

Mexicans fuming at 'Thornburgh' outrage

by Valerie Rush

Mexican government officials are warning that a serious diplomatic rupture could occur between the United States and Mexico if an adequate explanation is not immediately forthcoming regarding the April 3 kidnaping of Mexican citizen Dr. Humberto Alvarez Machain.

Dr. Alvarez, who is wanted by U.S. authorities for his reputed involvement in the 1985 mafia torture and assassination of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena, was seized by unidentified individuals at his home in Guadalajara, Mexico, and handed over to waiting DEA agents in El Paso, Texas. It is widely believed that the DEA orchestrated the kidnaping, whether or not its agents were directly involved on the Mexican side. As of now, Dr. Alvarez is expected to stand trial in Los Angeles on May 1, despite official Mexican requests for his return.

Speaking April 19 in Ixtapa, Mexico before an OAS-sponsored anti-drug conference, Mexican Attorney General Enrique Alvarez del Castillo warned that "We cannot and should not tolerate unilateral measures and subjective or arbitrary positions in the war on drugs, which defame, threaten, and offend the sovereignty of peoples and the dignity of individuals."

At that same event, speaking before visiting U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari pointedly warned: "We will not permit anyone, neither narcos nor their pursuers, to violate Mexican law. . . . We have energetically moved against the drug traffickers and will continue to do so. We will also energetically act against those who, in fighting it, violate the law and human rights, be it nationally or abroad," the President declared.

Not accidentally, the very violation against which Salinas was protesting was carried out under the so-called Thornburgh Doctrine, the "legal opinion" issued by the U.S. Justice Department and sanctioned by the Supreme Court, which asserts that U.S. authorities may "depart from international law" in conducting their operations abroad. It was precisely that doctrine which "justified" the invasion of Panama, conducted under the pretext of arresting Panama's Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Whether the Mexican government's strong statements are a serious response to Washington's illegal cross-border

raid, or is mere rhetoric intended to calm domestic outrage over the deed, remains to be seen. What is clear is that pressure is building for President Salinas to let Washington know—in no uncertain terms—that the kidnaping of Mexican citizens and any subsequent applications of the "Thornburgh Doctrine" will not be tolerated.

'An act of arrogance'

On April 24, several newspaper editorials were rushed into print, warning both the Mexican and U.S. governments that the affair could not be swept under the rug. *La Jornada's* editors wrote: "It is clear that our protest over the kidnaping of Dr. Humberto Alvarez Machain has not been understood by the United States, or that the arguments of the Mexican government, however conclusive, seem irrelevant or purely rhetorical to them over there. It is time that they understood that that negligent behavior—if such an adjective and not a worse one is applicable—is extremely wrong and dangerous. . . . From the point of view of Mexican society, it is an inadmissible act of arrogance, within an erroneous policy of new hegemony, of new spheres of world influence. Certain aggressively irrational sectors in the United States think that in view of recent world changes, anything is permissible in Latin America."

The prominent daily *Excelsior* editorialized the same day: "It is absolutely inappropriate for our country to allow a precedent of tolerance for a condemnable violation of Mexican sovereignty. If such a precedent were to prevail, the United States might choose at any moment to attempt the kidnaping of Mexicans undesirable for that country. It would no longer be a question of criminal suppositions. Nationalist officials, critics of U.S. policy, social fighters, and any individuals not pleasing to that government would be at risk, and one pretext would be as good as another."

On April 26, with no U.S. response forthcoming, the widely read *Proceso* magazine hit the stands, carrying the names of the 57 DEA agents who operate "with diplomatic immunity" inside Mexico, and mentioning the existence of many more, operating without immunity, "without control," and without the knowledge of the Mexican government. The magazine also identified the DEA's six centers of operation in the country. The DEA immediately put all of its agents in Mexico in a "state of alert" and redoubled their security. *Proceso's* editors would not reveal where they had gotten the agents' names, but declared that the list was on record at the Mexican Foreign Ministry, suggesting the source of the leak.

Reflecting the Mexican government's fear of Washington's new "big stick" approach to foreign policy, *El Universal* editorialized April 25, "It would be inexplicably ingenuous to believe that a rupture of anti-drug collaboration with the United States is not going to lead to reprisal from that country, in the form of a rupture in some other area of collaboration." In view of the Bush administration's irrational behavior toward its own allies, such a fear may be well justified.