

MESOAMERICA

Volume 26, Number 11, November 2007



HONDURAS

Popular Radio Personality Murdered & Station Manager Threatened

On 18 Oct, Carlos Salgado, the creator and star of a popular radio comedy show that often lampooned politicians, was gunned down by unknown assailants as he was leaving the Tegucigalpa studios of Radio Cadena Voces, which is a fierce critic of President Manuel Zelaya's government. The radio station is owned by former President Ricardo Maduro ('02-'06) of the rightwing National Party.

Salgado, who hosted a critical but comical program that often touched on politics and social themes, was shot six times, twice in the head, according to Security Ministry spokesman Hector Mejía. Witnesses to the shooting said two men fired handguns at Salgado and then escaped in a waiting car.

"He had not received any threats. We cannot point to anyone or any sector as the guilty party, but you cannot forget the confrontational situation between the government and the media," radio station director Dagoberto Rodríguez stated.

That same week the government accused certain Honduran newspapers and radio stations of conducting a media smear campaign against President Zelaya and his administration. Local media have criticized Zelaya, leader of one of the poorest countries in the region, for his constant trips abroad and have published numerous stories about government corruption.

Media owners also have criticized Zelaya, a populist, for being an ally of regional leftist presidents and leaders, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Cuba's Fidel Castro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega.

On 1 Nov, the director of Radio Cadena Voces, Dagoberto Rodríguez, fled the country with his family and took refuge in an undisclosed country, because of threats against his life, according to press reports.

Before leaving Honduras, Rodríguez told reporters that "two days ago I was told by a police intelligence agent that he had information from informants "in the underworld" [persons associated with organized criminal gangs] that unidentified persons had paid professional assassins to kill me."

The newsman, who was Press Secretary for President Ricardo Maduro gave his declarations to reporters from local radio stations at the Toncontín International Airport, near Tegucigalpa, accompanied by the Honduran Commissioner of Human Rights, Ramón Custodio.

Rodríguez and other newsmen associated with Radio Cadena Voces accused unnamed officials in the government of President Mel Zelaya of wanting to silence public criticism against the current administration, and of being responsible of ordering the murder of Salgado and of planning to kill him and other reporters who have written articles that exposed corruption by officials of government and semi-autonomous government entities.

On 2 Nov, Judge Nelly Martínez held an initial hearing regarding accusations against the alleged assassin of Salgado, named David Almendárez (age 21), who was arrested by police investigators after receiving confidential information from a protected witness, according to press reports. Judge Martínez ruled that Almendárez will be held in protective custody by judicial authorities until his case goes to trial.

Guard Killed in Prison Breakout

On 14 Oct, 10 prisoners shot their way out of a prison in Yoro, on the northern coast, killing an unarmed guard and holding visitors at gunpoint before stealing three cars from the parking lot and making their getaway, according to prison officials.

One guard was killed and two others were injured in the escape on Sunday during visiting hours. "They were shouting and shooting everywhere," prison director Martin Pérez told the press corp. Killed was guard Oscar Osorio, 26, who was shot in the head.

"None of the guards were armed because it was Sunday, the day the prisoners have family and friends visit," Pérez said. "That is why they couldn't stop the fugitives."

The prisoners fled in at least three cars stolen from visitors, many of whom were held at gunpoint until they turned over the car keys. Several of the escapees were being held for violent crimes that included homicide and kidnapping.

It was unclear how the escaped prisoners got the guns. However, guns and other contraband are often smuggled into Honduran jails and prisons, sometimes by family members or through tunnels dug by inmates.

At the time of the breakout, the Yoro prison was holding 220 prisoners, although it only has a capacity for 75.

UN Draws Honduras-Nicaragua Maritime Boundary

On 8 Oct, the UN's highest court granted Honduras sovereignty over four Caribbean islands in its decades-old dispute with Nicaragua, and carved up rich fishing grounds and offshore territories that are being considered for oil and gas concessions. The decision by the 17-judge court is binding and without appeal.

Spokespersons for the two neighboring countries said the new maritime boundary drawn by the International Court of Justice in the Hague, Netherlands, will remove a source of tension between them that in the past has led to seizures of fishing boats by both sides.

Honduran President Manuel Zelaya welcomed the decision. “The importance of our borders is vital as is Honduras’ relations with its neighbors,” Zelaya stated in a televised address from Tegucigalpa. “No one will break the unity of Central America again.”

He then headed to the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, where he was to meet Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega at the town of Las Manos, 125 miles southeast of the Honduran capital.

“There we will hug each other like brothers so we can celebrate the court’s ruling,” he said.

Nicaragua’s Ambassador to the Netherlands agreed that the decision was a landmark for the region. “This problem between our two countries is finished,” said Carlos Arguello. “There is no more reason to be raising nationalism or anything between our two countries.”

Both countries found elements to like in the judgment: Honduras got the islands, while Nicaragua could argue that the court gave it more than it had asked for.

The ruling demarcated a line roughly midway between the two countries’ rival claims. Honduran officials argued that the boundary should be drawn along the 15th parallel while Nicaragua wanted it to run northeast from the coast.

The line deviates to the south where it is disrupted by the territorial waters of the islands awarded to Honduras.

The court set the border “substantially north of the 15th parallel that Honduras wanted as a limit, so Nicaragua in that respect has gained substantial territory,” Arguello said.

Drawing the border was complicated because it had to start at the constantly shifting mouth of the Coco River, which forms the land border between the two countries.

To get around the problem, the judges started the new maritime boundary at a point three miles off the coast and told both countries to agree on a line linking that point with a boundary marker on land set in the ’60s.

Nicaragua filed the court case in ’99, saying international law gave it the right to “explore and exploit” natural resources, including possible oil reserves and fish stocks within a zone 200 miles from its coast.

Honduras claimed that a ruling by the Spanish king in 1906 set a boundary projecting eastward along the 15th parallel from the mouth of the Coco River.

But the court rejected that argument. “The 1906 award does not deal with the maritime delimitation, and it does not confirm a maritime boundary,” said the court’s president, Rosalyn Higgins.

Instead, the judges agreed with Nicaragua’s claim that, up until the new ruling, there had never been a firm maritime border.

Nicaragua’s lawyers had argued that the 15th parallel boundary was intended to give most of the disputed maritime region to Honduras. They also said that Honduras only dredged up the 1906 ruling when relations between the two countries soured during the ’79-’90 Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua based its claim for a line heading northeast on the shape of the coast around the Coco River.

The court can issue binding rulings in such border disputes. It is then up to both countries to effectively and quickly implement the ruling.

—Clifton L. Holland