

Argentine leader rebukes U.S. over cash

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

Argentina's new president reacted angrily Thursday to U.S. charges that a suitcase full of Venezuelan cash seized by customs was intended to finance her campaign, calling it an example of "garbage in international politics."

President Cristina Fernandez also suggested that anyone who might think a female president is more easily influenced is wrong.

The disclosure came Wednesday in a Miami court hearing for a criminal complaint against four men arrested and charged with being illegal Venezuelan agents who attempted a cover-up.

U.S. prosecutors said a suitcase filled with nearly \$800,000 was a campaign contribution to Fernandez, who was inaugurated this week as Argentina's first popularly elected female president. They said recorded conversations of those involved indicate the scheme reached to the highest levels of the Venezuelan government.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's government called it a "fabricated scandal."

Fernandez said she remains undeterred in her quest to deepen "relations with all Latin American nations and also friendship with ... Venezuela."

"This president may be a woman but she's not going to allow herself to be pressured," said Fernandez, alluding to the scandal. She called it an example of "garbage in international politics."

She also took a jab at U.S. officials, complaining that "more than friendly nations, they want countries ... subordinated" to them.

In Washington, the State Department declined to comment on the specifics of the case, but said it had been aware of the investigation and renewed U.S. concerns about alleged attempts by the Chavez government to meddle in other Latin American countries.

"We have talked about their interference in the affairs of other countries. They have tried to insert themselves into various elections throughout the region and in several cases it has backfired," spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters, citing the specific example of Peru.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro called the charges "a desperate effort by the United States government using ... the judicial branch for a political, psychological, media war against the progressive governments of the continent."

In Buenos Aires, Argentine Justice Minister Anibal Fernandez called the charges punishment for the government's good relations with Chavez.

He noted that Fernandez has promised even stronger trade and energy ties with Venezuela than her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner. "What is happening is stupidity, and in the current framework, I think it is a reprisal that arises from the United States' attitude toward Venezuela," he told government news agency Telam.

The allegations of campaign funding sent clandestinely from Caracas to Buenos Aires will give new ammunition to Chavez's critics who accuse him of meddling in other Latin American countries and using oil money to bolster alliances.

The revelations will also put Cristina Fernandez on the defensive just days after she was sworn in.

The complaint said "neither the true source nor the intended recipient of those cash funds had been disclosed." Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Mulvihill said in court, however, that the FBI recorded a conversation in which one of those arrested said the Fernandez campaign was the intended recipient of the money, which was seized by Argentine customs authorities in August.

Charged with failing to register with the U.S. as agents of a foreign power were Venezuelans Moises Roman Majonica, 36; Franklin Duran, 40; and Carlos Kauffmann, 35; and Uruguayan citizen Rodolfo Wanseele, 40. All were arrested Tuesday night and will remain in custody pending a bail hearing Monday.

If convicted, they face up to 10 years in federal prison and \$250,000 in fines.

The Venezuelan-American man who carried the suitcase, Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson, was not charged. Argentina asked the U.S. in August to extradite him on fraud charges, but the new case suggests the Miami businessman has gone from suspect to key witness.

Kenneth L. Wainstein, Assistant U.S. Attorney General for National Security, said the complaint "outlines 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."

Prosecutors said in court that evidence against the men includes FBI recordings of conversations between some of them and senior officials in Venezuela's office of the vice president, intelligence service and justice ministry.

In repeated conversations with Antonini, the four allegedly sought to keep secret the Venezuelan source of the money.

The criminal complaint said Duran told Antonini the matter was being handled at "the top of the Venezuelan government." It said another suspect, Kauffmann, told him his "future actions might put the life of Antonini's children at risk."

The complaint said during one conversation with Antonini, Duran identified the person who took the cash aboard a plane chartered by Argentina's state energy company as an assistant to the chief executive officer of Venezuela's state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela SA.

Officials have said Antonini was accompanied by Argentine officials and three low-level PDVSA employees, including the son of the top PDVSA official in Argentina. That manager stepped down as a result.

The attorney for Duran and Kauffmann, Michael Hacker, said his clients are innocent and "have led squeaky-clean lives."