

Pérez loses big in landmark asylum case

by Valerie Rush

The Colombian government's arrest and planned deportation of two Venezuelan military officers who had helped lead last November's second coup attempt against the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez, provoked a singular crisis on the continent, which was only resolved March 2 when the two political refugees were permitted to enter neighboring Ecuador under promise of asylum. The Venezuelans' release followed a week of intense political warfare which spanned the Americas, in which Pérez and his backers in Washington came out the losers.

In pressuring the Colombian government of President César Gaviria to send the officers back to Venezuela, Pérez was in effect trying to force the Ibero-American continent to stand behind his corrupt regime and his Washington-backed policies of demilitarization and International Monetary Fund (IMF) economic austerity. Pérez and his "Project Democracy" sponsors sought not only to continue their savage persecution of Venezuela's military rebels, but to suffocate the military nationalism which is on the rise across the continent. Their intention was to make clear to Ibero-America's patriots that even such elementary principles as the right to political asylum could no longer be taken for granted.

Colombian President César Gaviria had had every intention of complying with Pérez's demands, and had already announced plans to deport the officers, denying them both counsel and asylum. But neither Pérez nor Gaviria anticipated the outpouring of protests from across Ibero-America, and especially from within their own countries. The protests represented nothing less than a popular referendum on those governments' own political and economic policies. Both Pérez and Gaviria lost the "referendum," making the deportations politically impossible. The officers had to be released.

A matter of principle

Col. Higinio Castro and Capt. Oscar Navas were arrested on Feb. 20, in Ipiales, Colombia as they tried to enter Ecuador by the international Rumichaca bridge. Through the offices of the Colombian security police, the DAS, the Gaviria government announced Feb. 22 that the two Venezuelans would be deported to Venezuela, allegedly because they had entered the country with false passports. Their pleas for political asylum were ignored, in what constituted a violation not only of the right to asylum, but also of Colombia's international treaty commitments.

Colombia is a signator to the Declaration of Territorial Asylum, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1967, which states: "In case of persecution, every person has the right to seek and receive asylum in any country." Colombia is also a subscriber to an agreement approved at an international conference held in 1954 in Caracas, which prohibits deporting any person seeking asylum in a foreign land, even if the person entered the country illegally.

The Venezuelan officials, fugitives since the failed military uprising of last November, were trying to cross into Peru, whose government had already granted political asylum to the group of Venezuelan rebel officers headed by Gen. Francisco Visconti. Colonel Castro and Captain Navas expressed special concern for the welfare of their families back in Venezuela, and insisted that their own lives would be in danger were the Colombian government to deport them to Venezuela.

Numerous witnesses testified that during the Nov. 27 uprising, security forces loyal to President Pérez had murdered between 63 and 200 prisoners at the Catia prison. The Pérez government is also accused of having ordered the cold-

blooded murder of a dozen rebel soldiers at Los Mecedores, the offices of a Caracas television station which they had occupied, *even after the soldiers had surrendered*. The Venezuelan press later reported that the soldiers had been shot at point-blank range "in the temples, the foreheads, and the mouths." On Dec. 8, the daily *Diario de Caracas* reported on repeated denunciations that jailed insurgents, including civilians, were tortured and savagely beaten, "naked and threatened with sodomy and electric shock to the testicles."

IMF breeds tyrants

Pérez's demand that Colombia violate the right to asylum can be added to an already long list of his crimes, which range from the enforcement of IMF prescriptions to drastically reduce living standards, to his embrace of the concept of "limited sovereignty"—both pet projects of the U.S. State Department. Pérez's government has long promoted and openly voted for reforming the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) to permit foreign intervention into the nations of the region, in the name of "defending democracy."

The "democratic" Pérez has also lent the weight of his administration to Washington's efforts to overthrow the "authoritarian" President of Peru, Alberto Fujimori, who has rejected this concept of "limited sovereignty," and who has persisted in conducting a war against the Maoist butchers of Shining Path, despite the hostility of Pérez and of certain forces in Washington to his efforts.

Clearly, President Pérez was hoping that forcing Colombia and the rest of the region to line up behind his demand for the officers' deportation would also have helped, at least temporarily, to shore up his crumbling throne, given the fact that the vast majority of Venezuelans are clamoring not only for their President's resignation, but also for his trial on charges of corruption. The military fugitives, as long as they remain at large or under the protection of asylum, are a constant reminder of how despised Pérez's corrupt "democracy" really is.

And yet the continent-wide opposition proved overwhelming, frustrating not only Pérez but, more importantly, the "Project Democracy" forces in Washington, which need a whole slew of Pérezes in Ibero-America if their usurious looting schemes are to remain in force. On Feb. 24, thirty-six Venezuelan congressmen sent a letter to Colombian President Gaviria, urging him to grant asylum to the two Venezuelan officers. In hard-hitting statements, two Colombian senators and one representative also demanded Gaviria's adherence to the respected principle of asylum. Numerous newspaper editorials inside Colombia urged Gaviria to respect the Venezuelans' plea for asylum.

The pressure on Gaviria was dramatically intensified when, alerted by an EIR News Service press release on the case, hundreds of citizens from throughout the Americas and Europe contacted the Colombian embassies and consulates

in their respective countries to demand that the Venezuelans be granted asylum. The press release revealed that Colombia's denial of both counsel and refuge to the Venezuelan officers violated the right of asylum. The release also quoted a spokesman for the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement (MSIA) in Colombia's capital Bogotá, that the two officers' fear that their lives were in danger if deported to Venezuela, was well-founded. "The Gaviria government should not deport them to Venezuela, but grant their just request for asylum," said the MSIA spokesman.

Extreme case of nerves

Pérez, it appears, has but one source of solid support: his godfathers in Washington. "Venezuela occupies a central place in the relations of the United States with Latin America," intoned U.S. Ambassador to the OAS Luigi Einaudi last Oct. 22. Einaudi was warning that the fall of the IMF's favorite Ibero-American "democrat" would provoke an "extreme response" from his country.

This support notwithstanding, Pérez and company are apparently suffering an aggravated case of nerves. On Feb. 22, as reports began to circulate of the arrests of the two Venezuelans in Colombia, Pérez's ambassador to the OAS Guido Grooscors was forced to publicly deny charges made by Air Force Gen. Francisco Visconti, leader of the Nov. 27 uprising against Pérez, that his government supported an OAS reform embracing Washington's "doctrine of limited sovereignty."

In his address to a meeting of the Hemispheric Security Commission of the OAS, and in the presence of a full assembly of OAS ambassadors, the president of the Inter-American Defense Board, and the IDB's country representatives as well, Grooscors denounced as mere "speculation" Visconti's claims in a Jan. 20 interview with *EIR* (see *EIR*, Feb. 19, pp. 20-29) that Venezuela endorses Washington's efforts to convert the Inter-American Defense Board into an OAS multilateral intervention force at Washington's bidding, while simultaneously eliminating Latin America's armed forces and replacing them with police forces. "This is of course totally false, as we all know. No one in the OAS has conceived, or even imagined, such a pact," protested Grooscors.

Visconti has since publicly demanded that Venezuelan Foreign Minister Gen. Fernando Ochoa Antich fully investigate his charges, "and explain to the Venezuelan people and to their Armed Forces the implications such a reform of the OAS Charter as proposed at the foreign ministers meeting held Dec. 14, 1992, would have on Venezuela's national sovereignty." According to a Feb. 23 account in the daily *Ultimas Noticias* of Visconti's latest statement, the general "charged that in the OAS meeting, a U.S. demand to reform the charter, to incorporate the doctrine of limited sovereignty that would legalize a U.S. intervention into the countries of the hemisphere through such supranational institutions as the Inter-American Defense Board . . . was accepted."