine the role of Raul Salinas de Gortari in mismanagement and corruption in CONASUPO, including allegations that the agency was used for laundering millions of pesos in drug-trafficking profits. After negotiations between the PRI and the bloc of four opposition parties, the Chamber of Deputies decided unanimously to bring back the commission and to expand the scope of its investigation. "The seeds of corruption affected CONASUPO's operations," said commission member Juana Gonzalez Ortiz of the PRI. "An investigation is essential to punish those responsible for criminal activities."

PRI supports commission, but seeks clear objectives

For his part, PRI legislative leader Arturo Nunez said the governing party welcomes the investigation, even though the case is likely to cause some embarrassment for the PRI. "We want to prove that we have nothing to hide," said PRI legislative leader Arturo Nunez. Nunez said the commission should specify clear objectives and procedures to prevent the investigation from turning into an "inquisition" against Raul Salinas. The new 10-member commission will be formed by two deputies from each of the five parties represented in the lower house.

Deputy Pablo Gomez of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said the commission does not give the legislative branch the authority to conduct a criminal investigation. In fact, Gomez said, all the information obtained from hearings on the CONASUPO case will be turned over to President Ernesto Zedillo, who will determine what action, if any, must be taken. But Deputy Laura Itzel Castillo, also a member of the PRD, said the commission's limited authority will not prevent a thorough investigation of the matter. "We have pledged to the voters to end the impunity that has prevailed in our country for decades," said Itzel.

On a related matter, Switzerland's Federal Tribunal overruled an agreement by Swiss prosecutors to cooperate with Mexico in investigating the more than US\$100 million found in Raul Salinas's bank accounts. The Swiss government froze the accounts in 1995, based on information provided by Mexican and US anti-narcotics agents that the accounts were tied to drug trafficking.

According to news reports, the Swiss court suspended the cooperation agreement because it has found Mexico's claims about drug connections to be "too vague." The tribunal argued that Mexico had failed to specify what role, if any, Raul Salinas played in the drug business. For his part, Salinas contends the money was obtained through legitimate and legal business enterprises. (Sources: Novedades, 10/15/97; Miami Herald, 10/28/97; Excelsior, 10/11/97, 10/15/97, 10/31/97; La Jornada, The News, 10/31/97)

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