

Ecuador Congress sacks president

AP, Quito

Former President Lucio Gutierrez sought asylum in Brazil's embassy after being removed from office by Congress amid street protests calling for his ouster for abuse of power and misrule. He was the third Ecuadorean leader forced from office in the past nine years.

Lawmakers swore in Vice President Alfredo Palacio to replace Gutierrez late Wednesday, and he immediately promised to hold a referendum and constitutional assembly to create a new state structure in this small Andean nation.

Palacio, a cardiologist by profession, had for months used medical metaphors to describe Gutierrez as a dictatorial disease afflicting the nation.

"I am no politician. I belong to no political group, no economic group, banking or financial," Palacio, 66, told reporters. "I'm a simple doctor and my friends are my colleagues and my patients and no one else."

Earlier Wednesday, a special session made up of opposition legislators in the 100-seat unicameral Congress voted 62-0 to fire Gutierrez in hopes of ending a crisis that was spiralling out of control with the threat of violent clashes between government supporters

and opponents.

Gutierrez took office in January 2003 on a populist platform of working for the nation's poor but soon angered many in Ecuador by applying economic austerity measures. His recent decision to overhaul the Supreme Court was seen by protesters as an illegal attempt to amass power.

Following Congress's decision to remove Gutierrez, Ecuador's military quickly withdrew its support for the embattled leader, who apparently fled in a helicopter from the government palace roof.

Brazil's Foreign Ministry said in statement Wednesday night that Gutierrez had sought refuge in its embassy in Quito and had asked for political asylum. The Brazilian government was taking the necessary steps to grant the request, the statement said.

Several hundred people gathered outside the embassy and the ambassador's residency in Quito's upscale northern neighbourhoods, demanding Gutierrez be turned over to Ecuadorean authorities.

They shouted "Lucio, assassin" and "Lucio to jail" until police arrived and forced them to leave peacefully.

The rapid events were only the latest in a long history of political instability in Ecuador, a Colorado-size, oil-rich Andean nation of 12.5

million inhabitants on the northwest shoulder of South America. Since 1996 it has had seven presidents. Three of them, including Gutierrez, have been driven from office.

Palacio's ascension to power is reminiscent of Gustavo Noboa, another former vice president who took the reigns of government five years ago after President Jamil Mahuad was toppled following a revolt by Indians and junior military officers led by a rogue army colonel: Lucio Gutierrez.

After being imprisoned for four months for his role in the coup, Gutierrez was cashiered from the army. He was elected president in November 2002 after campaigning as a populist, anti-corruption reformer.

But that image quickly dissipated, along with his fragile constituency, after he implemented austerity measures, including cuts in food subsidies and cooking fuel, to satisfy international lenders.

His strong support for the US-backed Plan Colombia, which has provided tens of millions of dollars to Colombia to fight leftist rebels and drug traffickers, and his free-market policies made him a close ally of the Bush administration, but further alienated many Ecuadoreans.

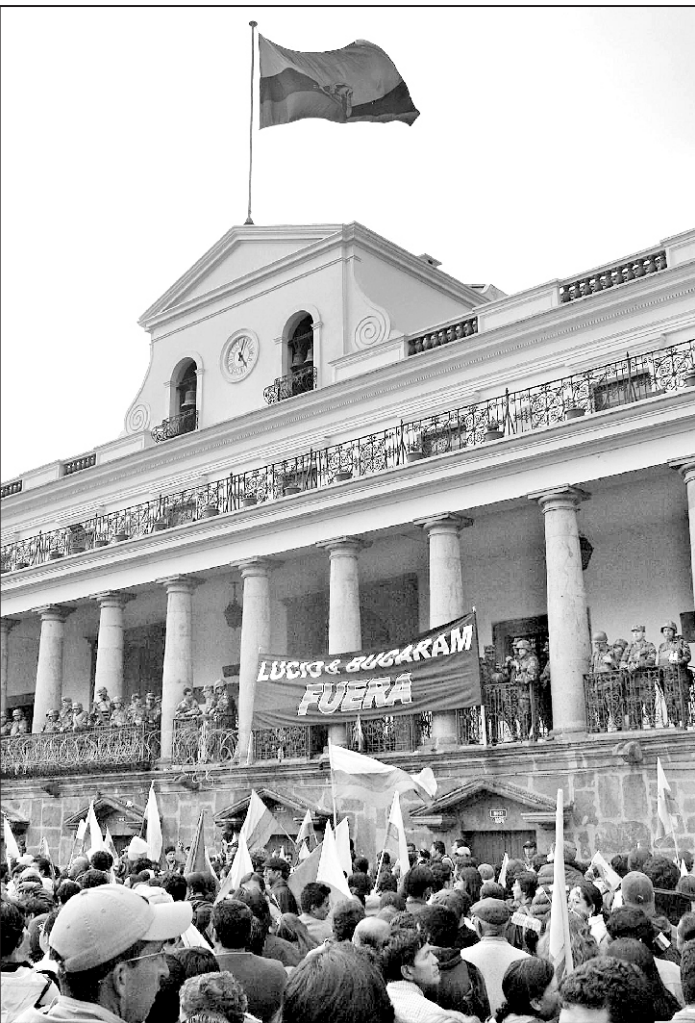


PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators rally in front of the presidential palace after the dismissal by the National Congress of Ecuador's President Lucio Gutierrez Wednesday. Ecuador's controversial leader Gutierrez was placed under arrest Wednesday after the Congress dismissed him, the armed forces withdrew their support and a new president was named.

Muslim-Americans sue govt for racial profiling

REUTERS, New York

Five Muslim-Americans sued the US Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday alleging racial profiling when they were detained and fingerprinted by border agents after returning from a religious conference.

The suit, filed in US District Court, named Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff among four defendants in what the New York Civil Liberties Union called a case of profiling.

A US Customs and Border Protection spokeswoman declined comment since the case -- involving the reentry of the five US citizens by car from Canada -- is in litigation.

Court papers said that on their way back from the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) conference in Toronto in December 2004, the plaintiffs were detained for up to six hours with other Muslim-Americans and searched, photographed and fingerprinted, the lawsuit said.

US Customs and Border Protection spokeswoman Kristi Clemens defended the government's actions and said, "Our priority mission is to prevent terrorists and their weapons from entering this country."

In the past the agency has denied the use of profiling on the borders but said intelligence has shown that conferences similar to the one in Toronto have been used by terrorist organisations.

Nato signs military accord with Russia

AFP, Vilnius

Nato signed a landmark military accord with Russia yesterday, highlighting progress in strengthening relations with its former Cold War foe at an unprecedented meeting held in a former Soviet republic.

Meeting in Lithuania, Nato foreign ministers also vowed to do everything possible to help Ukraine push through reforms needed to move towards the West, after an 'Orange Revolution' which has threatened to strain ties with Moscow.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov inked the military deal with his Nato counterparts including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at talks in Lithuania, one of three former Soviet republics that joined the alliance last year.

Other key items on the menu of the two-day informal talks include the future of alliance missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo -- as well as reflection on a possible Nato role in the Middle East.

The 'status of forces agreement' between Nato and Moscow will make it easier for the two sides to organise joint exercises and training and, for example, allow Nato troops to transit through Russian territory and vice versa.

Nato officials call the accord a key step forward in relations with Moscow, which were transformed by the geopolitical changes after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The agreement "is indeed a

9 killed as helicopter shot down in Iraq

Dozens of bodies fished out of Tigris, Allawi escapes assassination

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

A Russian-built Bulgarian commercial helicopter was shot down north of Baghdad yesterday and all nine people aboard were killed, US military sources said.

The attack, believed to be the first downing of a civilian aircraft in Iraq, comes amid a surge in guerrilla violence and puts further pressure on leaders struggling to form a government nearly three months after elections.

"The Mi-8 helicopter from the Bulgarian company Heliater was shot down by a missile," the statement said.

They said three crew and six passengers, all civilians, were on board at the time. Their nationalities were not known, although it was believed that the crew may have been Bulgarian.

Officials delayed the unveiling of a new Iraqi government yesterday after a day of violence in which

nearly 60 bodies were fished out of the Tigris river, 19 Iraqi army soldiers were executed in a football stadium and outgoing Prime Minister Iyad Allawi dodged a late-night assassination attempt.

The checkpoint near the park leads to Allawi's home and the Iraqi National Accord party headquarters. The site was the scene of previous attacks including a truck bombing January 24 that killed four and wounded 24.

Naqib said members of Allawi's parliamentary bloc were travelling with him, but was unable to identify them or say anything about their condition.

Earlier an Australian security contractor has been killed in an attack in Iraq, the foreign ministry in Canberra said yesterday.

In another grim incident, insurgents executed 19 soldiers in Haditha, 260 kilometers (155 miles) northwest of the Iraqi capital, an interior ministry official said.

Talks start as Berlusconi sweats on new govt

AFP, Rome

Italy's president began a round of crisis talks between the country's leading political figures yesterday aimed at averting early elections after the resignation of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi started a round of consultations at 9:30 am (0730 GMT) with Senate speaker Marcello Pera which will end with a meeting with representatives of Berlusconi's own Forza Italia party on Friday morning.

By that time, the composition of Berlusconi's next government -- to carry him through to elections slated for the first half of next year -- should have been agreed with the same coalition partners as in his outgoing administration.

32 Vietnamese war veterans die in bus accident

AFP, Hanoi

Thirty-two Vietnamese veterans of the Vietnam War died in a bus accident yesterday while on their way to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the victory over US-backed South Vietnamese forces, police said.

Only one person on the bus survived, and among the dead were 14 female veterans, police said.

The accident took place at 8:00 am (0100 GMT) while the bus was crossing the Lo So peak in central Vietnam's Kon Tum province about 1,100 kilometres (nearly 700 miles) south of Hanoi.

The bus was transporting 33 people, all war veterans from Hanoi bound for Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, for the celebrations scheduled for April 30.

When the bus started its descent from the peak, the driver lost control of the bus, which fell into a ravine 70 metres (about 230 feet) deep.