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Guatemalan Vice President Reyes in Scandal

by LADB Staff

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A congressional deputy who participated in efforts to blame Vice President Francisco Reyes Lopez for using government power against a political opponent has become the second person to leave the country under threat of harm. After a considerable delay, the legislature is beginning an investigation. What began as a routine political battle over an unpopular tax bill has developed into a possible criminal case against Vice President Reyes Lopez. Strong evidence pointed to his involvement in a campaign to smear businessman Jorge Briz, who led a protest against an increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) in August. The attorney general has evidence that Reyes Lopez ordered the government printing office (Tipografia Nacional) to print fliers and pamphlets anonymously attacking Briz (see NotiCen, 2001-09-20).

In October, Bloque Unionista Deputy Magda Estela Arceo announced she was going into exile in the US because of death threats. She said she had been intimidated by telephone calls and by armed men in cars and on motorcycles. "They told me my days were numbered, that what I had done against the vice president of the Republic could not be undone," said Arceo. Arceo was active in exposing the scandal and supported former printing office director Silvia Mendez, who went into exile in August. Other deputies besides Arceo say they received death threats. "My departure is because my life, that of my family, my children, my two grandchildren, and my mother are in danger," she said.

Arceo left behind a statement describing the threats against her and accusing Reyes Lopez of instigating them. She held him responsible for any harm that might come to her or her family. She also filed a complaint with the human rights prosecutor (Procuraduria de Derechos Humanos, PDH), and she blasted the UN human rights verification team (MINUGUA) for allegedly withholding evidence against the vice president. Arceo says that MINUGUA officials had sufficient information from Tipografia Nacional workers, Mendez, and others to force Congress to begin a formal procedure (antejuicio) that could strip Reyes Lopez of immunity from prosecution. Once in the US, Arceo presented a complaint against MINUGUA to the UN and said she would also file a complaint with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) against Reyes Lopez for the threats she received.

PDH director Julio Arango offered Arceo his support and said he was concerned that the attorney general's investigation had not progressed. He said there was enough evidence to begin an antejuicio. In its defense, the attorney general's office said it had not received much cooperation from MINUGUA.

MINUGUA spokesman Vincent Piola directly accused the government of ordering the printing and distribution of the fliers. The daily Siglo Veintiuno said the MINUGUA office had informed the newspaper that the evidence already available was sufficient to conduct an antejuicio. Piola said MINUGUA was cooperating with the authorities. But anti-corruption prosecutor Ramiro Coronado

told the newspaper in early October that MINUGUA had refused to hand over its information citing confidentiality. Meanwhile, progress in the case against Reyes Lopez has been slowed in Congress, which is controlled by the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG). Coronado asked Congress to begin an antejuicio against Reyes Lopez, and said the evidence against him included 34 printing plates used to make the fliers, as well as negatives and proof sheets.

FRG leader Deputy Aristides Crespo refused to consider the request, saying it had to go first to a court. Deputy Froylan Villatoro of the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) called Crespo's action a "maneuver" to hold up the process and protect the vice president.

Congressional leaders formally accepted the petition

Oct. 18. The body's leadership must appoint an investigating committee to review the evidence and then two-thirds of the Congress must vote to remove Reyes Lopez's immunity. President Alfonso Portillo has said he would not interfere to influence the proceedings. However, some opposition deputies are not optimistic that the case will ever get out of Congress. "With or without proof, the case will be dropped," said Deputy Anabella de Leon of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE)." She said the FRG would protect Reyes Lopez to the end.

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