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## **Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo Denies Coup Rumors**

*by LADB Staff*

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Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo responded to rumors of a military coup with denials and populist speeches to campesinos promising a new Guatemala. In early October, the Guatemalan press began reporting rumors of a coup and governmental denials. The rumors included news of troop movements, one of which was supposedly led by Gen. Francisco Ortega Menaldo.

But Portillo and the military high command repeatedly denied a coup was afoot. Portillo said Oct. 10 that a meeting the week before with military chiefs was routine. The meeting was held at the Brigada Militar Mariscal Zavala, where rumors said troop movements were underway. Defense Minister Gen. Juan de Dios Estrada Velasquez said there were no troop movements and no coup. "It's only a rumor," he said, started by some who "wanted to create a climate of insecurity."

Frank La Rue of the Centro de Accion Legal para los Derechos Humanos said there were rivalries within the government and a movement to replace the defense minister. Another explanation for the rumor was that it was intended by the military to pressure the Portillo administration on the Gerardi case. Three members of the military are awaiting trial, accused of the 1998 murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi (see NotiCen, 1998-04-30).

Besides the military connection to the rumors, there is conflict within the government over the "Guategate" scandal involving congressional deputies from the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) in the secret alteration of a tax bill (see NotiCen, 2000-09-14). The scandal has cast doubt on the party's credibility and threatened the tenure of Efraim Rios Montt as president of the legislature. Rios Montt is a retired general who briefly headed a military government in the 1980s.

Since the Guategate scandal exploded in June, the citizens group Movimiento Ciudadano por la Justicia y la Democracia has held weekly demonstrations outside the Congress demanding the resignations of Rios Montt and other FRG deputies involved in the legislative sleight of hand. While dismissing the rumors, the government has acknowledged that the country is in crisis. The coup rumors came as protests regarding the economy and land titles mounted.

The agrarian organization Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (CNOC) led mass demonstrations in various parts of the country in October demanding land and better wages for rural workers. One demonstrator was killed at a roadblock west of the capital.

### ***Government admits to a crisis***

Edgar Gutierrez, presidential secretary for strategic analysis, said the crisis came from a disconnect between the political system and society. He said Portillo was having difficulty integrating his

administration, which is composed of officials from various ideological backgrounds. Gutierrez is a former communist, while Vice President Francisco Reyes is a co-founder, along with Rios Montt, of the ultra-rightist FRG.

Some observers suggested that the presence of banker Francisco Alvarado and former Gen. Francisco Ortega is one factor in the crisis. Neither has an official position, but both are considered eminences grises who wield great power in the government.

During the week of denials, Portillo went on a junket giving populist speeches in which he said there was no coup threat, but repeatedly said a small group was trying to unseat him. He did not identify the group but told his audience of campesinos in Totonicapan, "You put me in office and you are the only ones who can remove me, not a group of lap dogs."

While in the western department of Totonicapan to inaugurate some public works, Portillo made something like a campaign speech, promising lower electricity rates and no increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado IVA) until everyone was taxed equally. He talked about a new Guatemala where "little groups who sucked the blood of the people" no longer run the country. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 10/11/00; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 10/06/00, 10/11/00, 10/11/12]

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