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Police Break up Rally for Ousted Honduran Leader

By ELISABETH MALKIN and MARC LACEY

MEXICO CITY — Honduran police officers used tear gas early Tuesday to disperse thousands of backers of Manuel Zelaya, the deposed leader, outside the Brazilian Embassy, where he was seeking refuge after sneaking back into the country the day before, according to witnesses and news reports.

The de facto government had declared a curfew Monday after learning that Mr. Zelaya, who was expelled three months ago in a dawn coup, had re-entered surreptitiously to rally his supporters and confront the officials who had arranged his removal. After backers of Mr. Zelaya defied the order to stay off the streets, heavily armed riot police officers and soldiers forced them to scatter and took up positions around the embassy in Tegucigalpa, the capital.

At least two tear-gas canisters landed inside the embassy compound, Reuters reported, and Mr. Zelaya said in a television interview with Telesur, a Venezuelan broadcaster, that he foresaw “bigger acts of aggression and violence” by the de facto government and possibly even an invasion of the Brazilian Embassy.

After what he described as a 15-hour trek through the mountains, taking back roads to avoid checkpoints, Mr. Zelaya and his wife took refuge at the embassy. He did not say which country he crossed into Honduras from.

Hondurans awoke Tuesday to find a curfew imposed by the government still in place and Mr. Zelaya still sheltering inside the Brazilian Embassy.

As tensions rose, the European Union joined other world governments in calling for calm.

“In light of the return of President Zelaya to Tegucigalpa, the presidency of the European Union underlines the importance of a negotiated solution to the current crisis in Honduras,” Sweden, which currently holds the E.U.’s rotating presidency, said in a statement.
“The European Union urges all concerned to refrain from any action that might increase tension and violence,” the statement said.

At the embassy on Monday, Mr. Zelaya gave a series of interviews with the international news media, saying that he hoped to begin meeting with “prominent Hondurans” and members of the de facto government that ousted him to find an end to the crisis that has engulfed the country since he was exiled on June 28. “We ask those in the coup government to think and to come to dialogue with us,” he told Al Jazeera’s English network.

His return appeared to have caught the de facto government by surprise. Roberto Micheletti, who was appointed president by Congress, at first denied that Mr. Zelaya had returned, calling the reports “media terrorism.”

But on Monday evening, after imposing a nationwide curfew, he acknowledged Mr. Zelaya’s presence but said it “changes nothing of our reality.” He called on Brazil to hand Mr. Zelaya over for arrest and trial.

“We are waiting for him,” Mr. Micheletti said in a news conference earlier in the day. “A court is ready to proceed against him legally, and a jail is also ready.”

But Brazil’s president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva showed no sign of bending to Mr. Micheletti’s administration, which it does not recognize as legitimate. At a dinner in New York on Monday night, Mr. da Silva criticized the removal of Mr. Zelaya once again and said that Brazil and the United States should work together to guarantee that democratically elected leaders are respected.

“We cannot accept any more military coups,” Mr. da Silva said. “We don’t have the right to accept that anyone can think they have the right to throw out someone that is democratically elected and take their place.”

The de facto government has said that Mr. Zelaya would be arrested if he tried to return, citing 18 charges against him, including treason.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Monday evening that the two sides must find a way to talk. “It’s imperative that dialogue begin,” she said. “It’s also imperative that the return of President Zelaya does not lead to any conflict or violence, but instead that everyone act in a peaceful way to try to find some common ground.”

President Óscar Arias of Costa Rica, who has led the international negotiations on Honduras, offered to go to Honduras to mediate if he were asked.
Mr. Arias and Mrs. Clinton were meeting in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting there.

Brazil’s foreign minister, Celso Amorim, also in New York, denied that Brazil had helped plan the return of Mr. Zelaya and his wife, Xiomara Castro, to Honduras. He said they had arrived at the embassy through “their own peaceful methods.”

Mr. Amorim did not say whether there was a time limit on Mr. Zelaya’s stay in the embassy, but he stressed that the Organization of American States should renew efforts to negotiate a solution. “If the O.A.S. doesn’t work to give guarantees to a democratically elected government, in the case of a coup like this, then what is the O.A.S. for?” he said.

Delegates from the organization met late Monday in Washington to discuss the crisis.

Mr. Zelaya has accepted a proposal offered by Mr. Arias that would restore him to the presidency with limited powers and grant an amnesty on all sides. Mr. Micheletti has rejected it.

As the talks have stalled and the international community has turned its attention elsewhere, Mr. Zelaya has grown impatient.

Since the coup, he has tried to return to Honduras at least twice. A week after the coup, he tried to fly into the Tegucigalpa airport, but soldiers massed on the tarmac and blocked his plane from landing.

In July, he set up camp with his supporters just over the border in Nicaragua and stepped briefly into Honduran territory before returning to Nicaragua. Rumors that Mr. Zelaya was already in the country, or was about to return, have circulated through the capital repeatedly since then.

The curfew was announced just 30 minutes before it took effect at 4 p.m. Monday, sending residents of the capital rushing to get home and tying traffic in knots, residents said.

At the time of his removal, Mr. Zelaya was planning a nonbinding referendum that his opponents said would have been the first step toward allowing him to run for another term in office, which is forbidden under the Honduran Constitution. Mr. Zelaya has denied any attempt to run for re-election.

No country has recognized the de facto government of Mr. Micheletti. President Obama and other leaders in the hemisphere have insisted that Mr. Zelaya be returned to office, contending that he was removed in a coup. The United States, the European Union, the
International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have all suspended aid to Honduras in protest.

But the Micheletti government has stood fast, insisting that Mr. Zelaya was removed from office legally. Mr. Micheletti has promised to hand over power to a new president who will be elected in national elections scheduled for Nov. 29.

Alexei Barrionuevo and Sharon Otterman contributed reporting from New York.