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State Department Bars President Ernesto

by LADB Staff

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The US State Department has revoked the visa of former President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) and several other former officials in his administration. So far, neither the Panamanian government, the legislature, nor his own Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD) has shown much interest in doing battle with the US for him. The administration of President Mireya Moscoso is in the midst of important bilateral talks with the US on more pressing issues.

In August 1999, the media reported that the US Justice Department was investigating Perez Balladares and others believed to be part of the conspiracy to sell Panamanian visas to Asians for US\$15,000 or more. It was believed at the time that the visas allowed Asians to use Panama as a springboard for illegal entry into the US. Samantha Smith, head of the Consejo de Seguridad Publica at the time, was one of those under suspicion. But Smith told US investigators that Perez Balladares ordered her to approve some 140 such visas. He later fired her (see NotiCen, 1999-08-26).

The State Department, through its consulate in Panama City, apparently made the decision to revoke the former president's US visa in January but did not notify either Perez Balladares or the Panamanian government. The daily La Prensa published the first news of the revocation on Feb. 5 after receiving confirmation of the State Department decision from the staff of Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) in Washington. The US Embassy in Panama City later confirmed that the visa had been revoked, and said it was because of Perez Balladares' alleged connection with the traffic in undocumented Asian nationals. The embassy spokesperson said the former president was barred from travel to the US but gave no details.

In an interview on local television, Rohrabacher said his office had been investigating the case for the past two years and concluded that Perez Balladares had been an intermediary in the visa sales. He said the US government might bring charges against him. As a member of Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), Perez Balladares has immunity from prosecution. La Prensa reported that other former functionaries in the Perez Balladares administration have had their visas revoked. They include Perez Balladares' former private secretary Romulo Abad, former head of the immigration service German Gil Sanchez, and Raul Montenegro, a former employee in the Interior Ministry. Moscoso's administration has taken a neutral position on the State Department action. Moscoso said it was the former president's problem and refused to comment on the case, though Minister of the Presidency Ivonne Young said the revocation was "regrettable."

Attorney General Jose Antonio Sossa promised to ask the US government for more information to see if there was reason to open an investigation of Perez Balladares in Panama. Sossa said he had made the same request two years earlier but received no response. As of the middle of February, the US had communicated nothing official to the Panamanian government, according to Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Aleman. Sossa said one person was sentenced to five years in prison in 1999 for assisting five illegal immigrants from the Peoples Republic of China, who were carrying false US

passports, to enter Panama. Sossa said the investigation of another suspect was ongoing. No high officials were convicted in the scandal.

In solidarity with Perez Balladares, Mitchel Doens, a former PRD official, called on party members to give up their US visas. He said they should emulate former President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) of the governing Partido Arnulfista (PA), who publicly defended Perez Balladares and said he would give up his visa. Endara said Perez Balladares had ample proof of his innocence. However, other PRD leaders refused to make the same gesture.

Carlos Duque, said the tactic was not a strong enough protest and proposed that the Moscoso administration launch a diplomatic offensive. Mario Velasquez Chizmar said the gesture would deprive PRD members of academic and professional access to the US. Though he gave up his visa, Roberto Velasquez criticized Doens. He said it was easy for Doens to advise others to make the sacrifice because he did not have a US visa.

Perez Balladares blames "gossips"

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The former president said he was innocent and that he understood through his Washington lawyers that the US government ended its investigation last year and did not plan to bring charges against him. He told the daily El Panama America on Feb. 6 that "local gossips" were responsible for the loss of his visa. He said that during his administration, he approved 137 visa applications for Asians but they were for entry into Panama, not the US. "In other words, they had no intention of going to the United States," Perez Balladares said.

Gregory Craig, one of his attorneys in Washington, said Perez Balladares was unaware of just what the charges were and called the revocation "arbitrary." Craig represented Perez Balladares in 1999 after Smith accused him of involvement in the scandal. Craig said he was sure the US Justice Department had absolved his client of any wrongdoing. He said the charges resurfaced because the US consul in Panama remained unconvinced of his client's innocence. Because the consulate had not released any details, Perez Balladares might now be facing charges of which he has not been informed. "We don't know what he has been accused of," Craig said. Craig reiterated that none of the 137 people who received a Panamanian visa ever left Panama except one who returned to China.

Perez Balladares asked the PRD congressional delegation to allow him time in the Legislative Assembly to present his rebuttal to the State Department. But Deputy Jose Isabel Blandon, assistant leader of the Arnulfista delegation in the Assembly, said this was not the place to air a personal matter. To do so would require approval by two-thirds of the Assembly. Blandon said the agenda for the session beginning March 1 includes important legislative matters that have precedence. Since the PA and its allies hold a majority in the 71-seat legislature, and the party considers the visa revocation a personal matter, it appeared that Perez Balladares would not get a hearing in the Assembly if the matter came to a vote. Nor did it seem the PRD was eager to have the scandal resurrected in so public a forum.

Perez Balladares then took his case to the Foreign Ministry. On Feb. 12, he wrote Foreign Minister Aleman asking him to find out from the US government the reasons for the visa revocation. He presented the revocation as an affront to Panama and its political institutions. In the letter, Perez Balladares said Panama had a right to know why the US had revoked the visa of the man it had freely chosen as president in clean elections, who was involved in no crime while in office, and who left office following another clean election. The matter, he said, went beyond the personal and became "an issue that also concerns anyone who, with their vote, grants a mandate to the rulers." However, it seemed unlikely that Aleman or the Moscoso administration was willing to press the matter any further.

By the time Perez Balladares sent his letter to Aleman, Ambassador Guillermo Ford in Washington said that, for the Panamanian government, the matter was closed. The former president's conflict with the US comes at an inconvenient moment in Panama-US relations. Panama is eager to resolve major bilateral issues, and Ford is now preparing an agenda for talks with the new administration in Washington after several years of difficult relations with former President Bill Clinton. Outstanding issues include Panamanian cooperation with the US on drug interdiction, decontamination of abandoned US military bases in Panama (see NotiCen, 1998- 11-19), and getting off a blacklist of countries allegedly uncooperative in cracking down on drug-money laundering (see NotiCen, 2000-08-03).

Some say revocation was revenge Some Panamanian observers said the decision to revoke the visa was a payback for Perez Balladares' refusal while in office to allow the US to set up an anti-narcotics center (Centro Multilateral Antidrogas, CMA) at the former Howard Air Force Base in Panama (see EcoCentral, 1998-10-01). Endara attacked the editor of La Prensa, Gustavo Gorriti, for publishing news about the revocation. Endara said it was an act of vengeance because of a slander suit that the former president brought against Gorriti and Winston Robles, editorial vice president of the newspaper, after La Prensa published articles on the scandal.

Deputy Miguel Bush, assistant secretary of the PRD, said he had information that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had put Gorriti up to publishing the news in La Prensa. "The news that the daily has published is nothing more than a campaign by Gustavo Gorriti, following instructions of the CIA, to say something that after all is under the jurisdiction of the consul of one or the other country." Gorriti replied in La Prensa that Bush's remarks were so "demented" that they did not merit any response. The important issues, he said, were whether Perez Balladares had adequate opportunity to present his case to the US government through his lawyers and whether the Panamanian people had the right to know if the visa was revoked because of his connection to the visa-selling scheme.

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