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## **Aftermath Of Failed Coup In Venezuela: Summary Of Events, February 11 - 24**

*by Erika Harding*

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Feb. 11: Foreign Minister Armando Duran released a document expressing support for the Venezuelan government signed by the heads of state of Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Suriname, and a representative of the Peruvian government. Local newspapers reported that the government and media organization directors reached an informal agreement under which the administration pledged to suspend military custody and censorship of the media. In exchange, the editors promised to avoid contributing to "public unrest." State of emergency suspending certain constitutional rights, including freedom of speech, continued in effect. Daily newspaper El Nacional resumed publication the day after security forces occupied paper offices and shut down presses. The Tuesday issue included articles criticizing the government. Caracas newspapers published statements from journalist associations, the Catholic Church and opposition politicians denouncing the government for abuse of power since the Feb. 4 coup attempt. More than 100 journalists marched through downtown Caracas to the national congress building demanding immediate reinstatement of constitutional rights. The demonstrators shouted, "Democracy with censorship is dictatorship!" Lawmakers agreed to their demand for congressional debate on the issue of press freedom. President Carlos Andres Perez and Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich said the rebel troops would be judged "severely and rigorously" by the military courts. Feb. 12: Caracas daily newspaper Ultimas Noticias reported that the government will replace army officers arrested or removed following the attempted coup with members of the army reserves. In addition, 100 cadets at the military academy will be promoted to second lieutenant before graduation in order to fill vacant officer slots. According to Ultimas Noticias, 320 officers were arrested in connection with the coup. The newspaper also reported the desertion of an entire battalion of 900 soldiers equipped with "sophisticated weaponry" during the coup. Military intelligence is currently conducting an intensive search for the missing soldiers and weapons. Two reporters for the Caracas daily newspaper El Universal, Roberto Romanelli and Jose Cohen, were taken into custody for two hours by soldiers when they attempted to photograph coup leaders as they exited the military court building in the capital city. Cohen also works as a photographer for the Agence France-Presse. Bolivar state governor Andres Velasquez, of the left-wing Radical Cause party, proposed a public referendum on holding general elections before the scheduled date in 1994. He said voters could choose between the continuity of President Perez's administration until 1994, and an elected substitute. Radical Cause and Venezuelan Radical Party members and former president Rafael Caldera were the only congressional representatives to vote against the suspension of constitutional guarantees decreed by Perez. Perez said that restrictions on freedom of expression would be lifted by Feb. 16. Other constitutional guarantees will not be reinstated until after Feb. 27 in order to forestall public protest demonstrations. February 27 is the anniversary of the 1989 "Caracazo," or mass protests against government-decreed price hikes. Hundreds of people were killed during street violence and looting. In protest of a decision by the congress to prohibit entry by reporters to congressional buildings, the National Journalists College (CNP) and the National Press Workers Union (SNTP) announced they will not cover statements or incidents involving the congress or any member of congress.

who voted in favor of the decision. The vote to block press access, enforced by the National Guard, was supported by representatives of Perez's Democratic Action (Accion Democratica-AD), the Christian Democrat COPEI, and the New Democratic Generation parties. In celebration of annual "Youth Day," Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) students gathered at the Plaza Bolivar in downtown Caracas. The students placed flowers on the statue of Simon Bolivar and made speeches criticizing the government's economic policies and the suspension of constitutional rights. The event was closely monitored by several military and police anti-riot squads. No incidents were reported. According to the Defense Ministry, brigadier generals in command of army garrisons at Maracaibo, Valencia, Maracay and Caracas, have been replaced, but not yet transferred to other posts, nor retired. The four garrisons were the organizational centers for leaders of the Feb. 4 coup attempt. Of 120 army battalions, 12 participated in the failed coup. Feb. 13: In a letter, former colonel Mohamed Ali Seineldin, principal leader of at least two attempted coups against the Argentine government, expressed solidarity with Venezuelan counterparts. Seineldin has been incarcerated since Dec. 3, 1990. The Interior Ministry issued a communique stating that the country had returned to "absolute normalcy." After calling on Venezuelans to avoid all public demonstrations, the communique said the government was prepared to respond to the "disinformation" campaign. Journalists suspected the government was responding to a series of anonymous bomb threats and reports that about 1,000 soldiers had deserted and remain in hiding. The communique cited Defense Minister Ochoa Antich's statement that only 16 soldiers deserted during the events of Feb. 4. Daily newspaper El Universal reported that 266 officers have been detained for suspected involvement in the coup attempt. Members of the COPEI and the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) opposition parties joined the Radical Cause in calling for a public referendum on the continuation of the Perez government. According to a public opinion poll published by El Diario de Caracas, 58% of respondents said that on the day of the coup, former president Rafael Caldera showed the greatest capacity to run the country. Only 6% identified Perez in this fashion. Eduardo Fernandez, COPEI secretary general and president of the Christian Democrat International, issued several recommendations to the government to counter the causes and effects of the attempted coup. The recommendations follow: 1) frontal attack on corruption by providing the Attorney General with "veto power," and authority to initiate investigations on corruption charges; 2) depoliticization of the judicial branch; 3) discipline in government foreign debt policy and a public rendering of accounts since the 1989 foreign debt restructuring; 4) stepped-up privatization of state-owned enterprises; 5) reduction in the number of cabinet members from 16 to five; and, 6) cut government spending to curb inflation. According to Fernandez, "Our economy must serve the common people...and become productive and competitive. Political democracy must generate economic democracy and social justice." Feb. 14: During a speech at the port of Capurano, President Perez said, "Venezuela's democratic institutions have definitely been strengthened" following the defeat of the coup attempt, "although there are deficiencies in our institutions, in the government's operational capacity and in the leadership of the political parties." Feb. 15: Attorney General Ramon Escovar Salom called for reinstatement of constitutional guarantees suspended Feb. 4 by presidential decree. According to UCV student federation president Luis Figueroa, 27 civilians are being detained in connection with the coup attempt. Figueroa said the detainees include 17 students from the University of Carabobo; five from the Western University, who are being held incommunicado by the secret police (DISIP); Henry Benitez, president of the Andean University student federation; and, a student representative to the Andean University Council. Family members and friends of persons arrested in connection with the coup attempt, led by MAS human rights director Enrique Ochoa Antich, formed a human rights defense group to monitor the treatment and trials of both military and civilian detainees.

Attorney General Escovar Salom told reporters that the detainees are protected by the constitution and their human rights are being fully respected. He rejected a call issued by AD party member David Morales Bello on Feb. 4 for execution of the insurgents. Escovar Salom said the AD leadership should reconsider Morales Bello's candidacy for president of the Senate, to be selected in March.

Feb. 17: Information Minister Andres Eloy Blanco announced reinstatement of the right to strike, and freedoms of expression and movement. The rights to personal freedom, free association and public demonstration, and the inviolability of private residences remain suspended. Consequently, police do not require arrest and search warrants. The CNP and SNTP press associations announced a 24-hour strike for Feb. 25 affecting radio, TV and print media. Strike organizers said the action is "in defense of the right to free speech, against self-censorship and for democracy."

Feb. 18: According to Defense Minister Ochoa Antich, the military courts filed criminal charges against 33 army officers, including Lt.Col. Hugo Chavez Frias. Twenty-four were described as coup "leaders or initiators," and the remaining nine as "followers." The 33 included five lieutenant colonels, seven majors, 19 captains and two lieutenants. Ochoa Antich said that in addition to 136 officers in custody, approximately 2,000 soldiers and about 30 civilians have been arrested in connection with the failed coup. Ochoa Antich told reporters that on Feb. 4, Lt.Col. Chavez Frias, accused of leading the attempted coup, had offered him the role of leader. The minister said he rejected the offer, "because this is not offered to men of honor."

Feb. 19: In a statement published in *El Nacional*, the Patriotic Front a group of Venezuelan intellectuals established three years ago proposed a national constituent assembly to deal with the current crisis. The statement said the coup attempt cannot be simply dismissed as a product of a few young military officers' personal ambitions. In an article published by Caracas newspapers, former army commander, retired general Carlos Penaloza, said the causes of the attempted coup still exist. According to Penaloza, one of the major causes is the high level of corruption affecting all government divisions and bureaucracies. During a press conference in San Cristobal, 600 km. west of Caracas, President Perez said, "There is no reason to fear another coup attempt, all is calm. What we must fear is ourselves. If we don't know how to properly conduct ourselves, if we don't take advantage of the lessons from Feb. 4, then we could create difficulties and anxieties for Venezuela." Perez called on Venezuelans to confront the nation's problems, which "do not rest solely within the government." He emphasized that his administration has adopted several measures against corruption, including the restructuring of export and import regulations and subsidies. In a statement, the army high command called on troops to "conduct themselves like the soldiers they are, in uniform, and to not look for greater compensation than peace, freedom and democracy."

Feb. 20: The secret police (DISIP) bomb squad deactivated an explosive device at the office of the Venezuelan-US Chamber of Commerce in Caracas. Chamber members said the office had received several bomb threats since the Feb. 4 coup attempt.

Feb. 21: MAS Deputy Orlando Fernandez said the government is attempting to link Arturo Uslar Pietri, a well-known intellectual and government critic, and journalist Marcel Granier with the attempted coup. Fernandez led a group of legislators who interviewed Chavez Frias and other participants in the attempted coup. He said questions by military and civilian officials indicated an attempt to fabricate links to Uslar Pietri and Granier. According to the deputy, the coup leaders clearly stated that they were motivated by the overwhelming corruption in government, and participants were limited to members of the armed forces. The insurgents said they intended to invite "esteemed civilians" such as Uslar Pietri and former president Rafael Caldera to participate in their government, but stated that they had made no contact with these individuals prior to the coup attempt. They also denied any plans or attempts to assassinate President Perez. They said they intended to capture Perez and bring him to trial. A Caracas military court issued formal charges

against another 41 army officers involved in the failed coup. Senate vice president Jose Marsicobetre announced that he had vacated his seat in the Congress, and would not return "until political leaders provide a clear and concise indication to the nation of the will to change." Marsicobetre said the Congress has "more responsibility than any other [government branch] for the current crisis and all effects caused by generalized discontent." Feb. 23: At a press conference, Attorney General Ramon Escovar Salom called for the mass resignation of the Supreme Court in order to facilitate extensive justice system reforms and "depoliticization" of the court. Escovar Salom said the nation could lose about US\$16.6 million if the Court fails to act on over 106 corruption cases. Included in the 106 cases are charges of fraud and misappropriation of funds by former president Jaime Lusinchí and Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV) leader Antonio Ríos. Feb. 24: According to local press reports, two lieutenants who participated in the coup attempt were executed the same day following surrender to loyalist troops. Several witnesses said the executions were carried out by a female member of the secret police (DISIP). In a televised statement, Labor Minister Ruben Rodríguez said the strike planned for Feb. 25 by media organization employees was illegal. In response, SNTP secretary general Jesus Perez said that the Justice Ministry is the only entity with the authority to rule on the legality of a strike. MAS and COPEI party leaders officially rejected an offer to participate in "a political cabinet" being formed by President Perez. The offer would have allowed party members to occupy "untitled positions" in the government, intended to demonstrate the Perez administration's "broad" political base. COPEI secretary general Eduardo Fernandez said his party's most important role in the strengthening of Venezuelan democracy is to serve as an "opposition and countervailing force." Family members of the coup leaders collected thousands of signatures on a petition requesting that the national congress approve amnesty for participants who were "inspired to rebellion by Bolivarian ideals." (Sources: Washington Post, 02/11/92, 02/12/92; Associated Press, 02/11/92, 02/13/92; Inter Press Service, 02/10/92, 02/12/92, 02/14/92, 02/15/92; Notimex, 02/11/92, 02/17/92; Chinese news service Xinhua, 02/11/92, 02/13/92, 02/19/92; Spanish news service EFE, 02/12-15/92, 02/17-22/92, 02/24/92; Agence France-Presse, 02/12/92, 02/13/92, 02/15/92, 02/17-24/92)

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