

Former Bolivian minister plotted to use U.S. mercenaries in coup attempt

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Riot police spray tear gas to disperse people taking part in a blockade to protest against the results of the October 20 elections in La Paz, on November 4, 2019. (Photo: AFP)

La Paz, June 18 (RHC)-- Leaked documents have revealed that a top Bolivian official plotted to deploy hundreds of mercenaries from the United States to stage a military coup and overturn the results of the South American country's election last year.

The leaked audio recordings of phone calls and e-mails were obtained by online U.S. news publication The Intercept, the outlines of which were published on Thursday.

The aim of the mercenary recruitment was reported to be forcibly blocking Luis Arce from taking up the 2020 presidency for Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), the party of former Bolivian President Evo Morales, who himself was forced to resign following a U.S.-orchestrated coup that year.

The coup plot continued even though Arce trounced a crowded field in the last October elections, garnering 55 percent of first-round votes and eliminating the need for a runoff.

In one of the leaked recordings, a person identified as Luis Fernando Lopez — the former Bolivian minister of defense — said he was “working to avoid the annihilation of my country,” and that the armed forces and the people needed to “rise up,” and “block an Arce administration.”

During a 15-minute phone call, Lopez was heard discussing with Joe Pereira, a former civilian administrator with the U.S. Army who was based in Bolivia at the time, about flying hundreds of foreign mercenaries into the country from a US military base outside Miami.

“Armaments and other military equipment are obviously highly important to reinforce what we are doing,” Lopez was heard as saying, with Pereira affirming that the request for weapons is “not a problem.”

When asked how many Hercules C-130 aircraft the former defense minister had available, Lopez responded that there were only three C-130s in all of Bolivia, and he only had control of one, while the national police had two.

“Following the phone call I’m having with you, I’m going to do the same to coordinate with the police authorities,” Pereira reassured Lopez, stressing that the aircraft were needed “to pick up personnel in Southern Command in Homestead Air Force Base in Miami.”

“By the time the C-130s get inbound, I’ll have them contracted, I’ll have them geared up, and ... all their weapons ready,” he added.

The troops would be collected “in such a way as if they were private contractors, under no representation of the American state. We are going to put all those people under shell contracts for Bolivian companies operating already in-country,” Pereira continues, with Lopez agreeing on each point.

“I can get up to 10,000 men with no problem. I don’t think we need 10,000,” Pereira stressed. “All special forces. I can also bring about 350 what we call LEPs, Law Enforcement Professionals, to guide the police. ... With me [in Bolivia] I have a staff of personnel that can handle various different jobs. ... If there’s something else I need, I will have them fly in as undercover, like if they were photographers, they were pastors, they were medics, they were tourists.”

In another phone call, Lopez was quoted by The Intercept as saying that his plan consisted of the formation of a “military junta” that would prevent Arce from taking over, claiming that the MAS party intended to replace the Bolivian armed forces with militias.

“We’ve been working on this all week. I can guarantee you that right now we have a united armed forces — not 100 percent, because there are obviously blues,” Lopez underlined, in apparent reference to the official color of the MAS.

Some military officers are likely to back “the winning horse [Arce] because he won the election,” he admits, but insists that they are “very few.” “I guarantee you that 95, 98 percent are super patriotic and don’t want to disappear,” Lopez added. “I’ve been working for 11 months to ensure that the armed forces have dignity, have morale, are tried and tested, and think of the fatherland above all. I guarantee you that this won’t fail.”

Evo Morales, who came to power as the president in 2006, won Bolivia's presidential election for a fourth term in October 2019. However, the Bolivian military and U.S.-backed opposition claimed that the election had been rigged, a claim that was later debunked, inciting deadly street protests against Morales and his ruling MAS party.

Amid fierce protests, the military publicly called on Morales to resign. The embattled president under pressure, particularly from former police commander Yuri Calderon, eventually stepped down in November that year and was forced to go into exile to Mexico and then to Argentina.

Later on, Jeanine Anez, a former senator, assumed power as the interim president. However, she withdrew her candidacy from the next presidential election in October last year, one day after polls revealed that Arce, the pro-Morales candidate, was in the lead.

Arce, who had served as Morales' minister of economy and public finance, won the elections, ousting Anez and ending her government's attempts to prosecute Morales' supporters. Evo Morales returned home from forced exile after Arce became the president and MAS once again became the ruling party.

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