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Ousted Honduran President Seen Responsible for 'Coup' Crisis

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By Patrick Goodenough, International Editor

(CNSNews.com) – The political crisis in Honduras has deepened, with the interim government refusing to allow ousted president Manuel Zelaya to return to office as demanded by the U.S. and other Western hemisphere governments. The interim government warned that he will be arrested for treason if he returns home.

The government of Roberto Micheletti, which insists Zelaya's arrest and deportation by the military on Sunday was constitutional, now risks suspension from the Organization of American States (OAS).

The regional group early Wednesday gave Honduras a 72-hour deadline to reinstate the president. OAS general-secretary, Jose Miguel Insulza has been tasked to undertake "diplomatic initiatives aimed at restoring democracy and the rule of law" and plans to visit Honduras shortly.

The OAS says the overthrow of an elected leader violates the Inter-American Democratic Charter, signed in 2001 and ratified by all members, including Honduras. Suspension from the OAS would be in line with the charter's articles 20 and 21, which deal with interruption of democratic and constitutional order.

A senior Obama administration official, in a briefing on background Wednesday, voiced optimism that the crisis would be resolved quickly.

"In the 21st century, these kinds of coups don't last long," the official said. "It is very hard for a country like Honduras to maintain this kind of position in the face of overwhelming rejection by the world, and especially by the region and its major trading partners."

The U.S. has put off for several more days any decision on cutting foreign aid, although the Pentagon said Wednesday it had put cooperation with the Honduran military on hold.

The administration official called the OAS's invoking of the articles for the first time a "dramatic move" that "underscores its commitment to democracy."

Ironically, Zelaya just a month ago led a push by the OAS to lift a 47-year-old resolution expelling communist Cuba from the regional organization, a move which critics argued flew in the face of the 2001 charter.

The Obama administration joined the consensus, and sought to portray the decision as a victory for diplomacy, given that some countries had wanted to allow Cuba to return automatically and without conditions, while the measure adopted envisages a "process of dialogue."

Latin American scholars of various political hues generally agree that the Honduran military's actions on Sunday were illegal, but many also stress that Zelaya's own conduct played a key role in the crisis. Some note that the

OAS had little to say on Zelaya's recent actions.

Since his election in 2006, Zelaya has moved to the left, and aligned himself with the nine-nation Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), a bloc led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

In an echo of earlier maneuvering by Chavez and others, Zelaya sought to amend the constitution to extend presidential term limits. He defied both the Supreme Court and the Honduran legislature in pressing for a referendum on the subject. When the head of the army last week refused to help him carry out the illegal voting exercise, Zelaya fired him – and then refused a Supreme Court order to reinstate him.

The court said Sunday it had ordered the army to remove the president “to defend the rule of law,” and the National Assembly later in the day appointed a new acting president to serve until January 2010, when Zelaya's term was to have ended.

'Fired for a legitimate reason'

The OAS permanent council did discuss the Honduran crisis in the days before Zelaya was ousted, meeting in special session last Friday at Honduras' request.

A resolution adopted at that meeting called on “all political and social actors involved to ensure that their actions respect the rule of law, in order to avoid a disruption of the constitutional order and of social peace that might impair peaceful coexistence among Hondurans.” There was no direct criticism of Zelaya's actions, however.

Roger Noriega, a former ambassador to the OAS and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said an “illegal interruption of power” should not be applauded.

“I don't think coups are good for institutions in the Americas and you need institutions to have stability and justice in these countries,” he said. “Having said that, Zelaya was attacking these institutions. The lesson I think we should get from this is that these populist strongmen really need to play by the rules.”

Noriega has also pointed out that neither the OAS nor the regional governments that are now rejecting Honduras' constitutional order spoke out against Zelaya's earlier conduct.

Heritage Foundation senior policy analyst Ray Walser argued that while the military's actions may have been “arbitrary” and “rash,” Zelaya had been “fired for a legitimate reason.”

He cautioned that desire of the Obama administration and others to restore Zelaya may not go as smoothly as envisaged.

“There is a grave danger that by acting against the new constitutional arrangement order established by the Honduran congress, supreme court, and military, bloodshed and political chaos are likely to follow.”

Walser recommended that the administration recognize the new interim government, “messy as it is,” and work

with the OAS to promote national reconciliation. Noting threats by Chavez to intervene militarily in Honduras on behalf of Zelaya, Walser said Washington must also resist any such attempts by Chavez and ALBA.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo, project coordinator for Latin America at the Cato Institute, said the restoration of stable democracy in Honduras could benefit from a call by the electoral authorities and legislature for elections to be held early; and by "international condemnation of moves by strongarm figures like Zelaya to undermine democratic institutions and the rule of law."

'Let the courts deal with lawbreakers'

"Zelaya pursued his ambition with total disregard of his country's constitution," observed Kevin Casas-Zamora, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, noting that the president's plans had been opposed by the Supreme Court, lawmakers, business, the media, the country's electoral tribunal and nearly all political parties, including his own.

Even so, he said on the institution's Web site, Zelaya remains the legitimate president and must be reinstated. And the courts should deal with those who stepped outside the law.

"If Zelaya must be prosecuted for his hare-brained attempt to subvert the Honduran constitution, then let the courts proceed as rigorously as possible. And the same applies to the coup perpetrators. If Honduras is to have a decent future its politicians and soldiers, in equal measure, must learn that the road to democracy and development runs through the rule of law."

Council on Hemispheric Affairs director Larry Birns said in an analysis that no matter how well-intentioned some of those who acted against Zelaya may have been, "the military must realize that because of the region's experience with military seizures of power and subsequent rule in which thousands of innocent civilians were subjected to an array of human rights atrocities as well as murder by armed forces, the hemisphere must stand united in upholding the principle of no extra-constitutional changes of power."

While some have characterized the situation as part of a broader ideological struggle, Geoff Thale, program director of the Washington Office on Latin America, disagreed that Chavez and ALBA were central factors, saying that the crisis was not about "outside actors and their disagreements."

"The Honduran state is extremely weak. Its institutional capacity is limited," he wrote on the Foreign Policy in Focus Web site.

"The inability of the state to mediate political disputes clearly contributed to the coup," Thale said. "In addition, Honduran political and economic systems are profoundly unresponsive to the needs and desires of its ordinary citizens."

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said Wednesday that even before Sunday's incident, the U.S. had been encouraging both sides in the dispute to resolve their differences through dialogue.

“But I think right now, what we are primarily interested in is restoring the constitutional order,” he added.

The senior administration official at Wednesday’s briefing said that any concerns about the wisdom of Zelaya’s actions leading up to his ouster were separate from the issue of his “unconstitutional and illegal” detention and expulsion.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs was also asked about Zelaya’s actions, and what message the administration had for “other leaders in Latin America who seek to alter the constitution to further their political ambition.”

Gibbs said he would get “more guidance” on the question.

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