

Second coup attempt strikes hated Venezuelan President

by Cynthia R. Rush

For the second time this year, members of the Venezuelan Armed Forces attempted to overthrow President Carlos Andrés Pérez and the free-market austerity policy he has imposed on his nation on behalf of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At approximately 4:30 a.m. on Nov. 27, units of the Air Force and Navy seized several of the country's Air Force bases, took over all but one national television station, and went into action with the intention of capturing Pérez at the Miraflores presidential palace, put him on trial, and in the interim form a combined civil-military government. A videotape of Col. Hugo Chávez, leader of last February's coup attempt by the Army's "Bolivarian-200" group, was aired on television as the rebellion began.

Leaders of the uprising indicated that had they succeeded, they would have held elections "as soon as the emergency were over." A statement they prepared which was to have been read on national television, explained that "the citizenry has stoically tolerated the looting of the nation, the degradation of its institutions, and the mockery of the democratic ideal. . . . The repudiation of Carlos Andrés Pérez's government has been expressed in a thousand different ways by all sectors of national life. . . . We have taken on the historic responsibility of insurrection, not against the constitutional order, systematically violated by Pérez's government, but against a regime which is destroying the nation and, with each day that passes, threatens to liquidate the concept of Fatherland and state."

The coup failed, however, not because the corrupt Pérez is not despised or because the population wouldn't welcome his ouster. In the days following Nov. 27, politicians of every stripe have called for his resignation and warned that only more chaos, and possibly more coup attempts, will ensue if he remains in office.

Rather, knowing that discontent within the Armed Forces is widespread, the U.S. government has spent the 10 months since last February's coup attempt directing psychological operations in the country to discredit any military nationalists who might attempt to overthrow Pérez's corrupt government. Even though CAP, as he is known, governs with a popular backing of under 10%, Washington is determined to keep him in power to be one of its continental spokesman on behalf of a "democracy" characterized by free-market austerity, limited sovereignty, and emasculation of the institution of the Armed Forces.

Shortly after last February's coup attempt, the Bush administration sent heavyweight Luigi Einaudi, U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), to Venezuela to warn that the United States would do whatever necessary to keep its boy in power. It is almost certainly the case that some of the developments which led to the failure of this most recent coup attempt are the result of operations which Einaudi set up in the country months ago. For their part, Pérez and his cronies are willing to do anything to stay on, even if it means plunging the country into civil war and permanent anarchy.

Warfare and looting

By late in the day on Nov. 28, units from the Army and National Guard had in effect put down the rebellion, and had retaken the Air Force bases rebel forces had seized. These included the La Carlota and Francisco de Miranda bases in Caracas, and the Maracay base in Valencia, which was the center of the uprising. Heavy combat occurred at all three before they were retaken. Throughout the day on Nov. 27, rebel pilots flew Mirage and F-16 fighter jets over Caracas, bombing the presidential palace, the Interior Ministry, and

the headquarters of the political police, the DISIP.

Close to 1,200 rebels are under arrest, and the death toll from combat as well as heavy rioting and looting in Caracas is estimated by some sources to be as high as 230. Shopping centers and stores in Caracas's poorer neighborhoods were destroyed, as residents hauled away food, clothing, and anything else they could find.

Ninety-three Air Force officers, led by Brig. Gen. Francisco Visconti Osorio, escaped from Venezuela on Nov. 27 and flew to Iquitos, Peru, where they have been granted political asylum by the government of Alberto Fujimori. In explaining his decision to grant asylum, Fujimori said, "What we have to preserve here is the security, the life, and integrity of these 93 military men."

Visconti told reporters that he decided to leave Venezuela with his men when it became clear to him that forces loyal to the government "had orders to eliminate us. . . . We used the Air Force for dissuasive purposes while the other side machine-gunned anyone they saw. So when we saw that they wanted to massacre us, we decided to leave for Peru." Pérez has sworn that all officers involved in the coup attempt will be court martialed for treason in summary trials over the next 10 days.

U.S. involvement

In the aftermath of the coup attempt, CAP has boasted that, except for a small minority, the Armed Forces as well as the population rejected efforts to overthrow him, thus displaying "absolute proof of loyalty." In Venezuela, "democracy is for today and forever," he said in a Dec. 1 press conference. Both during and after the coup attempt, Pérez and his ministers charged that the military rebels were just "bad officers" allied with members of leftist groups such as *Bandera Roja* and *Tercer Camino*, holdovers from the guerrilla days of the 1960s, and accused them of cruelly assassinating "humble Venezuelans." Their primary purpose, he lied, was to sabotage municipal and state-wide elections scheduled for Dec. 6.

But as the *Washington Post* admitted on Dec. 2, the lack of popular support or widespread military backing for the coup had nothing to do with loyalty to CAP. For nine months, the *Post* reported, "the United States had helped Venezuelan military intelligence weed out potential subversives and had effectively convinced the country's business community that 'there would be no normal relations with the United States—public or private'—if a military coup succeeded."

According to foreign diplomats quoted in the article, the campaign included attempts to bribe military officers into submission with offers of better housing, promotions, higher pay "and even Russian-made Lada sedans" to buy their loyalty. Venezuelan businessmen confirmed that the United States had threatened that if CAP were overthrown, the U.S. would cease purchasing Venezuelan oil, the country's major source of export revenues.

Psychological warfare

But the dirty operations go well beyond this type of blackmail and bribery. According to Brigadier General Visconti, neither he nor any of his Air Force or Navy allies ever intended to show a video of the imprisoned Colonel Chávez on television. He explained that he and Adm. Hernán Gruber had prepared a videotape "in which I, standing at attention next to our patriotic symbols, was to have spoken to Venezuelans on the causes and possible consequences of our movement." Instead, not only was the Chávez tape shown, but three unshaven, leftist thugs carrying assault rifles, who were unknown to any of the military leaders, appeared on the screen claiming to be representatives of the rebellion.

According to several press sources, it was the appearance of these leftists which frightened viewers. "People were terrified of these guys," one politician told the *Washington Post*. "If an admiral in full military regalia had delivered that speech, we would now have a military dictatorship in Venezuela." Another military source told the *Washington Times*, "Those three guys, all of whom were civilians, demoralized everyone. The coup failed because the face of Visconti was not there."

Brigadier General Visconti told the Venezuelan press that he had never seen the three thugs before and doesn't know why his video was not shown. He also denied having any association with leftists. Another Venezuelan officer in Peru, Capt. Mauro Araujo, added that his group had never had any link to Colonel Chávez's Bolivarians and, as for ties to leftists, "I can't even stand to look at those people." "We are not criminals," he said, "we are not murderers. We are Venezuelans who love their country."

The attempt to identify military nationalists with leftists is the culmination of the campaign begun by the Venezuelan government after February's coup attempt. To isolate the five commanders who led that effort, government officials deliberately separated them, placing three at Caracas's San Carlos prison and Col. Chávez and Col. Arias Cárdenas at a prison in Yare. In subsequent months, a concerted press campaign attempted to link incidents of bombings and violence, as well as any other criminal activities, to Chávez's group.

Venezuela's foreign minister, former general Fernando Ochoa Antich, took this further in an interview with the Buenos Aires daily *Clarín*. Lumping together the Bolivarians with Argentine Army nationalists led by Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, and with Venezuelan leftists such as *Bandera Roja*, Ochoa said these groups were united by their "extreme nationalism." Colonel Chávez, he said, "is a man of leftist thinking, linked to those violent groups whose maximum expression is [Peru's] Shining Path." It was only after Chávez appeared on the television screen, Ochoa said, that "anarchist groups appeared, calling for the collective assassination of Venezuelans, and later expressed this with concrete actions in which they killed innocent people."