

1420  
copy

AIR MAIL

Habana, Cuba, December 10, 1940.

Confidential

Dear Sumner:

After our telephone conversation this morning, I got in touch with Dr. Cortina and told him I would like to see him as early as possible during the day. Dr. Cortina said that he would be glad to break any engagements which he had to see me at any hour during the day that was convenient to me, but that he had a number of meetings which were of a character that they would keep him occupied until 4 o'clock this afternoon. I told him that I would call to see him at 4 at his house today, and after having seen him I will telegraph you. I happen to know that he has some really important meetings on today which involve a number of people and I did not think it advisable to ask him to break any of these engagements.

The resignation of Martínez Fraga is as much of a surprise to me as it must have been at home, although there have been very definite indications here that there is dissatisfaction with him within the Government, and certainly there has been dissatisfaction with him among responsible Cubans outside of the Government. I will try to give you some of the background.

While I have always refrained from discussing Martínez Fraga with members of the Government and others here, even when they seemed to try to open the way to such comment, I have gathered by implication in conversation with members of the Government that they have felt that Martínez Fraga has not given them a correct picture of the situation in the United States and of developments of immediate interest to Cuba. In my conversations with President Batista this question of the Ambassador was never raised. I am informed, however, that recently a number of the President's best friends have told him that in their opinion Martínez Fraga did not give him correct information concerning developments.

There

The Honorable  
Sumner Welles  
Under Secretary of State,  
Washington, D. C.

There is one point on which I think there is no doubt, and that is that Fraga did tell the President that with respect to the loan all that was necessary was that Cuba ask for any amount and it would be given by us without difficulty. Montoulieu, López Castro, and others told the President that in this respect Martínez Fraga had misinformed him. I think it is safe to assume that slowly but steadily the President has lost confidence in Martínez Fraga, and of course there has been intense disillusionment on the part of the President that the loan negotiations did not make the rapid progress that Martínez Fraga had undoubtedly told him would be made.

Of course Martínez Fraga has some very good friends in the Government, such as Saladrigas. These, of course, however, are as much interested in maintaining their position as they are in maintaining that of Martínez Fraga, and there have been indications that men like Saladrigas who have strong personal ties with Martínez Fraga have felt that he has not been particularly useful recently in Washington and has over-estimated and over-emphasized to them his power of getting things done there.

Among conservative and sound people in Cuba, generally, there has been the very definite feeling that Martínez Fraga is a hindrance to good Cuban relations with the United States. They feel that he is untrustworthy, does not have much prestige in the United States, and that he is not the sort of person to adequately serve Cuba's interest in the United States in times like these. These private persons have not hesitated to express their opinion rather freely, and you will have noted from some of the press comment which I have sent the Department that even in the partially-controlled press here there have been sarcastic references to him. These are a reflection of the general opinion here concerning Fraga.

With my strictly confidential despatch No. 1228 of December 4, which you may have seen, I transmitted a memorandum from the Consulate General covering a conversation by Tewell with Antonio Acosta. There is no doubt that the President sent Acosta as a sort of special representative to Washington, and a well-informed person

this

this morning has said to me that this was done by Batista to annoy Martínez Fraga. It has also been said to me by a well-informed person that Batista has indicated to Martínez Fraga that he was not satisfied with the reports he was getting from him with respect to their accuracy, and indicated to him that he wanted more information from the Department of State in Washington concerning developments, through our Embassy here to the Cuban Foreign Office. According to my well-informed friend, these steps were taken by President Batista to annoy Martínez Fraga and to lead him to send in his resignation. How correct this is, I do not know, but it comes from a good source and I am inclined to believe there may be something to it. Batista is a loyal friend, but I think when he believes a friend has let him down he can act very definitely. There is adequate reason to believe that Batista has felt that Martínez Fraga did not adequately and sufficiently correctly inform him.

There is an interesting feature which may mean more to you than it does to me now at this moment, but which my conversation with Cortina this afternoon may clear up. I have not been able to get over this slow fever, and I left the Chancery yesterday afternoon about 5:30. When I got home Cortina called me up about 6 o'clock, and said he was not going to speak very clearly but he was sure I would understand. He wanted to tell me that I would see in the morning papers that a high official of the Cuban Government had resigned, and he wanted me to know that this did not mean any disturbance in our good relations, nor in the good relations between the United States and Cuba. It was clear that he meant Martínez Fraga. He said he could not be more specific over the telephone, but would see me the next day. He asked me to say nothing about it, as the news would be in the morning papers in Habana and in the United States.

From the morning papers here and from our conversation over the telephone this morning, I gather that you saw Ambassador Martínez Fraga and the members of the Cuban delegation yesterday afternoon, from 4 to 5:30. It would appear from what you have told me over the telephone that there was no indication during that meeting

that

that the Ambassador was going to resign. At the same time, we must note that it was about 6 o'clock here and Washington time when Dr. Cortina called me on the telephone, so the decision with regard to the resignation must have been made a good deal earlier in the day yesterday. If Martínez Fraga did not know anything about the resignation at the time he saw you yesterday afternoon, the decision must have been made well before that here.

After having seen Dr. Cortina today I will cable you. I am inclined to think that the resignation of Martínez Fraga will be received with a good deal of satisfaction in responsible quarters in Cuba, and even in a good part of the circle around the President. It is not likely that his resignation will cause any ripple here, or any disturbance of any kind. It is more likely that there will be a feeling of relief and intense interest in his successor.

In this respect, I understand that Conchosa is working very hard to get the job, but it is to be devoutly hoped he will not get it. He is an opportunist and could not bring to the position the prestige and capacities needed. Besides that, he is the one man in the Cabinet here who is rightly or wrongly believed to be pro-Fascist and pro-German in his sympathies. I am told that sound elements are pressing the appointment of Ramiro Guerra as a sound, capable man. I myself have no thoughts at this moment as to who the new Ambassador will be.

The resignation of Martínez Fraga did not come as a complete surprise, for I felt that there was dissatisfaction within the Government, as well as this general dissatisfaction outside. I am convinced that the resignation must have come on the request of President Batista, or by his having taken measures which made it obvious to the Ambassador that he would have to resign. I am inclined to think that it was on the request of President Batista that he did resign.

This

1420

copy!

- 5 -

This is a hurried background which I wish to transmit to you by the air mail of today. I think you can be assured that the resignation is not going to cause any real disturbance in our relationships, and I am inclined to believe that we will be able to make more rapid progress. Although Cortina has never said anything to me directly, I gather that he himself has not been utterly happy with regard to Martínez Fraga.

With all good wishes,

Cordially and faithfully yours,

George S. Messersmith

GSM/mw