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Tension from Detention Of Salvadoran Diplomats and Nicaraguan Police Officials

by LADB Staff

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On Aug. 14, Honduran authorities arrested two Salvadoran diplomats at a military hospital and charged them with espionage. Because they had diplomatic immunity, the two were released and left for El Salvador the next day. In a similar case, two Nicaraguans were expelled in March, according to a Honduran legislator. While all three governments are preparing for talks on the crisis, observers point out that incidents of this kind are hindering the process of regional economic integration.

Salvadorans accused of buying military secrets

The accused men were Maj. Alejandro Reyes Cerna of the Salvadoran army, who was serving as assistant military attache at the Salvadoran Embassy in Tegucigalpa. The other is Jose Marquina Vargas, secretary to the military attache's office. Also implicated as accomplices were Doris Oliva, a former employee at the Honduran Colegio de Defensa Nacional, and Thelma Iris Aguilar, a Honduran navy employee. Both are Honduran nationals and have been indicted on charges of falsifying public documents and treason.

Reyes Cerna, Marquina Vargas, and Oliva were arrested in the hospital as they were making a transaction, said Honduran police. As proof, the Honduran military offered videos and documentary evidence purporting to show the two men were gathering information on Honduran armed forces logistics, arms, troop training, and naval exercises. Oliva is shown on one of the videos handing Reyes Cerna computer diskettes said to contain military information.

Authorities also showed an identification card issued to Javier Edgardo Lobo that Reyes Cerna allegedly used to gain entrance to the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Honduras (UNAH). Authorities said he used UNAH and the military hospital to receive the stolen military documents from Oliva. The Honduran government sent a formal protest to the Salvadoran government and accused El Salvador of espionage before the Organization of American States (OAS). According to Col. Jorge Estrada Guzman, auditor general of the Honduran armed forces, the information turned over to the two diplomats compromised national security. He said Oliva confessed to having turned over four batches of documents to the Salvadorans for US\$33 each.

Honduran armed forces spokesman Col. Carlos Andino told the Spanish News Service EFE, that the spying slowed down the process of regional integration. "It surprises us that...El Salvador and Nicaragua, who now accuse us of an arms race, are assuming an integrationist attitude at the [negotiating] table but do the opposite in practice." The official government reaction in San Salvador was that it had seen no evidence to support the Honduran allegations.

Salvadoran Foreign Minister Maria Eugenia Brizuela demanded an official explanation of the manner in which the two diplomats were detained. She and Salvador's Ambassador in Honduras Sigifredo Ochoa Perez said Honduras had violated international law by detaining the suspects for several hours despite their diplomatic immunity. Ochoa denied the Embassy had any contact with the two accused Honduran women and said neither Reyes Cerna nor Marquina Vargas had been expelled but instead were recalled for consultations in San Salvador.

Ricardo Acevedo Peralta, former Salvadoran foreign minister shrugged off the espionage charges, saying Honduras did not have a significant military force and there was no worthwhile information to acquire about it through spying. Beatrice de Carrillo, director of the Salvadoran human rights office (Procuraduria de la Defensa Derechos Humanos, PDDH), asked her Honduran counterpart Leo Valladares to look into the police handling of the case to see if there were any human rights violations. De Carrillo said she had reports that the two men were tied together by their thumbs with shoelaces and had been tortured. But a Honduran armed forces spokesperson denied the diplomats had been mistreated, and pointed out that when arrested, the two men were carrying false identification that did not indicate they were diplomats.

Nicaragua also accused of espionage

Nicaraguan armed forces spokesman Col. Ramon Arnesto Soza said Aug. 16 that the Honduran military was planning a "rapid and surprise" attack on Nicaragua. The accusation followed claims made by Honduran National Assembly Deputy Mamilio Rodas that authorities had uncovered and expelled members of a Nicaraguan spy ring in March. According to Rodas, Nicaraguan police official Eduardo Cuadra Ferrey and an unnamed accomplice were deported after being accused of stealing documents from the Honduran National Assembly. The two men were in Honduras for a meeting of regional police forces. Nicaraguan authorities denied the charges. Nicaragua and Honduras have been sparring with each other since 1999 after Honduras ratified a maritime boundary treaty with Colombia that Nicaragua said deprived it of a large area in the Caribbean (see NotiCen, 2000-01-27).

Earlier this year, Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman and his military chiefs began charging that Honduras was building up its military forces and upsetting the balance of power in the region (NotiCen, 2001-04-05). Nicaragua raised its tariffs on goods imported from Honduras in retaliation for the supposed Honduran rearmament program. Col. Soza said the Nicaraguan army had documents proving the Honduran military had mounted an arms acquisition program with initial purchases of rifles and communications equipment valued at US\$1 million. He said Honduras also had a plan for military operations to be implemented on the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran borders.

Honduran Foreign Minister Roberto Flores replied that Honduras was still in the midst of recovery from damage caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. "Our losses were more than US\$5 billion," he said. "Who is going to think of spending public resources on armaments?" An international observer mission has been reviewing the border situation for the OAS. As the two Salvadoran diplomats were being arrested, OAS observers reported they were satisfied that the Honduran military in place along the Nicaraguan border had made no aggressive movements. Military and police forces of both countries were carrying out their constitutional duties dealing with public security, contraband,

and national defense, said the report. Foreign Minister Flores suggested that, in view of Nicaragua's "paranoia," the OAS should place permanent observers on the border.

Daniel Ortega says incident designed to stop his election Nicaraguan presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, secretary general of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), said the Aleman administration with help from Honduras was whipping up war fever to prevent the November elections from taking place. Polls show Ortega ahead of the governing party candidate Enrique Bolanos. "There is interest on the part of the [Aleman] government to try and stop the elections because they think the people are not going to vote for them and therefore, they are willing even to invent these wars," said Ortega. Some political leaders in El Salvador said similar things about President Carlos Flores' administration in Honduras, which is also approaching elections.

Eugenio Chicas, Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) deputy in the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), said both El Salvador and Honduras were interested in slowing the integration process. Legislative Assembly Deputy Jose Almendariz of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) said that "It has been a tradition that Honduras provokes a conflict with its neighbors whenever it has internal problems." All sides say they want dialogue Salvadoran President Francisco Flores asked Honduran President Carlos Flores to settle the issue through dialogue. Aleman played down the Salvadoran-spy incident and said it had been sensationalized. He said that "if by chance there was a small error on the part of Honduras in the expulsion of the diplomats, sooner or later it will be corrected."

All three presidents attended the Grupo de Rio summit held in mid-August in Santiago de Chile, where they issued conciliatory statements. Honduran Foreign Minister Flores met with Salvadoran Foreign Minister Brizuela in Santiago. He later told EFE the discussion went well and said bilateral relations were "very good." He was less generous with Nicaragua, saying relations with that country were not "in their best moment," and accused the Nicaraguan military of running an obvious campaign against Honduras since January. The three presidents agreed to meet for talks in Guatemala to resolve the espionage issue. A date has not been set, but by prior arrangement, all Central American governments will be represented in Guatemala at a summit Aug. 29 that was called to deal with the Honduras-Nicaragua maritime boundary issue.

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