

Editorial

The case of the Venezuelan officers

At the end of February an incident exploded in Ibero-America which puts to the test every government in the continent and the future of U.S. policy toward our hemispheric neighbors. It involves an illegal attempt by the corrupt Venezuelan regime to use the Colombian government to grab two fugitive officers of the Venezuelan Army as they attempted to enter Ecuador by the international Rumichaca Bridge.

Venezuelan Army colonel Higinio Castro, one of the leaders of the failed military coup last Nov. 27 against Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez ("CAP"), was detained on Feb. 20 in Ipiales, Colombia, together with Capt. Oscar Navas.

The Colombian government, through its Department of Security Administration (DAS), announced on Feb. 22 that the two Venezuelan officers would be deported, thus violating the right of asylum protected by the Caracas Treaty of 1954, which provides that "in the case of persecution every person has the right to seek asylum in any country," and that "one cannot expel from a country a foreigner even in the case he entered into the territory in a surreptitious or irregular manner." Thanks to a mobilization by *EIR* and others, the affair has become the subject of an international uproar.

The Venezuelan Army officers, who have been fugitives since the failed coup, were traveling to Peru when they were arrested and placed under the custody of Colombia's DAS in Pasto. The Peruvian government of President Alberto Fujimori has granted political asylum to a group of Venezuelan officers, led by Air Force Brig. Gen. Francisco Visconti, who participated in the November coup attempt.

Colonel Castro and Captain Navas said they were concerned about the welfare of their families in Venezuela, and said that their lives were in danger if the Colombian government deports them.

Indeed, during the Nov. 27 coup attempt, security forces loyal to President Carlos Andrés Pérez massacred between 63 and 200 inmates at the Catia prison outside of Caracas, according to eyewitnesses. The Pérez government is also accused of ordering the murder of a dozen Army troops in Los Mecedores, site of

a Caracas television station, *after* these troops surrendered last Nov. 27. The insurgents were murdered by shots "to the temple, the forehead, and mouth," according to the Venezuelan press. The Dec. 8 issue of *Diario de Caracas* reported that there have also been repeated accusations that jailed insurgents, including civilians, have been tortured and savagely beaten, "naked and threatened with sodomy and electric shock to the testicles."

A few weeks ago, the wife of Adm. Hernán Grüber, one of the detained coup leaders, informed Venezuela's General Prosecutor that she feared for her husband's safety. General Visconti has explained that he had to seek asylum with his men in Peru "to save his life and avoid a massacre perpetrated by the Pérez government."

At issue here is the desperate attempt by CAP, with the backing of the U.S. State Department, to get Colombia to side with him against the 90% of the Venezuelan people who hate him for imposing murderous austerity and destroying his country's institutions at the behest of Venezuela's international creditors. It is well known that the vast majority can't wait to see his overthrow.

Seventeen Venezuelan senators and 19 congressmen signed a letter to Colombian President Gaviria on Feb. 26, stating that while they don't condone coups, "for humanitarian reasons, in the concrete case of these officers, they must be granted political asylum." In Bogotá, leading Colombian politicians, including a conservative senator who will be a presidential candidate, have pointed out that CAP himself once sought, and received, asylum in Colombia, as did the ex-President of Peru, Alan García.

We demand that the U.S. government distance itself at once from CAP's bloody effort to hold onto power. It must also reverse the Bush policy favoring Peru's Shining Path terrorists and their "human rights" support apparatus against the legitimate government of Peruvian President Fujimori. So far, the Clinton administration has done just the opposite; it has just denied Peru a desperately needed loan on alleged "human rights" grounds.