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Inter-American Relations Roiled

Ouster of Several U.S. Officials Highlights Strains in Hemisphere

By Joshua Partlow
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RIO DE JANEIRO, March 12 -- An American diplomat accused by the Bolivian government of conspiring with opposition factions left the country Thursday, one of several U.S. officials forced out of Andean nations in recent months and another sign of the deep discontent with U.S. policy that the Obama administration faces in Latin America.

The ejection of Francisco Martinez, the second secretary of the U.S. Embassy, for allegedly meeting with the political opposition and spies, follows Bolivia's decision to throw out Ambassador Philip S. Goldberg in September, Venezuela's expulsion of Ambassador Patrick Duddy the same month and Ecuador's move against two American diplomats last month.

The departures do not include Bolivia's decision to banish 38 Drug Enforcement Administration agents and support personnel, its request to remove U.S. Agency for International Development employees from the coca-growing region of the Chapare or the U.S. government's decision to pull Peace Corps volunteers out of Bolivia.

"We are talking here about diplomats who are taking advantage of privileges and immunities, who use those privileges and immunities to perform intelligence tasks on behalf of a foreign power," Bolivian Government Minister Alfredo Rada said this week at a news conference in La Paz, the capital. "No government in the world would accept that."

The State Department has denied any untoward conduct in the cases. The meeting that the Bolivian government alleges occurred between American officials including Martinez and Ernesto Suárez, an opposition governor of the Beni region -- part of what President Evo Morales described as the American "conspiracy" against his administration -- never happened, according to the State Department. And other recent allegations, including that a Bolivian police captain working in the state oil company had been trained by the CIA to infiltrate it, were also false, U.S. officials said.

"We completely reject the accusation that the officer involved was engaged in any kind of inappropriate activity. And we regret the fact that the government of Bolivia chose the action that it did," Thomas A. Shannon Jr., the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said in an interview. He added that the expulsions were inconsistent

with statements by Morales and other Bolivian officials that they wanted to improve relations with the U.S. government.

Shannon said that the erosion of diplomatic contact between the United States and Bolivia, and the ejections of other diplomats from South American countries, is more damaging than simple bilateral disputes with the United States. He said that the inter-American system has generally been based on equality of states, mutual respect, peaceful resolution of disputes and diplomatic dialogue, and that such moves "are tearing at a fundamental or core principle of the larger inter-American system, and that's worrisome to us."

For a swath of the population in Bolivia in particular and the region more generally, the U.S. government is, at a visceral level, an enemy. It is often seen as the "empire" that for generations has pillaged natural resources or used its diplomats or intelligence services to undermine governments it opposes.

George Mason University anthropologist Mark Goodale said the current political moves must be seen in a larger historical context of Bolivia's relationship with the United States, including such episodes as the 1967 killing of Ernesto "Che" Guevara by Bolivian soldiers supported by the CIA and Morales's formative years as a union leader for coca growers fighting U.S.-backed eradication efforts.

Although "the United States is an ever-present scapegoat for the problems that continue to plague Bolivia," he said, "meddling is what the United States does. . . . This goes back to the Monroe Doctrine."

"It is embedded in the structural relationship between the United States and Latin America," said Goodale, who is writing a book about Bolivia. "One of the things that Morales is trying to do is change that structural relationship."

U.S. officials said diplomats around the world regularly meet with government and opposition officials. In Bolivia, Morales has deemed such meetings an attempt to undermine his government.

"There is clearly a connection in the activities that the former ambassador Philip Goldberg, USAID, the DEA and now Martinez have been doing here in Bolivia.," said an official in Bolivia's Government Ministry, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "These are suspicious acts that have nothing to do with diplomacy or foreign aid."

In the past, the official said, American diplomats "were giving orders related to drug-trafficking issues, to stop activities of trade unionists, peasant and indigenous groups. This conduct of interference, and it cannot be called anything else, is not tolerated here anymore."

Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa has said the decisions last month to expel diplomats Armando Astorga and Mark Sullivan were related to accusations that they

were manipulating appointments for Ecuadoran police programs that receive U.S. funding. Correa said foreign diplomats would not be allowed such "abuses" as taking away sensitive information on the National Police.

"The days of colonialism are behind us," he said.

The dispute became a sovereignty issue when Ecuador pushed back against U.S. involvement with vetted Ecuadoran police officials. When American officials work with foreign security forces, it is common to do background checks, including polygraph testing.

"Vetted units aren't unique to Bolivia or Ecuador; they're used throughout the world, and used quite successfully," Shannon said. It is a system devised by our Congress "designed primarily to ensure that we were not working with people who were engaged in human rights violations and in the employ of drug cartels."

Beyond the diplomatic tension, the situation has made it harder to fight the flow of cocaine from the Andes. Bolivian authorities had relied on DEA officials to provide intelligence on international drug-trafficking outfits that the Bolivian government lacked, according to Bolivian anti-drug officials.

"There's no doubt that what Bolivia did, especially the expulsion of the DEA, really has complicated our ability to work with the government of Bolivia to achieve the kind of counter-narcotics goals and objectives that we both had in mind," Shannon said.

Special correspondent Andres Schipani in La Paz contributed to this report.