

Army chief warns that Brazil's crisis is threat to "stability"

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In an unprecedented video conference with some 2,000 reserve officers, the commander of Brazil's army, Gen. Eduardo Villas Boas, issued a warning that the country's deepening economic and political crisis was posing a mounting threat to "stability."

The general's speech was broadcast to officers gathered at eight commands around the country last Friday. It began circulating on the Internet this week.

"We are living through an extremely difficult, critical situation—a very serious crisis of a political, economic and ethical nature," he said in the speech, adding that "if it persists, it can turn into a social crisis with negative effects on stability."

The general continued, "And there, in that context, it begins to concern us directly."

According to the Brazilian daily *Folha de Sao Paulo*, in response to the general's speech, the president of the reserve officers' council, Sergio Monteiro, published a note that concluded, "The lieutenants are coming back soon! Give us a mission!"

General Villas Boas also paid special tribute to Roberto Magalhães, a politician of the extreme right-wing Democrats Party, who was present for the speech. The army chief praised Magalhães, who began his political career under the former military dictatorship, as a "public figure of irreproachable character," adding that he was "from a time when politicians knew what the word ethics meant." Magalhães has been among the most vociferous of those calling for Rousseff's ouster.

The general's remarks come in the midst of a mounting political crisis for the government of Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) President Dilma Rousseff, which has been engulfed by the multi-billion-dollar corruption scandal involving political payoffs and kickbacks at the state-owned energy conglomerate Petrobras, Brazil's largest corporation.

At the same time, Brazil's economy has entered

recession, with economic activity falling for a third straight month in August, down 0.76 percent from the previous month, and plunging 4.47 percent compared to the same month last year.

The Fitch rating agency Thursday downgraded Brazil's sovereign debt rating to just one notch above junk status, citing rising government debt and deepening economic and political crisis. Standard & Poor's last month downgraded Brazil debt to junk status.

With unemployment rising and the government seeking to push through a sweeping package of economic austerity measures to placate international finance capital, Rousseff's approval rating has fallen to the lowest level of any president since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. A poll conducted last month showed just 7 percent of those surveyed rating the president positively, while nearly two-thirds said they did not believe she would complete her term in office, which ends in 2018.

Rousseff's right-wing opposition has organized a series of mass demonstrations calling for her impeachment, with the most recent protests in August dominated by banners calling for the military to intervene.

Under conditions in which Rousseff has repeatedly charged that she is the victim of a "coup plot" by the Brazilian right to bring down her presidency, the remarks by General Villas Boas have assumed ominous implications.

Brazil's military seized power in a US-backed coup in 1964 and ruled the country under dictatorship for more than two decades afterwards. To this date, those responsible for political murders, disappearances, arbitrary arrests and widespread torture have enjoyed complete impunity thanks to a 1979 Amnesty Law drafted by the military rulers themselves and kept in place since, including during more than a dozen years of Workers Party rule.

Villas Boas was installed as army chief by Rousseff

herself at the beginning of this year, replacing Gen. Enzo Martins Peri, who was accused of stonewalling a “truth commission” set up by the Rousseff government to investigate the crimes of the military dictatorship.

In May, in the wake of earlier anti-Rousseff demonstrations, the new army chief gave a statement rejecting the demands of right-wing protesters for the military to overthrow her. “It is not the role of the armed forces to supervise the government, bring down the government or interfere in the political life of the country,” he said.

In September, however, he harshly criticized the PT government’s cuts to the military budget, saying that they posed a “real threat” to the army’s ability to function. At around the same time, he noticeably softened his tone in relation to the right-wing demonstrations, declaring that those who had taken to the streets calling for a military coup “are in reality asking for efforts based upon values, and the military class is perceived as the bearer of these principles.”

In his speech to the reserve officers, Villas Boas indicated that a military seizure of power was unnecessary because civilian institutions were working. He gave as his example the October 7 ruling by Brazil’s Court of Accounts (known by the Portuguese acronym TCU), a federal budget watchdog agency, which indicted the Rousseff government’s 2014 accounts, an action that has not been taken since 1937. It found that the government used illegal methods, such as incurring debts from state banks, to pay expenses, to conceal the fact that it was increasing the deficit during an election year.

The court’s recommendation to the Congress to reject the accounts was immediately seized upon by the right as the grounds for impeaching Rousseff, an action that has been at least temporarily stymied by the country’s supreme court. The question obviously arises: if this avenue remains blocked, will Villas Boas or some other general seek a different means of removing the government?



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