

Andean Report by Carlos Méndez

Venezuelan rebels convicted

President Pérez has some explaining to do about the illegal trial of leaders of the coup attempt against him.

The Venezuelan government's Accidental War Council (CGA) on Jan. 13 convicted 97 civilians and military personnel of participating in the failed coup attempt of Nov. 27, 1992 against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. The CGA also ordered the release of another 109 military men and civilians who had also been accused of involvement in the rebellion.

Among those convicted are Rear Adm. Hernán Gruber Odreman, Rear Adm. Cabrera Aguirre, and Navy Capt. Ramón Emilio Rodríguez Chacín. Those acquitted include former minister Manuel Quijada and lawyer J.A. Cova, the latter a member of the anti-Pérez group known as the Notables, and a close adviser to "Notable" writer Arturo Uslar Pietri.

Apart from the numerous irregularities of the trial itself, the defense lawyers had charged that the CGA, created on presidential orders to try the rebels, violated the Venezuelan Constitution, since this kind of extraordinary court was prohibited except in time of war. The Supreme Court is considering a legal challenge to the CGA.

The accused have also denounced a variety of threats and illegal pressures against them. For example, lawyer J.A. Cova charged that his family had been threatened and that he was told to leave the country. Cova blamed the minister of the interior and the director of the DISIP, Venezuela's political police, for anything that might befall himself or his family.

Why were the military rebels con-

victed? Formally, they were accused of rebellion, but everyone in Venezuela is aware that their convictions are the government's direct response to their demands for change. As one of the leaders of the coup attempt, Gen. Francisco Visconti, declared from his exile in Peru, one of the factors that led to the coup attempt was "the government's attitude of submitting wholly to the dictates of the inter-American system, which seeks to turn the Armed Forces into simple police forces, in accordance with U.S. interests."

In a letter sent to the National Congress and published in the daily *El Nacional* of Jan. 5, two of the convicted rebels—Rear Admirals Gruber Odreman and Cabrera Aguirre—declared that had the rebellion triumphed, they would have formed a junta made up of six civilians and four military figures. The first acts of this junta would have been a total revision of the judicial system, a battle against corruption, adequate exchange controls, import controls, incentives for agriculture, new tax laws, and a reorientation of the budget of the state oil company. Then, they would have called elections.

On Jan. 7, *El Nacional* published the statements of Air Force Lieutenants Luis Reyes, William Farinas, and Wilmar Castro, who said that they had joined the rebellion because of the political corruption of the Armed Forces. According to the newspaper, "two of the pilots of President Pérez's lover, Cecilia Matos, joined the uprising

because they were tired of being used for personal favors, to transport ice or to humor the daughters of high-level officers. . . . And Air Force Commander General Eutimio Fuguet authorized those trips because, he said, this was part of what one had to do to get promoted in one's military career."

From Lima, another exiled Air Force lieutenant, Maritza Camargo, referred to a cartoon in an Ecuadorian newspaper, showing three rats eating the Venezuelan flag. "It is very denigrating, very painful to see one's flag being eaten by three rats," but that is the image of the country abroad.

There are many indications that the Pérez government has been violating human rights. Pérez ordered bloody repression of the rebels and there has been much talk of torture, assassinations, and "disappearances," without any clarification from the government. On Jan. 12, the commander in charge of the rebels in detention at Fort Tiuna (Caracas) was kidnapped for more than three hours, to protest the conditions of detention and the illegal trial.

According to a Reuters report of Jan. 14, "Venezuelan police fired tear gas and plastic pellets into a bus carrying about 80 children who were returning home from school on Thursday, apparently mistaking them for student protesters, witnesses said. Some of the children, aged between 4 and 10, were overcome by the gas and taken to the university hospital after firemen rescued them from the bus, Simon Muñoz Armas, dean of the Venezuelan Central University, told Reuters. Muñoz said there had been some student protests earlier at the university, but police attacked the children for no reason. A reporter who witnessed the incident said one policeman broke a window to throw a tear gas grenade into the bus."