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In Guatemala a General Handed Interior Ministry After Scandal

by LADB Staff

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Under pressure from cooperating countries and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to clean up government corruption and reduce human rights abuses, the administration of Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo has begun making Cabinet shifts. The appointment of an armed forces general to the Cabinet has caused concern among human rights advocates.

German Ambassador Walter Eickhoff, who heads the Grupo de Paises Amigos del Dialogo six nations that have supported the peace process since 1990 said the group acknowledged the government's efforts to do something about corruption and human rights violations, "but we think more could be done." After a meeting with a committee headed by Norwegian Ambassador Rolf O. Berg and UNDP representative Juan Pablo Corlazzoli on Nov. 28, Portillo asked Interior Minister Byron Barrientos for his resignation.

On Nov. 29, Secretary General of the Presidency Luis Mijangos confirmed that Portillo had dismissed Barrientos and said some other Interior Ministry officials had also been sacked. Mijangos said Defense Minister Gen. Eduardo Arevalo Lacs had resigned his commission to take Barrientos' place. Gen. Leonel Mendez Estrada, chief of the Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional, will replace Arevalo Lacs as defense minister. International pressure on Portillo is also mounting to fire Communications Minister Alvaro Heredia for alleged contract fraud. Mijangos confirmed that Portillo might consider other Cabinet changes, including the replacement of Economy Minister Marco Antonio Ventura by Agriculture Minister Jorge Escoto, but those changes would be aimed at improving the economy.

Barrientos was appointed Interior Minister in August 2000. During his tenure, the ministry was accused of corruption because it could not account for millions of dollars in public funds. Barrientos, a former military officer, was accused of human rights violations during the civil war that ended in 1996, and his appointment to the Cabinet was opposed by human rights groups (see NotiCen, 2000-08-03). Barrientos faces investigation and possible trial Barrientos is entitled to take back the seat in Congress he gave up to enter the Cabinet. However, legal proceedings underway could force him to answer to charges relating to misappropriation of funds.

Barrientos came under fire in June for negligence in overseeing the prison system after 78 convicts escaped from a prison in Escuintla department (see NotiCen, 2001-07-19). Portillo said at the time that he might replace Barrientos but that a Cabinet shift would not solve the problems in the prisons. However, he said that he might remove Barrientos as a political gesture in response to public demands that he take action. Barrientos complained that talk of his removal was politically inspired. By October, the corruption issue replaced the prison escape as the primary concern regarding Barrientos' tenure. US\$11.2 million in public funds had disappeared from the ministry into personal bank accounts.

The daily Prensa Libre reported that ministry official Jarol Axel Gil Munoz had transferred the funds from a ministry account in the Credito Hipotecario Nacional (CHN) to seven personal accounts in various banks. Barrientos and his vice ministers refused to comment on the newspaper's allegations. In Prensa Libre's account, when the Superintendencia de Bancos discovered the transfers, Gil Munoz redeposited US\$3.6 million in the ministry's CHN account. The whereabouts of the rest of the money and of Gil Munoz are a mystery.

Besides Gil Munoz, Angel Rene Argueta, an official in the ministry's budget office, has been missing since mid-November. Also missing is Comptroller General (Contralor General de Cuentas de la Nacion) Marco Tulio Abadio, although a spokesperson for the department said Tulio Abadio would be investigating the Prensa Libre report. With no information coming from Interior, the media questioned the president's office about the missing funds. But Portillo's press office said it was not up to the president to explain the anomalies, and referred questions back to the Interior Ministry.

Opposition leaders demanded a congressional investigation. Responding to requests from Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN) Deputy Nineth Montenegro, the attorney general's office said it would begin the process of removing Barrientos' immunity on the grounds that Cabinet ministers should be answerable for the actions of their subordinates. Judge Luis Alfredo Morales said on Nov. 28 he would ask the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to remove Barrientos' immunity, which could expose him to an investigation and possible trial on charges of embezzlement, misuse of funds, and failure to report the missing funds.

During an interview Nov. 22 with the daily Siglo Veintiuno, Portillo acknowledged "setbacks" in the struggle against corruption. Asked about the Interior Ministry scandal, Portillo said that the state was corrupt at all levels and always had been and that only now, during his administration, was there freedom to denounce and criticize corruption. "We are going to take concrete measures to combat it at the beginning of next year," he said.

A week later, Foreign Relations Minister Gabriel Orellana said the media was emphasizing only the government side of the problem. "The big question is what about the corruption on the civil society side?" Orellana asked. UN team criticizes appointment of a general The UN human rights verification team in Guatemala (MINUGUA) sharply criticized Portillo for appointing a military officer to the critical position of interior minister.

In a statement Nov. 30, MINUGUA said the appointment contradicted the terms of the 1996 peace accords, which placed great importance on strengthening civil as opposed to military authority. The statement said the accords required the demilitarization of the public-security function over which Interior has control. Human rights activist Helen Mack said the appointment indicated that the administration had little interest in complying with the peace accords and showed that the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) intended to control the country. Although Arevalo Lacs resigned his military commission, critics brushed aside his new civilian status.

Frank La Rue, head of the Centro de Accion Legal de Derechos Humanos, said that strategy was invalid. "He [Arevalo Lacs] is military, and that's it." Human rights commission says disappearances

are back As the scandal regarding the missing funds unfolded in November, the independent Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA), based in San Jose, Costa Rica, issued a report declaring crime and corruption the most serious problems facing Guatemala. Referring to a study by nongovernmental organizations, CODEHUCA said the core of the security problem was that organized crime had protection from police and military forces. The report said many human rights violations were forced disappearances disguised as common crimes. Disappearances all but vanished in the early 1990's, the report said, but re-emerged after July 2000 when Barrientos took over the Interior Ministry.

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