

Feds: 2 Latin nations led cash coverup

An alleged 'bagman' in a presidential campaign scandal used an FBI wire to show that Venezuela and Argentina plotted a coverup, a U.S. prosecutor said.

The Miami Herald
Dec. 18, 2007

Venezuela and Argentina joined forces to cover up a political scandal sparked by a suitcase stuffed with almost \$800,000 that was sent with a Key Biscayne "bagman" for the election campaign of Argentina's new president, a prosecutor in Miami said Monday.

Federal prosecutors learned of the alleged connection between the leftist governments after the alleged bagman, a Venezuelan businessman living in Key Biscayne, began cooperating with the FBI after he was accused of carrying the money in the suitcase in the summer and violating customs laws in Argentina. He traveled in a private plane with seven others from Caracas to Buenos Aires.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Mulvihill said the countries' links became apparent after Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson started wearing a wire to record his conversations with Venezuelan agents, who flew to South Florida to pressure him to keep his mouth shut about the source of the money.

"There are numerous recorded conversations, your honor, where they make it very clear that an agreement had been reached between the Venezuelan and Argentine governments in which the true source of those funds would be suppressed and this whole problem would go away as long as Mr. Antonini would cooperate [with the Venezuelan agents]," Mulvihill told U.S. Magistrate Judge William Turnoff.

The meetings -- at a Starbucks in Plantation, over the phone and in other Broward County restaurants -- occurred from Aug. 23 to Dec. 11.

MONDAY'S HEARING

The revelation came at a bail hearing for one of the four defendants arrested last week in South Florida on charges of being unregistered agents for the Venezuelan government. The four suspects -- three Venezuelans and one Uruguayan -- are accused of traveling to Miami and trying to silence Antonini, who was stopped with the money in Buenos Aires.

The intended recipient was Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mulvihill has said. But Fernández, who replaced her husband in the post, angrily denied she knew anything about the money or that it was meant for her campaign. The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez also denied trying to influence the Argentine election.

At Monday's hearing, Mulvihill said Antonini was offered \$2 million in hush money by Venezuelan agents to keep a lid on the source of the money. Two of the four men charged with being unregistered Venezuelan agents offered the money to Antonini, a dual U.S.-Venezuelan citizen.

Mulvihill did not disclose the names of the two men, but said they threatened Antonini's family if he did not agree to help Venezuela's intelligence service cover up the \$800,000.

"The problem that occurred is, it became a public relations disaster," Mulvihill said, adding that agents from DISIP -- Venezuela's intelligence service -- met with Antonini "to suppress" the political embarrassment.

Antonini, who is wanted by Argentine authorities on customs violations for allegedly failing to declare the money in Buenos Aires, began cooperating with the FBI and the U.S. attorney's office after the Aug. 4 trip.

His attorney, Theresa Van Vliet, said Antonini will defend himself against the charges in Argentina.

"He not only did not know the money was on the plane, but the money was, in fact, not his," Van Vliet told The Miami Herald.

"The answer to all the questions will become abundantly clear when the government is able to present their case" with the tapes from recorded conversations with the alleged unregistered Venezuelan agents, she said.

At Monday's hearing, the magistrate judge granted Uruguayan Rodolfo Edgardo Wanseele \$150,000 bail, but the judge later agreed to stay the order to give prosecutors a chance to appeal.

Wanseele's role in the alleged conspiracy was to drive another man, purportedly an emissary from Venezuela's government, to and from a meeting at a Starbucks coffee shop in Plantation on Oct. 28, FBI agent Ryan Young testified. Wanseele, 40, has lived in Miami for eight years and works for an export-import business.

Wanseele conducted surveillance of the Starbucks meeting and then drove the alleged emissary back to his hotel using an extremely circuitous route that took about 40 miles to cover a seven-mile distance, Young said.

ELITE CLASS

Also charged in the case are two wealthy Venezuelan businessmen with ties to Miami: Franklin Delvis Duran Guerrero, 40, and Carlos Kauffmann, 35. They are being held without bail.

Both Duran and Kauffmann are members of a new Venezuelan elite that has grown wealthy during Chávez's "Bolivarian revolution," a class dubbed the "Bolí-bourgeoisie" by his critics. The two are shareholders in Venezuelan petrochemical company Venoco

and have done business with Venezuela's state oil company, which bankrolls Chávez's government.

The fourth defendant is Moises Maionica, 36, a Venezuelan lawyer who has an upcoming bail hearing.

All four men are scheduled to be arraigned and enter pleas Dec. 28. If convicted, they face up to 10 years in federal prison.