
158. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Bolivia¹

Washington, July 24, 1980, 0039Z

195173. Subject: Bolivian Coup.

1. C—Entire text
2. Following for addressees information is INR analysis of Bolivian coup situation and aftermath as of July 23.
3. Begin text: Consolidating the coup in Bolivia

Bolivia's new military masters have consolidated their physical hold over the nation, but they face a prolonged period of popular resistance and eventually may be forced to cede power to another, more acceptable military regime. The careful organization and timing of the July 17 coup and the brutal repression that accompanied it assured its initial success. All of Bolivia's regional commanders, even those whose anti-coup sentiments were well known, have accepted the coup for the sake of institutional unity. Widespread misgivings within the ranks and among the junior officers have been momentarily assuaged by the thrill of paramilitary action and the opportunities for personal gain.

The Bolivian high command, under the leadership of Army Commander General Luis Garcia Meza Tejada, demonstrated that it still has the authority and resources to execute a coup. The generals, however, appear to have thought little about developments beyond the initial takeover:

—Garcia Meza has named a hastily improvised, mostly military cabinet of dubious ability and integrity. He has called for economic reorganization and worker ownership of the means of production and wealth (precisely what the conservatives professed to fear if front-running presidential candidate Hernan Sles Zuazo had been elected in the scheduled congressional run off).

—The military are only dimly aware of the extent and complexities of Bolivia's economic problems. In their ignorance they have asserted that the anticipated cut-off of financial assistance from the IFIS, the

¹ Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800354-0832. Confidential; Immediate. Sent for information Immediate to Rome, Madrid, Tokyo, Quito, Bogota, Asuncion, Caracas, Guatemala, Lima, Madrid, Panama, Santiago, London, Paris, Bonn, Department of Defense, JCS, DIA, and USCINCSO. Drafted by Blohm; cleared by Barnebey and in INR/IAA; approved by Eaton.

US² and other donor countries will be counterbalanced by unspecified aid from Argentina, Brazil, and “the Arabs.”

—In its high-handed treatment of the Bolivian Church, the military has ignored at its peril the political weight of the Church and clergy, especially in the wake of John Paul II’s highly successful visit to Brazil.³

—In their haste to eliminate leftist political, labor and peasant leaders, the military underestimated the galvanizing effect of their actions on the most radical and militant sectors of Bolivian society.

Over time, the mounting pressures from within the military, the civilian opposition, and the world at large may force the leaders of the coup to step down in favor of less tarnished officers, perhaps in coalition with civilian conservatives. The installation of presumptive President-elect Hernan Siles Zuazo or the holding of new elections appear far less likely, however.

Factors conducive to prolonged and sporadic, violent resistance to the coup are:

—About 500 persons have been arrested in La Paz and in some cases brutally beaten and mistreated. Reports are inconclusive and contradictory, but it appears that as many as 100 persons have died, including prominent political figures and labor leaders.⁴

—The peasant federations in the Department of La Paz strongly resent the interruption of the democratic process and will probably try to blockade the capital, causing food shortages and hoarding.

—The general strike ordered by the Bolivian labor confederation was 95 percent effective on July 21 in La Paz and Cochabamba, Bolivia’s first and third most important cities, but its effectiveness has subsequently declined.

—The Armed Forces are spread thin and do not have the resources to counteract prolonged strikes, roadblocks, anti-military terrorism, or sporadic resistance. This is especially true in the mining area to the

² In a July 24 memorandum to Muskie, Tarnoff suggested that at their July 25 breakfast meeting Muskie “may want to bring the President up to date on our moves in the last 24 hours in Bolivia.” Tarnoff noted, “We will withdraw our Military Assistance Group immediately because of its clear identification with the Bolivian military,” and “Terminate by next week all portions of the \$120 million aid pipeline for which non-compliance with loan conditions can be established except for humanitarian feeding programs through voluntary agencies.” (National Archives, RG 59, Office of the Secretary—Subject Files of Edmund S. Muskie, 1963–1981, Lot 82D100, Presidential Breakfasts July, August, September 1980)

³ Pope John Paul II visited Brazil from June 30 to July 12.

⁴ In telegram 198465 to Lima, July 26, the Department reported: “There is substantial evidence that a veritable reign of terror is being conducted by the new authorities in Bolivia.” (National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D800359-1183)

south, where intense fighting between miners and the military occurred on Monday.

—The Archbishop of La Paz has condemned the wholesale violation of human rights, the attacks on Church property and personnel, and the interruption of the democratic process in a forcefully worded exhortation read at mass last Sunday.⁵

—Latin American reaction to the coup and subsequent repression has been strongly condemnatory. Several governments have recalled their ambassadors, the OAS probably will express grave concern over developments in Bolivia, and Andean Pact Foreign Ministers have denounced the coup.

—Hernan Siles Zuazo, the symbol and leader of the democratic opposition, remains in hiding in La Paz.

Given the potential for prolonged popular resistance and the isolation into which the military has forced itself, the prospects for Bolivia seem particularly bleak. End text.

Muskie

⁵ July 20.
