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NICARAGUA

Alemán Closer to Total Freedom

Embattled former President Arnaldo Alemán, serving a 20-year light sentence for money laundering, could be a free man at the end of the year, thanks to a new reform to the Penal Code that reduces the sentence for money laundering to five years in jail, which Alemán will complete in Dec.

With the support of lawmakers from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and Alemán's Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), the National Assembly approved a reform to Article 284 of the Penal Code on 19 Apr that reduces the sentence for non-drug-related money laundering to five years.

The reform, which is being lambasted as another example of corrupt politics at the hand of the power-sharing pact between Alemán and President Daniel Ortega, could set the stage for Alemán, 61, to run for reelection in '11. Under Article 38 of the Constitution, the new reform reducing the sanction for money laundering could be applied retroactively to Alemán, thereby fully restoring his political and civil rights by the end of the year, according to legal analyst Alejandro Serrano.

Alemán, whose conditions of house arrest were further loosened earlier this year to allow him free mobility around the country, is already in full campaign mode. The portly former president is in the midst of a nationwide tour to "unify the Liberal bases," which means squelching the leadership aspirations of Liberal dissident Eduardo Montealegre, whose Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance splintered from the PLC last year and divided the rightwing vote, facilitating Ortega's victory.

"When you let the cat loose it eats the rats, and this cat is going to travel all over the country," Alemán said, referring to Montealegre, who is often lampooned as a rodent.

Alemán's enthusiastic nation-wide campaign has led some to question reports that he is in fragile health, too sick, in fact, to serve out his prison sentence in jail.

The former president was originally let out of jail and into a loose form of house arrest that allowed him to move freely about the municipality where he lives was due to an obscure legal provision that allows

terminally ill inmates to commute their sentences. The provision—known as “familiar co-inhabitation”—is so obscure that Alemán is the only inmate in the country to be granted such freedom; the other 64 inmates that have applied for similar treatment over the years have been rejected.

“Anyone who can travel around the whole country doesn’t have any serious health limitations,” argued Gonzalo Carrión, of the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENIDH).

With Alemán on the loose, other opposition leaders have taken some tentative steps toward unifying the right-wing without the former president. Montealegre and leaders of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), a small Sandinista opposition party, have started to talk about the possibility of forming an electoral alliance. Even former Vice-President José Rizo, Alemán’s handpicked candidate for the PLC in ’06, is reportedly in favor of an opposition alliance to the Sandinistas, similar to the UNO alliance that defeated Ortega in ’90.

The first test of the alliance would be the scheduled municipal elections in ’08, when the anti-Sandinista alliance could reportedly run former MRS presidential candidate and renowned economist Edmundo “El Feo” Jarquin as candidate for Mayor of Managua. Meanwhile, there is a movement by some sitting mayors to suspend the municipal elections until ’11, in order to hold them along with the next presidential contest. A suspension of the municipal elections would most likely favor Ortega and the Sandinistas by preventing the possibility of them losing ground in municipal elections before the next presidential campaign, which Ortega reportedly has his eye on, despite a current constitutional ban on consecutive reelection.

Sandinistas Launch Zero Hunger Program

The Sandinista government has returned to its ambitious socialist agenda by launching a program known as “Zero Hunger,” which aims to pull 75,000 families out of poverty within the next five years.

The program was inaugurated 5 May by President Ortega and government officials in the northern department of Jinotega, near the border with Honduras, where the FSLN carried out its first guerrilla action 44 years ago against the forty-year (1937-79) dictatorship of the Somoza family.

The Zero Hunger program will cost \$150 million and is set up to deliver to 75,000 *campesino* families a food production bonus valued at \$2,000 over the next five years. Each family will receive a pregnant cow, a hog, five chickens and a rooster, seeds, fruit and forest plants, revolving credit, a composter and other items.

The beneficiary families will return 20% of the value received to set up a rural credit bank to guarantee the continuity of the program, which will be carried out by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and residents of each community.

The program, according to the government, will be committed to achieving the first goal of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which is to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce hunger to zero. According to the document, the short-term aim is for each *campesino* family to be able to produce their own milk, meat, eggs, fruits, vegetables and cereals, and eventually to establish local markets for the export of those products.

Teachers Declare Hunger Strike

Seven teachers went on a hunger strike in Managua on 1 May to pressure the government to authorize a monthly pay increase equivalent to \$30 for all public school teachers.

The teachers had been protesting for several weeks before declaring the hunger strike, and the United Teachers Union, which represents some 30% of the country's 39,752 public school teachers, promised to increase the protests throughout May, until the government capitulated to their demands.

One of the teachers, 54-year-old Amalia Palacios, was forced to call off her hunger strike after five days, when the Red Cross reported that she was in frail health and took her to an emergency room. The six other teachers on the hunger strike maintained their protest.

The government has authorized a pay increase equivalent only to \$17—roughly half of what the teachers are demanding. Many public school teachers are only paid \$80-\$100 per month, which is not enough to cover their basic living expenses.

However, on 8 May, the teachers suspended their strike after accepting the government's latest offer of a \$21 monthly pay increase. This was the first major labor strike that President Ortega had to face since taking office in Jan.

Nicaragua Busts Mexican Drug Cartel

Nicaraguan law enforcement sent a strong message to drug traffickers in Apr by busting 17 people, including Nicaraguans, Mexicans and Guatemalans, suspected of having links to Mexico's powerful Sinaloa drug cartel.

In the drug busts, a police operation known as "Operation Phoenix," police officials launched coordinated stings to arrest the suspects, destroy a clandestine airstrip in the northern part of the country and dismantle the cartel's operations in Nicaragua. One of the men arrested was an alleged "hitman" sent from Mexico to kill National Police Chief Aminta Granera, who has declared an open war on drug traffickers.

So far this year, the national police have confiscated 42 kilograms of heroine and cocaine.

Nica Pitcher Called Up to Boston Red Sox

Nicaraguan rookie pitcher Devern Hansack, from the small Caribbean fishing village of Pearl Lagoon, was called up from the AAA Pawsox to the Boston Red Sox on 3 May, making him the 17th Nicaraguan in the history of the country to play Major League Baseball and the second Nica currently on a Big League roster.

Hansack, a wiry pitcher who is old for a rookie yet with a nasty slider that has gotten better with age, will be hoping for some middle relief appearances while aging Sox veteran pitcher Mike Timlin sits on

the 15-day disabled list. If Hansack is able to prove himself in this window of opportunity, some think he may become a viable candidate to eventually move into the Sox fifth-starter position.

Hansack was first called up to the Red Sox at the end of last season, and in just his second Major League start threw five shutout innings against the Baltimore Orioles, in a game that was called due to the rain. Hansack started the year for the AAA Pawtucket Red Sox. He went 1-3 with a 3.77 ERA, but sparkled in his first two starts, striking out 20 in 10 innings.

—*Tim Rogers*