

U.S. Says Venezuela Tried to Give \$800,000 to Argentine

4 Accused in Miami Of Trying to Hide Illegal Contribution

The Washington Post
December 13, 2007

LIMA, Peru, Dec. 12 -- The United States on Wednesday said it had evidence that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's government tried to secretly funnel hundreds of thousands of dollars to the campaign of [Argentina's](#) new president.

In a criminal complaint, U.S. prosecutors accused four men arrested Wednesday in [Miami](#) -- three Venezuelans and a Uruguayan -- of involvement in a conspiracy to cover up an illegal campaign contribution on behalf of the Venezuelan government. The complaint offered the first evidence for an allegation often leveled against Chávez but never proved: that he uses his country's oil wealth to illegally meddle in the politics of his Latin American neighbors.

The allegations center on a Venezuelan businessman, Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson, who was detained in August at a [Buenos Aires](#) airport carrying nearly \$800,000 in undeclared cash. He had arrived on a plane chartered by Argentina's state oil company.

The money, according to U.S. prosecutors, was destined for the campaign of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was sworn in as Argentina's president Monday.

The four suspects are accused of having traveled to [Florida](#), where Antonini owns a home, to pressure him to conceal the truth about the cash, according to court documents. Two of the men -- Carlos Kauffmann and Moisés Maionica -- allegedly told Antonini that Argentine and Venezuelan authorities would pursue him if he denied that the funds were his but that he would be protected if he remained quiet.

"Carlos Kauffmann advised Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson that the consequences of Antonini's future actions might put the life of Antonini's children at risk," said the criminal complaint, which was prepared by the [FBI](#). Referring to [Venezuela's](#) state oil company, it said, "Moises Maionica advised Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson that PDVSA would pay for all the expenses and financial penalties that Antonini might incur as a result of the seizure of the \$800,000."

The four men have been charged with being unregistered foreign agents in the United States. Two of them, including Maionica, have denied the charges, according to the [Associated Press](#). The others have asked for court-appointed attorneys.

Chávez has often voiced his support for leftist candidates, but he has always denied bankrolling their campaigns, despite allegations by some leaders in the region.

"Clearly he has a lot of money and clearly he has a regional political agenda, but there's never been concrete evidence of him supporting campaigns," said Michael Shifter, a Washington-based analyst who closely tracks Venezuelan issues. "I think if this were proven true, and if this were established, then this would be a significant change and would mark a real departure in the conversation up until now."

After it was revealed that Antonini had traveled on the plane with officials from Venezuela's state oil company, Chávez dismissed allegations of wrongdoing as a plot by U.S. officials to discredit him. "It is part of the plan of the empire to disrupt our travels," he said in August in Buenos Aires.

The Venezuelan Embassy in Washington said it could not comment on the arrests in Miami. But [Bernardo Alvarez](#), the ambassador, has said Venezuela's foreign policy is designed to offer poor countries an alternative to U.S. aid, which the Venezuelans say comes with damaging restrictions.

The allegations surfaced just two days after Fernández de Kirchner, 54, was sworn in to office in Argentina. In recent months, her husband and predecessor as president, Néstor Kirchner, has been dogged by corruption allegations. Political analysts said Wednesday's arrests could pose serious problems for the new president, who won in a landslide, if the money was definitively linked to her campaign.

"All these past corruption scandals seemed to have some degree of separation from Cristina -- they were seen as a part of Néstor Kirchner's administration and the expectation was that Cristina Kirchner was something better," said Felipe Noguera, an Argentine political analyst. "So if there is a link to her campaign, then this will be a very big problem for her."

The accusations also come at a difficult time for Chávez, who was stung Dec. 2 by a defeat in a referendum on constitutional changes.

"One of the things that has caused concern for Venezuelans is to know that the president, directly or through his agents, is using the power of the Venezuelan government in political projects abroad," said Roberto Smith, president of Venezuela First, a nongovernmental group that opposes the government's policies. "It's an open, official policy of this regime to utilize the public resources to carry out international policies. Everyone knows that."

Those arrested Wednesday, in addition to Maionica, 36, and Kauffmann, 35, were Rodolfo Edgardo Wanseele Paciello, 40, and Franklin Duran, 40. A fifth man, Antonio José Canchica Gómez, 37, was also charged but remained at large. If convicted, they would face maximum penalties of 10 years in prison and fines of \$250,000.

According to the criminal complaint, Antonini met with Duran, Maionica and an unnamed Argentine in [Fort Lauderdale](#), Fla., on Aug. 27. Duran allegedly told Antonini that the truth about the money could cost Fernández de Kirchner the election.

Two days later, Duran asked Antonini by telephone to transmit a power of attorney to him. According to the court document, Duran then "assured Antonini that the matter was being handled at 'the top of the Venezuelan government.' "

