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NICARAGUA

Alemán's Leash Tightened

In the most recent mockery of Nicaragua's highly politicized judicial system, former President and Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) boss Arnoldo Alemán was released from house arrest for two days last month by a PLC-sympathetic court, before quickly being placed under arrest again by an unsympathetic court controlled by the opposition Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

Acting on an obscure legal provision, PLC-appointed judge Roxana Zapata, on 25 July ordered Alemán's release from house arrest under a condition called "familiar coexistence," which allowed Alemán to move freely around Managua and throughout the rest of the country with special permission.

Alemán is serving a 20-year jail sentence for bilking the country out of more than \$100 million during his five-year presidency ('97-01). Since being sentenced in '02, the former president has only spent three months in jail; the other 27 months have been spent in the hospital recovering from finger surgery or sprawled out under house arrest at his spacious family ranch, known as "El Chile."

Familiar coexistence is a special condition that allows for terminally ill inmates to die among family. Alemán, who already was living with his family at the ranch, reportedly suffers from 10 chronic illnesses, mostly related to his obesity, and none that have him in bed surrounded by grandchildren.

Familiar coexistence is in fact so rare that it has not been granted to any of the other 400-plus chronically ill inmates in Nicaragua's penitentiary system who have requested the right to die at home, Interior Minister Julio Vega noted cynically.

Alemán's release from state custody was immediately lambasted as a political move most likely involving FSLN leader Daniel Ortega, who, together with Alemán, has a power-sharing pact to divide up government institutions as party patronage between Liberals and Sandinistas.

Publicly, Ortega ridiculed the decision to release Alemán, and said that, if he were really that sick, it was time "to put him in the hospital and keep the hearse nearby." Ortega blamed President Enrique Bolaños

and the US for releasing Alemán as an effort to patch together the divided right wing before the '06 presidential elections.

Bolaños and the U.S., meanwhile, blamed Ortega for releasing Alemán, either as payback for the pact, or in an effort to foil plans to patch together the right under new leadership. As is often the case in Nicaragua, even the best effort to explain what had occurred and who was behind it was based on speculation and political suspicion.

Most fingers, however, pointed at Ortega. And two days after Alemán's release, on 28 July, the Sandinista-controlled Criminal Chamber of the Managua Appeals Court reversed the decision of the Liberal-controlled Civil Chamber of the Managua Appeals Court and ordered Alemán be taken back into state custody at El Chile, effectively ending what political pundits were calling his "political rehabilitation."

Conventional thinking is that Ortega could stand to gain from Alemán's freedom, if he is able to disassociate himself from the PLC leader's release. If Alemán were able to squirrel back onto the political stage and groom his predecessor, his presence would have a divisive effect on the right, thereby strengthening Ortega's position on the left. But releasing Alemán from jail is too high a political cost to pay for his freedom, as Ortega appears to have learned in the recent weeks.

On HIS Majesty's Secret Service

Oliver Garza, the US' former hardliner Ambassador to Nicaragua during the Alemán administration, returned to Nicaragua 22 July on a hushed U.S. mission aimed at patching together the so-called "Liberal Alliance" to keep Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega from returning to power in '06.

U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Preeti Shah said that Garza would be acting as interim Ambassador to Nicaragua for the month of Aug, until the new Bush appointed Ambassador, Paul Trivelli, arrives sometime in Sep.

Shah said Garza would be meeting with "political and non-governmental leaders" on "issues of interest to both countries." When asked who defines what issues are of interest to both countries, Shah answered: "both countries."

The Embassy did, however, allude that the mission was related to a recent interview in the daily *La Prensa* with Roger Noriega, the US' outgoing Undersecretary of State for Latin America. In the interview, Noriega parroted Bush by warning Nicaragua's Liberals that it was time for them to decide whether they want to be "friends or enemies of the US." The threat was in clear reference to the Liberal's power-sharing pact with the Sandinistas.

Garza is rabidly anti-Sandinista; some in the national media blame him for playing a major role in Ortega's defeat to President Enrique Bolaños in '01.

Garza's job of patching together the right wing is made more difficult by Liberal leader Arnoldo Alemán's cult of personality, which has divided the self-proclaimed "democratic forces" along lines of pro and anti-Arnoldismo.

Popular reformers in the Liberal movement, namely former Finance Minister Eduardo Montealegre and Poverty Relief Director José Antonio Alvarado, have been excommunicated from the PLC for questioning the direction of a party that is led by an unpopular man who is under arrest for embezzlement, fraud and corruption.

Although disenfranchised political leaders have been talking increasingly about forming a “great alliance for democracy,” it is not yet clear under which tent they will all gather, or whether the US will facilitate or deter that alliance from occurring.

Concepcion Volcano Wakes up Grumpy

Nicaraguan geology specialists are warning that Concepción Volcano, located on Lake Nicaragua’s Ometepe Island, has awakened after a 20-year nap and is at risk of a major eruption.

The 1,600-meter high volcano—a perfect cone visible from the Inter-American highway heading north from the Costa Rican border to Managua—grumbled back to life 29 July with a series of minor eruptions that dusted the island and nearby department of Rivas in ash.

On 3 Aug, residents of Ometepe, Granada and much of the south Pacific were awakened several times in the early morning hours by two 6-plus-magnitude quakes that are being blamed on Concepción Volcano’s recent awakening. Public school classes were cancelled that day in the department of Moyogalpa, in the shadows of the volcano.

In the following 24 hours, there were 10 minor quakes registering a 4-plus magnitude, and several dozen smaller tremors, according to the Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies.

Concepción Volcano has erupted 17 times since 1883, the last time being in 1999. Its largest eruptions were in 1908 and 1921.

Ghost of Christmas Past

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in late July dusted off an old, unresolved complaint regarding crimes against humanity allegedly committed by former President Daniel Ortega and other Sandinista leaders in ’83.

The so-called “Red Christmas” complaint refers to alleged crimes committed during a Sandinista military operation to remove some 8,500 Miskito Indians from their communities on the banks of the Coco River, along the border with Honduras, and relocate them to distant camps to prevent them from giving logistical support to the *contra* insurgents, who ere funded by the CIA.

Indigenous groups have complained that hundreds of their people died during the operation. They filed a complaint in ’91, but it was never processed.

The complaint also includes former Sandinista Army leader Humberto Ortega, former Interior Minister Tomas Borge, former secret police chief Lenin Cerna and Nicaragua's current human rights prosecutor, Omar Cabezas.

—*Tim Rogers*