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Administration Official Fired in Clash Over Human Rights

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala's vote condemning Cuba at the April meeting in Geneva of the UN Human Rights Commission has had serious repercussions both in Cuba-Guatemala relations and within the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG). The vote caused a furor in Havana because, according to Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, Cuba had assurances from President Alfonso Portillo's administration that it would abstain.

In a March 27 letter, Portillo thanked President Fidel Castro for the Cuban doctors and teachers working in Guatemala, and he indicated Guatemala would abstain. On that same day, Edgar Gutierrez, head of the Guatemalan Secretaria de Analisis Estrategicos (SAE), wrote Guatemalan Ambassador in Geneva Antonio Arenales instructing him to abstain or to vote for a no-action motion on the resolution condemning Cuba. Perez Roque said he had copies of both letters.

Perez Roque said the US had exerted "terrible pressures on Guatemala," using economic threats and suggesting that President George W. Bush's administration might order the immediate deportation of 100,000 undocumented Guatemalans living in the US. The minister noted that, on March 29, State Department official Susan Wood went to Guatemala to review US aid scheduled for the next three years, and, on April 10, Ambassador Arenales lunched in Geneva with anti-Castro legislators Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL). Perez Roque also said Portillo told the Cuban ambassador in Guatemala that Wood warned that a vote of abstention could cost Guatemala future aid and that the Bush administration would take a tougher line against Guatemala than did former President Bill Clinton.

The Miami Herald said the US Embassy conceded that the State Department had "expressed to Guatemala...our strong concern about the human rights situation in Cuba," but denied using economic or other threats of retaliation. Denying that Portillo had caved in to US pressure, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Gabriel Orellana said the vote was in response to Cuba's detention of three Guatemalans accused in the 1997 bombings of tourist sites in Havana (see NotiCen, 1999-03-25). Guatemalan authorities had complained that the suspects were being held too long without trial. But Castro called the explanation "ridiculous," and human rights advocates in Guatemala challenged authorities to explain where Guatemala got the right to complain about due process abroad when so little of it existed at home.

Vote widens split between president and Congress

Editorialists and other political observers have been saying for some time that the unlikely coalition of former leftist Portillo and former right-wing dictator Efraim Rios Montt was coming apart. Opinion polls consistently show a widespread assumption that Rios Montt, the president of Congress and head of the FRG, is the real power in government. The open warfare within the

administration coincides with a crisis in government brought on by, among other things, the Portillo administration's inability to deal with economic problems and the rise in crime.

On May 8, the FRG congressional delegation began an investigation into how Cuba came into possession of the Guatemalan documents. FRG deputies questioned presidential advisors Gutierrez, Luis Mijangos, and Rodrigo Carrillo, as well as Victor Hugo Godoy, head of the Comision Presidencial de Derechos Humanos (COPREDEH), who had led the Guatemalan delegation in Geneva. On May 16, Vice President Francisco Reyes announced that he had fired Godoy for "exceeding his authority." Reyes, acting for Portillo who was then traveling in Japan, said he took the action because of Godoy's disloyalty. However, Reyes declined to explain what specific events led to the firing and what part Godoy might have played in the leak.

Gutierrez denied leaking the letters to Cuban authorities and said Portillo had asked him to send the letter to Ambassador Arenales ordering him to abstain. He said he did not know where the last-minute order to vote against Cuba came from. Both Godoy and Carrillo belong to the Portillo wing of the FRG. Godoy said his firing was part of a strategy to push the Portillo supporters out of government and the Cuba vote was only a pretext. Curiously, Portillo had given instructions before leaving for Japan that there should be no personnel changes during his absence. Godoy's firing caused a clash between the Rios Montt and Portillo wings of the party.

The daily Prensa Libre called the falling out a "divorce" between the two factions and accused Reyes of timing his announcement of the firing to coincide with Portillo's absence from the country. The newspaper reported that Gutierrez and 15 Portillista Cabinet members met to consider a counterattack on the Rios Montt faction. Among the possible actions was a public statement criticizing the Rios Montt wing, but the Portillistas instead decided to take their case to Portillo and demand an end to the attacks on them or they would offer the president their resignations.

A Prensa Libre editorial said Godoy's firing was proof that a "civil war" had broken out within the government, and it showed that Portillo was no more than a figurehead. Godoy had been an effective human rights official at a time when Guatemala appeared to be experiencing an increase in human rights violations, said the editorial. Political analyst Fernando Solis said the firing was in part the result of an FRG siege mentality stemming from the party's recent legal troubles over the Guategate scandal involving the illegal alteration of a beverage-tax bill (see NotiCen, 2001-02-15).

President promises Cabinet changes

The daily Siglo Veintiuno reported that after the president's return from Japan, the Portillo faction sent Gutierrez to sound him out on Godoy's dismissal. However, neither Gutierrez nor Portillo gave details about the meeting. Portillo complained to the press that he was under attack from unnamed "groups in power," mentioning "directors and owners of the media." He said there would be some Cabinet changes and acknowledged the difficulty of holding together an administration composed of various political tendencies. While not directly addressing the Godoy firing, Portillo said Congress should accept the fact that he thinks in pluralistic terms and appoints officials with varying political ideologies.

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