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Paraguay: Political Implosion Topples Cubas Administration Snipers open up on protestors; six dead, hundreds wounded

by **George Kourous**

Asuncion, Paraguay— The March 26 shooting deaths of six pro-democracy protesters on the steps of Paraguay's capital building, coupled with another round of violence after a funeral mass for the victims, has precipitated the collapse of embattled President Raul Cubas's administration. On March 28, after five days of intense political disorder triggered by the assassination of Vice President Luis Maria Argaña, the unpopular Colorado Party (ANR) president announced his resignation.

One by one, key army divisions stated their support for the constitutional transfer of power to senate president Luis Gonzalez Macchi, who belongs to the ANR faction that Argaña had led. The new government was sworn in on March 30. Macchi's appointment maintains the Colorado Party's grip on power, which stretches back to 1947, including the 1954-89 dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner.

Street battle turns deadly

The transfer of power between the two competing wings of the Colorado Party capped off a chaotic week. Following the Argaña assassination, a crowd of students and campesino protesters had installed itself outside Congress to demand the resignation of Cubas, who is accused along with his political mentor, ex-general Lino Oviedo, of orchestrating Argaña's death.

On March 26 police attempted to remove the protestors, injuring many in a pitched battle of flying rocks, tear gas, and water cannons, but failed to disperse the crowd.

A short while later, several masked snipers perched atop nearby buildings opened fire on the crowd, killing four instantly, fatally wounding two more, and injuring 228 others.

As the snipers moved about on rooftops, protestors and Cubas supporters belonging to the Colorado splinter group led by Oviedo, the National Union of Ethical Colorados (UNACE), clashed on the streets below, using bottles, fireworks, and ripped up paving stones for weapons.

When Cubas called in military armored cars to bring order to Asuncion, Lower House speaker Walter Bower—also of the ANR's Argañista wing—took to the airwaves to urge Paraguay's military to practice restraint. "We instruct the armed forces, if they receive orders outside their

usual duties, to reject them and limit themselves to fulfilling their democratic duty," he said in a radio broadcast.

As news of the killings spread, public sentiment precipitously turned against the president. The administration mounted a frantic effort to derail an ongoing impeachment trial against Cubas, sparked his controversial pardon of Oviedo for a 1996 coup attempt and subsequent disregard for a Supreme Court decision countermanding that pardon.

When some senators announced that they had been offered money by high-ranking administration officials, including the first lady, in exchange for their no vote, public indignation mounted.

On Saturday, the impeachment continued as rumors of coup plans and coming bloodshed swept Asuncion. Many senators were seen entering Congress wearing bulletproof vests. Cubas's lawyer, Luis Canillas, argued against the legality of the trial on technical grounds and tried to have 29 senators of the 45-seat house disqualified from voting. But by late afternoon, Congress had voted down Canillas's arguments and position announcements by senators made it obvious that the president would be removed from office.

Saturday saw snipers again open fire, this time on worshipers exiting a funeral mass for the victims of Friday's bloodshed. Congress remained in special session, but evacuated after radio calls ordering Oviedo followers to gather near congress and "open fire" were intercepted.

All those arrested in relation to March 26 sniper attack have been UNACE members, such as Walter Alfredo Gamarra, a bureaucrat with Paraguay's Department of the Interior also suspected in the Argaña assassination.

Cubas steps down in backroom deal

But as UNACE supporters called for an uprising on Paraguayan radio, Cubas and the traditional ANR leadership were meeting with opposition politicians, high-ranking members of the Catholic Church, and foreign diplomats, negotiating a deal which culminated in Cubas's resignation late Sunday night.

Fears of a military uprising were allayed when army divisions began releasing communiqués stating their allegiance to the incoming administration—even before Cubas went public with his decision.

"I will not be responsible for the spilling of any more blood in political infighting," Cubas said in his resignation announcement. He insisted his removal was the result of a "conspiracy" by

opponents in Congress. "I am not leaving because I am corrupt, or because I am a thief," he declared. "I am leaving because my exit may help to pacify the country. History will judge me."

On the streets of Asuncion, the news spread rapidly and Paraguay's citizenry celebrated noisily. Incoming president Luis Gonzalez Macchi was carried into Congress on the shoulders of supporters amid cheering and hand clapping. "The democratic process has passed the hardest test of all. The people of Paraguay have triumphed!" he declared.

Concern that the crisis could affect Paraguay's membership in MERCOSUR may have prompted leading Colorado leaders to push through Sunday's deal. Following the Argaña assassination, Brazilian president Henrique Cardoso told reporters that "the MERCOSUR union has an irreversible commitment to democracy. MERCOSUR does not accept non-democratic regimes."

Oviedo flees the country

Lino Oviedo abruptly fled the country with his family as Cubas was still making his deal, prompting speculation that he had been cut out of the loop by an exhausted Cubas and feared justice at the hands of the ascendant Argañista wing of the ANR.

The populist politician soon surfaced in Argentina, where he was first detained for not having proper papers but was later granted asylum by President Carlos Menem.

Oviedo is currently staying as a guest at the ranch of a businessman friend of President Menem's. ANR senator Juan Carlos Galaverno charges that Oviedo cashed in on past corrupt financial dealings involving "the highest levels of Argentine government."

The ex-general is represented by attorney Pedro Bianci, who in the past defended Argentina's last military dictator, Emilio Eduardo Massera, and the escaped Nazi Erich Priebke, condemned in Italy for war crimes.

According to Argentine justice minister Granillo Ocampo, the decision was made in agreement with other MERCOSUR member nations. "After consultations by the foreign ministry with MERCOSUR countries, we have arrived at the conclusion that this could help calm the conflict in Paraguay," he said. President Menem referred to the decision to grant Oviedo asylum as "a contribution to Paraguay's democracy."

"We don't doubt the good intentions [of the Argentine government]," said Paraguay's new foreign minister, Miguel Saguier, one of four opposition members in the new Macchi cabinet, "but we think Oviedo has to face justice in Paraguay."

Other politicians, however, hope that the ex-general will stay out of the picture—permanently. "I personally prefer Oviedo far from Paraguay so that people will forget his arrogance and foolishness, because if he returns, this man, who has taken up so much of the country's attention already, will remain in the public eye," said opposition politician Juan Granada.

An extradition request for Oviedo is in the works.

"I will not rest until Oviedo is brought back to Paraguay," President Macchi announced at an April 4 press conference. Macchi added that in addition to the 10-year sentence Oviedo received for his 1996 coup attempt, the UNACE leader could also be linked to the Argaña assassination as well as the March 26 sniper attacks.

Meanwhile, a federal judge has frozen the accounts of certain government offices due to the embezzlement of funds during the final days of the Cubas administration.

Cubas follows Oviedo into exile

Paraguay's Prosecutor General, Judge Gustavo Ocampos, requested Cubas's arrest the Monday after he resigned. As an ex-president, Cubas should have immunity as a "senator-for-life" but had not yet been sworn in as such. But despite Macchi's promise of "no more immunity," new Interior Minister Walter Bower rejected Ocampos' request.

The ex-president sought refuge in the Brazilian embassy with his family and soon left the country for a beach house they own in Camboriu. Brazil already plays host to Paraguay's former dictator, Alfredo Stroessner.

Both Cubas and Oviedo are bound by their asylum agreements to accept certain conditions: they may not make political declarations, nor may they hold meetings of a political nature.

Oviedistas were planning "butchery," Archbishop says

Reports surfaced following Cubas's resignation appeared to confirm that Oviedo supporters were planning an armed response in the case of the president's impeachment.

On March 27, former vice president and Cubas supporter Angel Roberto Seifart told reporters that the regime "would not allow itself to be removed from power." When asked if this meant an armed struggle, Seifart responded, "yes, sir—unfortunately, that's right."

During the negotiations which produced Cubas's resignation, according to Monsignor Pastor Cuquejo and Felipe Santiago Benítez, the Archbishop of Asuncion, Cubas indicated that a large,

armed group of Oviedistas were preparing to attack the protestors gathered outside the parliament, prompting the Church to call on crowd members to disperse for their own safety.

The papal nuncio, Monsignor Lorenzo Baldisseri, also attended the meeting. According to Baldisseri, Cubas "didn't want any more blood spilled. He didn't want any more of any of it."

The central post office, the Asuncion Port Authority, and the office of YACYRETA—a binational entity operated by Paraguay and Argentina to oversee a jointly owned hydroelectric facility—were used by the Oviedistas to stockpile weapons. The directors of these three institutions were firm supporters of Oviedo.

Cubas's resignation and the news that Oviedo had already fled the country, apparently, caused the Oviedistas to reconsider their plan. The buildings were cordoned off the Monday after Cubas's resignation as police searched them for arms and other evidence.

"Government of conciliation" takes the helm

During day-long negotiations on March 29, Paraguay's political parties hammered out the rough outline of a "government of conciliation," with six ministries under Colorado control and four ministries and the vice presidency in the hands of the opposition. It is the first time in more than 50 years that non-Colorado Party members have formed part of a ruling cabinet. Two of the new ministers are veterans of former-dictator Stroessner's political apparatus, but the Argañista wing of the ANR clearly holds the reins of power.

Paraguay's Electoral Tribunal has expressed uncertainty regarding the constitutionality of the arrangement, which has Macchi serving out what would have been Cuba's term and calls for national elections for vice president in November 1999. On April 7, the tribunal petitioned the Supreme Court to rule on the matter, citing "unclearities" in the constitution.

If an entire new round of elections is called for, Macchi will head the ticket with an opposition candidate as vice president—an electoral alliance spelled out in the deal which formed the current administration.

There are signs that some tension exists between Paraguay's leading opposition parties, the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico and the Partido Encuentro Nacional, as to which should field the vice presidential candidate.