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Honduras blocks ousted leader's return

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TEGUCIGALPA (Reuters) - Honduras blocked ousted President Manuel Zelaya's return from exile on Sunday and the country faces growing international isolation for staging Central America's first military coup since the Cold War.

Zelaya tried to fly back from Washington and land in Tegucigalpa, but clashes between his supporters and troops at the airport forced him to abort his plan one week after troops seized him in his pajamas and bundled him out of the country.

At least one person was killed when thousands of pro-Zelaya demonstrators marched to receive him at the airport and broke through fencing near the runway. It was the first death since the coup last weekend.

"Honduran soldiers don't turn your rifles on your own brothers," Zelaya urged from El Salvador where his plane was diverted after Honduran authorities refused it permission to land and troops blocked the runway with vehicles. Zelaya's supporters cheered as his plane circled over the airport.

The interim government has taken a defiant stance, insisting Zelaya's ouster was a constitutional transition. But his removal has sparked wide international condemnation as a military coup, especially among Zelaya's leftist allies.

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The coup has tested regional diplomacy and presented a challenge for the Obama administration in Latin America, where Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is promoting socialist revolution to counter U.S. influence.

The Organization of American States suspended Honduras on Saturday night for refusing to reinstate Zelaya, the strongest move yet by foreign governments to isolate the impoverished coffee and textile exporting country.

The caretaker government of Roberto Micheletti has said it plans to stay on until already scheduled elections in November but has said it would consider early elections.

Micheletti's government has told the OAS that it wants to start talks to solve the crisis, a senior U.S. official said on Sunday. He called the situation in Honduras "very fluid and challenging."

The OAS suspension will complicate Honduras' access to multilateral loans. Washington has held off on issuing a legal determination of the ouster as a coup -- a definition that would force a cutoff of U.S. aid to the country, the third poorest in the hemisphere after Haiti and Nicaragua.

Zelaya, who had been due to leave power in 2010, was pushed out of office by troops and flown into exile in Costa Rica a week ago in a coup triggered by a dispute over presidential term limits and his growing alliance with U.S. foe Chavez.

Leftist allies of Zelaya, including the presidents of Argentina, Ecuador and Paraguay, flew from Washington to El Salvador on Sunday to monitor Zelaya's attempt to return.

Zelaya, a businessman who edged to the left after he came to power in 2006, upset traditional elites, including members of his own Liberal Party, by seeking changes to presidential term limits and by establishing closer ties with Chavez.

(Reporting by Patrick Markey; editing by Anthony Boadle)

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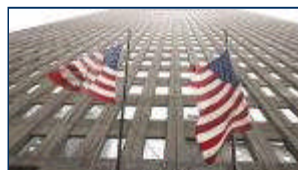
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