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Ousted President Zelaya says back in Honduras

By FREDDY CUEVAS (AP) – 45 minutes ago

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — Deposed President Manuel Zelaya said Monday he has returned home to Honduras to reclaim his presidency, defying threats of arrest and summoning supporters.

While the State Department confirmed on Monday that Zelaya is in Honduras, his exact whereabouts were unclear, possibly in an attempt to avoid capture.

"I cannot give details, but I'm here," Zelaya told the local TV Channel 36. His voice, but not his image, were transmitted.

He said initially that he was at the United Nations headquarters in his homeland, and Elisabeth Sierra, a spokeswoman for the Honduran Embassy in Nicaragua, where Zelaya had been exiled, reiterated the claim.

"He is in Honduras and calling the resistance to gather in front of the United Nations and protect the constitutional president of Honduras," she said Monday.

But a spokeswoman at the U.N. offices in Tegucigalpa told The Associated Press he wasn't there. "I have no idea where that story came from," said spokeswoman Ana Elsy Mendoza. Nonetheless, Zelaya supporters were gathering outside the U.N. compound, said U.N. spokeswoman Michele Montas in New York.

Interim government officials who have held power for three months denied that Zelaya was in the country at all, calling the reports a lie.

But Zelaya, who said he would hold a news conference Monday afternoon in Tegucigalpa, told the television station that he had "evaded a thousand obstacles" to return. And his staunch supporter, leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, described the journey: "President Manuel Zelaya, along with four companions, traveled for two days overland, crossing mountains and rivers, risking their lives. They have made it to Honduras."

Zelaya was forced out of the country at gunpoint on June 28. Interim leader Roberto Micheletti has repeatedly said a jail cell awaits Zelaya if he comes back.

Most international leaders have condemned Micheletti, terminating aid and demanding Zelaya's return. Micheletti has said he will step aside after presidential elections are held as scheduled in November.

If the current administration attempts to imprison Zelaya, protesters who have demonstrated against his ouster could turn violent, said Vicki Gass at the Washington Office on Latin America.

"There's a saying about Honduras that people can argue in the morning and have dinner in the evening, but I'm not sure this will happen in this case," said Gass. "It's been 86 days since the coup. Something had to break and this might be it."

But Juan Carlos Hidalgo, project coordinator for Latin America at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Zelaya should expect to be jailed.

"If he is back, his options are quite limited, because the moment that his location is discovered or that he publicly comes out of the trees where he's hiding, he's going to be arrested for sure," he said.

Associated Press reporters Catherine E. Shoichet, Martha Mendoza and Alexandra Olson in Mexico City and Fabiola Sanchez in Caracas, Venezuela, contributed to this report.

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Supporters of Honduras' ousted President Manuel Zelaya shout slogans in front of the United Nations' building in Tegucigalpa, Monday, Sept. 21, 2009. Zelaya has told a local television station that he has returned home to Honduras to reclaim his presidency. He said he was at the U. N.'s headquarters in his homeland. (AP Photo/Esteban Felix)



Map

