

Venezuela accused in Argentina campaign probe

The arrest of four men in Miami could unravel a scandal linking alleged illegal contributions from Venezuelan President Chávez to the new Argentine president.

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Federal prosecutors dropped a bombshell in a federal courtroom in Miami on Wednesday, alleging for the first time that the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez secretly tried to funnel nearly \$1 million in cash to the presidential campaign of newly elected Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The accusation came during a hasty hearing for four foreign nationals -- including two wealthy South Florida Venezuelans. Each is charged with being unregistered foreign agents for the Venezuelan government.

Their mission from the Chávez government, prosecutors say: to hush up a local Venezuelan man who was caught in August with a suitcase full of campaign cash as he arrived at a Buenos Aires airport with a high-ranking Argentine official. They pressured him not to reveal the source of the cash or its recipient.

"The money was meant for the campaign of Cristina Kirchner," Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Mulvihill told U.S. Magistrate Robert Dube. "These defendants were instructed to keep the role of Venezuela in the matter quiet."

REACTION TO COME

The arrests and allegations are certain to spark major scandals in both Argentina and Venezuela, where Chávez has been widely accused of using his overflowing petrodollars to spread leftist-populist ideology around Latin America and the Caribbean.

Named in Wednesday's federal complaint: Franklin Duran, 40; Carlos Kauffmann, 35; Moises Maionica, 36, and Rodolfo Edgardo Wanseele Paciello, 40. All have homes in or ties to Miami-Dade County. A fifth suspect, Antonio Jose Canchica Gomez, 37, remains at large. If convicted, they each face 10 years in prison.

Prosecutors said Duran and Kauffmann, to get the cooperation of alleged "bag man" Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson, threatened his children. Both men were Antonini's friends and business partners.

Federal prosecutors had taped conversations among Antonini, Duran and Kauffmann -- one at Jackson's Steakhouse in Fort Lauderdale. Antonini wore a wire for investigators.

Wednesday's arrest was prompted out of fear that Duran and Kauffmann -- both well-heeled Venezuelans with homes in Key Biscayne and Coconut Grove -- would flee in Duran's private jet, Mulvihill said.

'NO EVIDENCE'

Michael Hacker, attorney for Duran and Kauffmann, said his clients did nothing wrong.

"If any crime was committed, it was committed in Argentina," Hacker said. "The government has no evidence they violated any laws. These men have led squeaky-clean lives. Yes, they have money, because they deal with oil."

Hacker said the defendants had no plan to flee South Florida, but they were deemed a flight risk and denied bail.

In Argentina, Fernández de Kirchner said she would have no comment. Her husband and predecessor, Néstor Kirchner, has been one of Chávez's closest allies in Latin America. Chávez attended Fernández de Kirchner's inauguration as president on Monday.

In Venezuela, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, speaking live on *Dando y Dando*, a national television program, accused the U.S. government of engaging in a "political, psychological and media war against the progressive governments of the hemisphere."

The judicial action against the four men in Miami was a "desperate effort" to lend veracity to the "political and media ambush" against the Venezuelan and Argentine leaders and "do damage that they were not able to do at the time [when allegations first surfaced in August] and they will not be able to do," Maduro said.

"They have removed their mask," he said. "The hand that was behind [the Antonini case] is now revealed."

In a statement, Kenneth L. Wainstein, assistant attorney general for national security, called the defendants' actions "an alleged plot by agents of the Venezuelan government to manipulate an American citizen in Miami in an effort to keep the lid on a burgeoning international scandal."

Added Miami-based U.S. Attorney Alex Acosta: "This is not the first time in recent years that we have charged individuals with operating illegally in South Florida as agents of foreign powers, and likely will not be the last."

RAMPANT SPECULATION

Even before Wednesday's announcement, many opposition leaders in Argentina had speculated that the confiscated money had been meant for supporters of Fernández de Kirchner.

But no evidence surfaced until Wednesday's hearing.

Argentine political analyst Julio Burdman predicted the complaint will cause a stir in Argentina, though the political impact would be muted because it comes well after Fernández de Kirchner's Oct. 28 landslide victory.

"It would have been much stronger if this had happened weeks before," Burdman said.

In recent years, the Venezuelan government has purchased billions of dollars in Argentine bonds.

Argentine federal Deputy Adrian Perez, leader of the opposition Civic Coalition's congressional delegation, said Wednesday's news confirmed many Argentines' fears that their government was too close to Venezuela's.

"If this turns out to be true, it is a grave fact," Perez said. "What we're learning is that all these economic and business ties between Argentina and Venezuela were not transparent at all."

The scandal first emerged Aug. 4, when Antonini and seven others flew in a private chartered Cessna Citation from Venezuela to an airport in Buenos Aires.

Antonini was accompanied by Claudio Uberti, a senior Argentine government official. Uberti later resigned as head of an Argentine government agency that controls toll roads. He had also been the main Argentine negotiator in several trade and investment agreements between Buenos Aires and Caracas.

When the Argentine customs service inspected luggage offloaded from the plane, they found approximately \$800,000 in U.S. currency in Antonini's bags. Argentine authorities seized the money. No charges were filed against Antonini, who returned to South Florida.

The conspiracy to cover up the source of the money began shortly after August, prosecutors said.

JOB OF CONVINCING

According to the federal complaint, the defendants asked for a series of meetings with Antonini soon after authorities confiscated the money. Their goal: convince Antonini to conceal the real source of the cash, which was "a contribution to the political campaign of a candidate in the recent Argentine presidential election of Oct. 28, 2007."

At one meeting, Duran and Kauffmann told Antonini that various high-ranking Venezuelan government officials, including the office of the vice president of the republic, members of the Intelligence and Preventive Services Directorate and a high-ranking official from the Justice Ministry of Venezuela, were aware of the cash.

As late as Tuesday, some of the defendants had met with Antonini to discuss the creation of false documents to cement the coverup.