

LATIN AMERICA ROUNDUP

Corruption charges deal blow to OAS and leave its former head under arrest

Miguel Ángel Rodríguez had led the organization for less than a month when he resigned

GUY HEDGE COE, Madrid

The resignation and arrest of the general secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS), Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, following corruption accusations has not only damaged the reputation of the former Costa Rican president, but further undermined the already shaky credibility of the international body.

Rodríguez stepped down on October 8, less than three weeks after being installed as OAS head, claiming he needed time to defend himself from charges being aimed at him from within his native country. However, on arriving in Costa Rica from Washington on Friday he was immediately arrested and handcuffed.

The former secretary general was then admitted to hospital with high blood pressure, while the judge investigating his case placed him under house arrest for six months.

The corruption charges arose earlier this month, when José Antonio Lobo, a former director of the state telephone company, announced that during Rodríguez's term as president (1998-2002) the two of them had received a large bribe from French firm Alcatel to allow it to install 400,000 cell phone lines. Since then, another accusation alleging that Rodríguez accepted a similar payment from the Taiwanese government has been revealed.

The Costa Rican Congress passed a motion for Rodríguez, the former leader of the conservative Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC), to resign from his new post, with president Abel Pacheco



Miguel Ángel Rodríguez during a television interview in 1998. / AP

formally backing the request. Rodríguez resisted until the clamor for him to prove his innocence became unbearable.

The charges come as a sur-

prise to many observers, as the 64-year-old Rodríguez, who promised "work and austerity 24 hours a day" when elected Costa Rican premier in 1998, was auto-

matically a strong candidate to fill the high-profile OAS post following the end of César Gaviria's term earlier this year.

However, for an organization whose main objectives include "tackling the complex problems caused by poverty, drugs and corruption," this comes at a bad time. On being elected secretary general, Rodríguez was entrusted with focusing on Latin America's corruption problems.

"Historically, [the OAS] has not been very impressive in terms of efficiency and as a multilateral body it is known for its lack of timely action," said Gastón Chillier of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). "Rodríguez came in with a general mandate to promote some important reforms, there were high expectations for him and so this is going to harm the credibility of the OAS very badly."

To make matters worse, corruption within the OAS had never previously been a particular concern, so this crisis gives its critics substantial new ammunition.

The OAS has been involved in recent years in mediating between the government and opposition in Venezuela's political crisis, as well as attempting to smooth negotiations between the Colombian government and paramilitary groups.

Countries are now jockeying to replace Rodríguez: Argentina has said it will support deputy foreign minister Jorge Taiana as a candidate, while Guatemalan Gert Rosenthal and Salvadoran Francisco Flores are also being touted as contenders.

Central Americans mull sending troops to Haiti

Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua are considering sending up to 500 troops in total to Haiti, to work with the 3,000-strong United Nations force which is attempting to control violent social unrest there. The presidents of the four Central American countries have met to discuss the issue in Nicaragua this week. Haiti has seen an escalation of violent clashes between followers of ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and supporters of the new government in recent weeks.

Peru sets date for Shining Path trial

Abimael Guzmán, the leader of Peru's Shining Path guerrilla group, will begin a civil trial November 5, senior judicial authorities reported. Guzmán was sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court following his arrest in 1992. However, the Constitutional Tribunal subsequently declared the trial void due to legal wrongdoing and his new case will be overseen by the national court for terrorism cases. Charged with terrorism against the state, Guzmán could again face a life sentence.

Ecuador president rejects calls for resignation

Ecuador's President Lucio Gutiérrez rejected calls by the opposition for him to resign after his party suffered a humiliating defeat in provincial elections across the country at the weekend. Gutiérrez's Patriotic Society Party (PSP) won only one out of a possible 22 prefectures after initial results came in. León Febres Cordero, leader of the Social Christian Party (PSC), has led the offensive against Gutiérrez, calling him "ignorant and inefficient." Gutiérrez, who led a coup d'état in 2000 and then was elected president in 2003, called for calm and sought to justify the poor results by arguing that the PSP is a new party.

European Union to rethink Cuban sanctions and policies toward Castro

Latin American council will meet in November amid growing tension

M. ELKIN, Madrid

The European Union's council on Latin America will meet on November 16 to discuss whether to lighten or cancel the sanctions that the bloc imposed on Cuba if Fidel Castro makes more efforts to respect human and civil rights, sources in Brussels said on Tuesday.

Also on the council's agenda will be a review of the recent diplomatic rift between the EU member states and the Castro regime. Since last Friday, the Cuban government has denied entry to two Dutch congresswomen and Popular Party (PP) congressman, Jorge Moragas. The Castro regime feared they would be meeting with members of the Cuban opposition.

Last week, the Spanish government said that the sanctions have failed to accomplish the desired result, and that the EU should back more dialogue with the Cuban dictator. Belgium,

Sweden and Austria agree with the Spanish position, while Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic are reluctant to lift the sanctions that were imposed in July 2003.

The Spanish government's stance marks a stark change from the no-holds-barred anti-Castro policies of the previous PP administration.

"In short, there are two versions," said one European diplomat. "Some say that the Cuban government is not willing to change or free dissidents from prison or promote any openness, so greater closeness makes no difference. And there are the soft-handed policies."

The latter point to the 40-year-old US embargo that has only hardened Castro's resolve. Tensions developed last year when several European diplomats in Havana invited Cuban dissidents and family members of political prisoners to the embassies for

their respective national festivals. This occurred after the regime jailed 75 dissidents. Castro responded by freezing relations with Europe. As a result, some foreign ambassadors in Cuba argue that a dialogue-based policy for Europe may not be easy.

Poor relations between Cuba and Spain date back to 1996, when newly elected Prime Minister José María Aznar suspended all cooperation with the Castro regime. Spain's proposal to the EU to condition its assistance to Cuba on Castro's human rights record was passed at the end of that year.

The opposition to Castro in Cuba said it does not agree with a policy of dialogue toward the regime because Castro has not signaled that any changes will be made. The Cuban government does not want dialogue, they say; reversing the current policy would be a "dangerous error," declared one dissident.

Brazil allows air force to shoot down any planes suspected of drug-running

JUAN ARIAS, Rio de Janeiro
Brazil's air force on Sunday got the green light to shoot down any aircraft that crosses the country's air space without prior authorization, and which refuses to identify itself. The new law, originally drafted in 1998, aims to fight drug trafficking: according to the air force, last year 4,628 unidentified airplanes entered Brazilian air space.

Controversy surrounding the law, including protests from human rights groups and the US government, prevented it from being passed by the previous administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. But the rise in drug-related violence in Brazil prompted the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to allow the armed forces to take direct action against drug traffickers who violate Brazilian air space. Defense Minister José Viegas said that pilots will be adequately warned, and pointed out that there are nine prior steps to go through

before a shutdown can take place — from identifying the aircraft to firing warning shots.

One of the problems impeding this kind of law in the past is that drug traffickers often bring children along on flights, and make them visible to prevent any possible attacks. But according to Ricardo Machado Vieira, a spokesperson for the Defense Ministry, even when traffickers travel with children, "not even that will serve as a safe-conduct to outwit the law sanctioned by the State of Brazil."

Human rights activists, such as Reed Brody from Human Rights Watch, nevertheless regard this new legislation as a peril given that it could spur violations of "international laws with the intentional use of lethal force." Peru previously had a similar law, but it was repealed after the air force mistakenly shot down a plane carrying US missionaries.