

Venezuela arrests 30 more military officers in coup plot

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As the government of President Nicolás Maduro entered a second round of talks with Venezuela's right-wing opposition, a leading national daily reported that the number of military officers under arrest for involvement in an alleged coup plot has risen to over 30.

The talks, which have been billed as a vehicle for pulling Venezuela out of its political and economic crisis, and the alleged military conspiracy have both unfolded in the context of two months of nationwide protests, riots and street blockades organized by the right with the aim of forcing the year-old administration of Maduro from office. Those organizing the violent street clashes, which have claimed at least 40 lives, have enjoyed longstanding political support and funding from Washington.

Citing unnamed high level sources at the Miraflores presidential palace, *Ultimas Noticias* reported that among those in custody were the Rivero Lago brothers—one of them a colonel and the other a lieutenant colonel—two officers from the National Guard, two from the Navy and one from the Army. The majority of those implicated were from the Air Force, as were the three generals whose arrests were announced three weeks ago: Oswaldo Hernández Sánchez, José Machillanda Díaz and Carlos Millán Yaguaracuto.

According to the report, the plot had been set to unfold on March 20, at the height of the violence orchestrated by the right and was to include air maneuvers and the strafing of Army soldiers as part of a plan to trigger nationwide upheavals and a military seizure of power.

The investigation, according to the report, had uncovered links between the alleged military conspirators and at least one leading member of the right-wing opposition.

President Maduro, whose public announcement of the arrest of the three generals coincided with last month's arrival in Venezuela of a mission of foreign ministers from the UNASUR (Union of South American Nations)

seeking to mediate between the government and the right, made no comment directly on the revelation of a significantly wider coup plot.

In a rally called to mark the first anniversary of his election as president on April 15, however, he warned that a coup was being prepared to overthrow his government as a "strategic play by the great powers" to gain control of Venezuela's oil reserves and use them as a means of "dominating" Russia, China and India.

"The world must know that the coup against the Bolivarian revolution is also a coup against the independent energy development of the world," Maduro said. He added that, if this strategy were successful, it would sink the economies of 18 Caribbean countries that benefit from Petrocaribe, a Venezuelan program providing subsidized oil, and open the door to their "recolonization."

Even while denouncing the coup threats against his government, Maduro has moved ahead with talks with the right-wing opposition aimed at reaching an accommodation. After a six-hour publicly televised round held last week, the two sides met for closed-door discussions on Tuesday.

At the end of the meeting, the two sides announced that the government's rightist opponents had agreed to participate in a "pacification" plan being prepared by the government to crack down on the country's high crime rate.

Ramón Guillermo Avelledo, the secretary general of the opposition coalition known as MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable), said that the opposition, which controls three of Venezuela's states, 76 municipalities and the metropolitan Caracas government, would work together with the government. "We are prepared to coordinate on the plans for security and peace," he said.

While the government rejected an opposition call for a blanket amnesty decree freeing all those being held for

political violence, the opposition leader indicated that the government was amendable to consideration of individual cases.

In particular, the two sides discussed the case of Iván Simonovis, the US-trained Caracas metropolitan police commander, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison for his role in the shootings that killed 19 demonstrators and wounded around 60 more during the CIA-backed coup against then-President Hugo Chavez in April 2002. Avelledo said that in the spirit of “national reconciliation,” special attention would be given to Simonovis’s case as well as to those of other police jailed on similar charges. The opposition is also seeking the release of right-wing leaders jailed for instigating violence during the current round of protests, including Leopoldo López, the head of the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) party.

The two sides also agreed to the broadening of a “Truth Commission” proposed by the government to investigate responsibility for the violence that has plagued the country since mid-February. The opposition said that it would bring allegations of 60 cases of torture or ill-treatment of detainees to the commission.

In addition, agreement was reached on opposition participation in panels naming members of the judiciary and the national election commission.

Venezuelan Vice President Jorge Arreaza, who headed the government negotiators, said that the right-wing opposition was also invited to work jointly on policies to confront the country’s economic problems and had been asked to submit “constructive criticisms.”

Mediating these talks are the foreign ministers of three UNASUR countries—Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador—and the Vatican’s representative in Venezuela.

In recent Senate testimony, US Secretary of State John Kerry, who had previously denounced the Venezuelan government for what it called a “terror campaign against its own people” and threatened US sanction, voiced Washington’s “strong support” for the UNASUR’s mediation efforts and expressed the hope for an “honest dialogue” to deal with “the legitimate demands of the people of Venezuela.”

Clearly, the hope of Washington—like that of the Venezuelan right itself—is that with the aid of the UNASUR governments and the Vatican these talks can be used to push the Maduro government further to the right. Colombia, the closest US ally in Latin America, is serving as one of the mediators, while Brazil’s position was indicated in a statement made by the country’s former president Lula da Silva, who called for Maduro to form a

coalition government with the right as a means of “diminishing tension.” Lula insisted that a power-sharing deal must be reached because, for Brazil, “Venezuela is strategic.”

The talks have generated increasing unease within the Venezuelan working class as the government has engaged in “peace conferences” with the country’s wealthiest businessmen and big business associations and “dialogue” with the right, while implementing policies that have driven down real wages, including currency devaluations and the lifting of price controls.

The last two months of violent protests have been concentrated in wealthy and better-off middle class neighborhoods, while the masses of Venezuelan workers and poor have shunned them. Nonetheless, rising prices, shortages of basic necessities and repression of workers’ strikes has generated rising popular anger against both the government and the right.

This has found pale reflection in protests by unions at their exclusion from any of the discussions of the crisis organized by the government. Last week, leaders of the Workers Federation of the western state of Zulia protested that “until now only the powerful economic groups and capitalists are the ones that are meeting with the government” seeking their own interests.

And in Caracas, Servando Carbone, secretary of FENTRASEP representing public sector workers, charged that workers were facing their own violence in the form of layoffs, attacks on their rights and the use of government security forces to suppress their struggles and even jail them.

“The exclusion of workers’ organizations from the entire setup implemented by the national government to seek solutions to the economic crisis and social peace for us only provokes alarm,” he said.

Between the threat of military coup and the turn by the Maduro government toward a common policy with the Venezuelan right on economic and social questions, the Venezuelan working class is confronted with intense and growing dangers.



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