

Odebrecht Agrees to Pay Guatemala \$18 Million Over Bribes



Brasilia, January 26 (RHC)-- The Brazilian construction company Odebrecht has agreed to pay the Government of Guatemala \$17.9 million dollars, an amount equivalent to the bribe Guatemalan public officers received from the company in order to obtain its contracts, the country's prosecutor's office.

According to a joint investigation by Brazil's and Guatemala's Public Ministries, as well as the U.N.-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG, Odebrecht offered to pay \$19.7 million dollars to former Infrastructure Minister Alejandro Sinibaldi so the company would get the \$399.4 million dollars tender to build a road in Guatemala.

In 2016, the company board admitted this, but the investigation revealed Sinibaldi only got \$17.9 million dollars. Guatemala's former presidential candidate Manuel Antonio Baldizon was arrested in Miami on January 21 as he tried to illegally enter the country and ask for political asylum. He's awaiting deportation for having accepted \$1.6 million dollars in bribes, as he faces charges of money laundering, illicit association and passive bribery.

“We have an effective collaboration in this case, which shows us that Mr. Carlos Machado, one of Odebrecht's representatives, met with both Mr. Sinibaldi and Mr. Baldizon, and that in one of those meetings US\$3 million dollars were agreed for Baldizon, 7.5 percent of the initial agreement of US\$19.7 million dollars total in bribes,” said Prosecutor Thelma Aldana in an interview with Emisoras Unidas.

The bribes were paid through seven different offshore financial accounts between 2013 and 2015, at the time Baldizon was leading popularity polls. The Guatemalan Public Ministry's key witness is an anonymous Brazilian citizen identified as “collaborator 1.” Other people have been charged in relation with this case. Architect and businessman Jorge Eduardo Antillon Klussman and lawyer Diego Chacon Yurrita have already been arrested in the last few days for the same crimes as well as their relationship with Baldizon.

Carlos Arturo Batres Gil, former Vice President Roxana Baldetti's personal secretary, received \$4.9 million dollars in bribes. An arrest warrant against him already exists, but it's believed he fled Guatemala and might be in the United States.

Odebrecht agreed to pay the Guatemalan government an amount equivalent to that paid to Sinibaldi, and to desist from any payment derived from the tender, according to declarations by Aldana in a press conference. The road was to be built in southern Guatemala and its construction began in 2013, during Otto Perez administration. He was later ousted and put in jail on corruption charges. Road construction stopped in 2015 because the company had only built 33 percent of it and had already received 70 percent of the payment.

The Brazilian company is involved in corruption scandals in 12 different countries and has admitted payments of \$788 million dollars in bribes in order to secure itself public tenders, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

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