

Honduran regime meets Zelaya's return with "state of siege"

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23 September 2009

Police and army troops Tuesday violently attacked thousands of Hondurans who had gathered outside the Brazilian embassy, where deposed President Manuel Zelaya took refuge following his clandestine return to the country the day before.

Firing tear gas grenades and rubber bullets and beating people with clubs, the repressive forces dispersed the demonstrators beginning at 7:00 in the morning. Armored trucks mounted with water cannon were also deployed. At least 20 people were admitted to the Tegucigalpa hospital with broken limbs and head wounds.

"We were calm, singing, when they came and violently drove us out," Jaqueline Espinal, one of the demonstrators told the Spanish daily *El Pais*. "We weren't doing anything wrong."

The police announced Tuesday afternoon that some 150 people had been arrested in the assault, charged in connection with the police violence and for violating the regime's curfew.

Many of those outside the embassy had traveled from the countryside in response to an appeal issued by Zelaya from his refuge in the embassy. "Come to the capital, because here is where a peaceful dialogue must be established, but one which reestablishes constitutional order," he said in a radio broadcast.

Since his return, the ousted president has mixed demagogic rhetoric—"fatherland, restitution or death"—with statements to a Honduran television station that he is "reaching out" to the leaders of the coup regime by way of intermediaries. He has repeatedly asked to speak to the president of the coup regime, Roberto Micheletti—his former Liberal Party ally.

The demonstrators came in defiance of a 26-hour curfew imposed suddenly Monday afternoon, after the coup regime confirmed that Zelaya was indeed in Tegucigalpa. Initially, the regime's president, Micheletti, said reports that he had returned were "lies" and that he was actually in "a hotel suite in Nicaragua."

In addition to the curfew—which has been extended at least until Wednesday morning—the regime ordered the closing of all of the country's civilian airports and their takeover by the military as well as the sealing of Honduran borders. These measures have virtually paralyzed the entire country, closing down businesses and schools.

Two radio stations that supported Zelaya were forced off the air after their power was cut off. Micheletti has threatened to

arrest their reporters for having covered Zelaya's return.

The secretary of the Honduran United Workers Union, Raul Salinas, told Telesur that the coup regime had effectively imposed a "state of siege" that it was using to persecute leaders of the unions and popular organizations and others opposed to the coup.

In the aftermath of the police assault, heavily armed soldiers continued to encircle the Brazilian embassy, taking up positions in nearby houses, while military helicopters flew overhead. With hundreds of people inside, including Zelaya and his family and supporters as well as media and Brazilian officials, the Honduran regime cut off electricity, water and telephone lines. Even after the demonstrators were dispersed, Honduran security forces set up sound devices outside the embassy, broadcasting the country's national anthem at ear-splitting volume.

"I foresee bigger acts of aggression and violence; that they could be capable of invading the Brazilian embassy," Zelaya said in an interview with the Venezuelan television network, Telesur.

While Micheletti said that the coup regime would respect the embassy, other officials in the regime called this pledge into question. "The inviolability of a diplomatic mission does not imply the protection of delinquents or fugitives from justice," Micheletti's foreign ministry adviser, Mario Fortinthe, told the media.

Micheletti issued an ultimatum to the Brazilian government, demanding that it either give Zelaya asylum in Brazil or turn him over for arrest by the regime for trial on alleged violations of the Honduran constitution.

Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim dismissed the demand as "total impertinence." He warned that any violent act against the country's embassy in Tegucigalpa would be "intolerable."

The coup that overthrew Zelaya on June 28 was organized after he dismissed the commander of the country's armed forces and sought to press ahead with a referendum—deemed illegal by the country's supreme court—in which Hondurans were to be asked whether they favored amending the constitution that was imposed upon the country by the leaders of its former military dictatorship and the US embassy in 1982.

The ousted president's return was apparently timed to coincide with both the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York and a planned visit to the country by the head of the Organization of American States, Jose Miguel Insulza, who is pressing the coup regime to accept him as a mediator in resolving the crisis. Insulza, however, was forced to postpone the visit after the regime ordered the airport closings.

Zelaya has repeatedly insisted that his aim is to open a "dialogue" with those who overthrew him. "I am here in Tegucigalpa," he said in a statement to the media. "I am here for the restoration of democracy, to call for dialogue."

Zelaya had crossed the Nicaraguan-Honduran border and traveled for 15 hours to reach the Honduran capital. The journey marked his third attempt to return to Honduras. On July 5, he flew to Honduras aboard a Venezuelan plane, but the regime denied permission to land and sent troops and vehicles to block the runway. One young man was shot to death that day when troops opened fire on pro-Zelaya demonstrators who had come to greet his plane. Then, on July 24, he crossed over from Nicaragua in what amounted to a photo opportunity, quickly returning to the Nicaraguan side of the border.

Zelaya indicated that he had received help in returning this time, but declined to give any specifics. There was speculation that the Brazilian government had aided him in an attempt to seize the initiative from Washington. It seems highly unlikely that Zelaya would carry out a secret trip to the Honduran capital without any idea of where he was going.

This has been repeatedly denied by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as well as Brazilian ministers.

According to the account given by Brazilian officials, Brasilia learned of Zelaya's return only when one of his supporters, a member of the Honduran parliament, called the embassy asking if he could find asylum there.

At a press conference in New York, where he is attending the opening of the UN General Assembly, Brazilian Foreign Minister Amorim said his country had played no role in organizing Zelaya's return, but had merely granted his request for asylum. "We hope this will open a new stage in the discussions and a rapid solution," he said. The Brazilian government, he added, had offered Zelaya "refuge and at the same time help in dialogue with the political forces in Honduras."

For his part, the Brazilian president, Lula, said that Brazil was only doing "what any other democratic country would do" and did not want to be the mediator between Zelaya and the Honduran coup regime. That role, he said, should go to the OAS and its secretary general, Insulza.

One Honduran official, a supporter of the coup regime, suggested that Brazil was using the Honduran affair to assert its power in Latin America at the expense of Washington. Delmer Urbizo, who was the country's ambassador to the UN before announcing his backing Micheletti, declared, "Brazil wants to be the new regional police and wants a new world status.... I

don't know if the region is ready to trade American intervention for Brazilian intervention."

Meanwhile, after the US State Department issued a demand that "all parties refrain from actions that would lead to further unrest"—an apparent rebuke to Zelaya and those who have taken to the streets to oppose the coup—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a public appearance in New York with former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, who was promoted by Washington to mediate the Honduran crisis.

"Now that President Zelaya is back it would be opportune to restore him to his position under appropriate circumstances, get on with the election that is currently scheduled for November, have a peaceful transition of presidential authority and get Honduras back to constitutional and democratic order," Clinton told the media.

The "appropriate circumstances" favored by Washington are those proposed by Arias in the so-called San Jose Accord. Under this proposal, Zelaya would be allowed to return to the presidential palace, but only as a largely powerless figurehead in a government of "unity and reconciliation" dominated by the very forces that overthrew him in the June 28 coup. He would also be barred from proposing any changes to the country's constitution. Micheletti and the other coup leaders would be granted a blanket amnesty for the coup as well as the killings, disappearances, arbitrary detentions and torture that they have carried out against the popular opposition.

This proposal essentially consolidates the principal aims of the coup, with US blessings, even as Washington postures as a defender of democracy.

Zelaya has accepted these conditions for his return to office for what amounts to little more than three months before the winner of an election set for November would assume power. The contrast between this position and the courage and determination of the masses of ordinary working people who have defied military repression to oppose the coup could not be starker.



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