



BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

BIF Briefing, May 2009

Foreign mercenaries in Santa Cruz, questions raised

It was in the early hours of the morning of April 16 when an elite police unit, flown in from La Paz, entered the *Hotel Las Americas* in the city of Santa Cruz. Half an hour later, three men lay dead. As details unfolded about who they were and what they were doing in Bolivia, it became apparent that a plot to wreak havoc, including a possible assassination attempt on the life of President Morales, had been stopped in its tracks. The magistrate investigating the case has since released witness statements that claim key figures in the *Comité Pro-Santa Cruz* were involved.

The police raid on the hotel had been an intelligence-led operation, and it has since become clear that the intelligence services had been following the group for several months following a tip-off from one of those closely involved. Evidence emerged that the group had a number of assassination targets in its sights, including Morales, Vice-President Alvaro García Linera, Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramón Quintana and the Santa Cruz Prefect Rubén Costas. The night before the operation, a bomb had exploded in the house of the Archbishop of Santa Cruz, Cardinal Julio Terrazas, damaging the doorway, but causing no other harm. There had been several previous attacks in the city.

The three men shot dead were Eduardo Rózsa Flores, born in Santa Cruz with Hungarian-Bolivian parentage; Michael Dwyer, an Irish former security guard; and Árpád Magyarosi, a Hungarian-Romanian. Mario Tadic, a Croatian, and Hungarian Előd Tóásó were arrested and are now being held for questioning in La Paz. Two other supposed members of the group, Daniel Gaspar and Gabor Dudog, both with eastern European connections, were not at the scene and are still missing.

As details emerged about the group, it became clear that the ring-leader was Rózsa Flores. A video was released that Rózsa had recorded

while still in Hungary, in which he declared his intentions to travel to Bolivia to organise an armed militia in defence of his “homeland” of Santa Cruz. Rózsa was born in Santa Cruz, but his family were forced to flee Bolivia to Chile in 1972 during the Banzer dictatorship. Following the Pinochet coup in 1973, they ended up in Hungary. A supporter of Opus Dei, the right-wing Catholic organisation, Rózsa later became involved in the Balkans war and the Croatian independence movement. He founded the First International Platoon, a volunteer brigade rumoured to be aligned with neo-fascism and the Croatian far-right. Two journalists, including a British photographer, died in suspicious circumstances while they were investigating the platoon. He later converted to Islam and was for a time a spokesman for an Iraqi separatist movement.

There has been some speculation in the international press about the degree to which Irishman Michael Dwyer had been aware of the nature of the group he was with. He was a young college graduate with no criminal record in Ireland, who had worked as a doorman and security guard before travelling to Bolivia. The magistrate investigating the case, Marcelo Soza, then released a collection of photos of the group, found hidden along with a cache of firearms and explosives in a stand at a Santa Cruz trade fair, that showed Dwyer handling pistols and a sub-machine gun and sitting with Rózsa at a table strewn with guns and ammunition. Other photos showed members of the group handling a large rifle with telescopic sights.

Another key piece of evidence presented by Soza was a video shot on a mobile phone showing a conversation between Rózsa, Dwyer and Magyarosi. According to reports, the audio is of poor quality but the words “Titicaca”, “frogman” and “explosive” can be understood. The witness who supplied the video claims that they were discussing a missed opportunity to use a frogman to plant a bomb on a boat carrying the president and

several members of his cabinet on Lake Titicaca. The president had recently been on a boat on the lake with other government ministers to promote Titicaca as one of the new natural wonders of the world.

Ongoing investigations

The revelations about the plot brought international attention to Bolivia, particularly from Irish and Hungarian diplomats, in response to the deaths of their citizens. The Bolivian government agreed to allow an international investigation to be carried out into the group and the deaths of the three men. A cross-party commission from the Bolivian Congress has also been established to investigate the facts, particularly who in Santa Cruz had been involved in sponsoring and financing the group.

Shortly after the initial raid, police apprehended two other men with suspected links to the plot: Juan Carlos Gueder Bruno, a member of the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista*, a quasi-fascist shock troop organisation, and Alcides Mendoza Malawi, both suspected of selling arms to Rózsa. In statements that have raised the political stakes, both detainees and another key witness, Ignacio Villa Vargas, who is believed to have been a local fixer and driver for the group, allege that a list of key civic leaders were involved. They include the recently retired president of the *Comité Pro-Santa Cruz*, Branko Marinkovic, as well as prominent figures from the business elite and the Santa Cruz prefect himself. Also identified as a conduit for financing of the group was lawyer Hugo Achá, president of the Santa Cruz office of the US organisation Human Rights Foundation. These have denied any involvement and have accused the government of orchestrating the scandal to denigrate Santa Cruz.

Both García Linera and the congressional commission investigating the case have voiced fears that there may be other similar groups operating in the country. According to congressman René Martínez, a member of the commission, “[these groups] could be sustained and financed by someone acting as a link [on one hand], or on the other, they could be connected to groups that would be nuclei of support, linked to other regions”.

Also awaiting resolution is a full account of what actually took place during the police operation in the *Hotel Las Americas*. Photos of the bodies taken shortly after the raid showed them to have been in their underwear when they were shot, suggesting that they may have been sleeping when the police first entered the building. Initial police reports said that the men were killed fol-

lowing a 30 minute exchange of gunfire. Soza has since made public a forensic report which identified traces of explosives on the hands of the three dead men.

Underlying issues

These events raise a number of questions related to the broader political context in Bolivia. The opposition has made much of allegations that the two men arrested in the week following the raid were mistreated during their transfer from Santa Cruz to La Paz and have focused their attention on the police operation that led to the deaths of the three men in the *Hotel Las Americas*. While it is important to ascertain whether abuses occurred in these instances – not least since the dead men were foreign citizens - there are larger questions at play about these attempts to undermine Bolivia’s democracy and the hiring of armed assassins to achieve political aims.

Regardless of who exactly were the sponsors of the group, its existence is indicative of anti-democratic elements operating in the *media luna* region. In the face of continued defeats in national electoral contests (such as the constitutional referendum in January), and the likelihood of another victory for Morales in the December presidential elections, extreme tactics are now being employed to defend elite interests in Santa Cruz and elsewhere. There have been some 30 attacks in Santa Cruz on houses and offices of people linked to the government (including members of congress, ministers, and social movement leaders) as well as some members of the opposition and attacks on the offices and personnel of human rights organisations. These actions reached their zenith in the wave of violence last September in Santa Cruz and the main towns of the *media luna* which ended in a massacre of indigenous peasants by an armed group in the department of Pando.

A United Nations report into the Pando massacre, released in March, attributed the killings to members of the local prefecture and civic committee in Pando. Published at the same time was the UN OHCHR annual human rights report which pointed to the activities of the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* and groups like it that operate with the support of the civic committees in the *media luna*. Even if the allegations of involvement in the plot of the prefect and business leaders in Santa Cruz prove inconclusive, these actions are an indication that a campaign to promote terror was on the cards. Rather than condemning the presence of the armed group in their midst, the incident has served as a rallying point for the *cruceño* opposition.