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Guatemala arrests five over shelter blaze, opposition accuses president



Guatemala's President Jimmy Morales attends the Latin America and Caribbean International Economic Forum at the Bercy Finance Ministry in Paris, France, June 9, 2017. REUTERS/Charles Platiau

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Guatemala arrested three human rights officials and two police officers on Monday for their alleged responsibility in the death of 41 girls who died in a blaze in a children's shelter, the attorney general's office said.

The office also said it was turning to the Supreme Court a request by two opposition lawmakers that President Jimmy Morales be investigated for his role in the tragedy, for having placed unqualified officials into the state body that ran the shelter.

If the court accepts the lawmakers' petition and believes there is enough evidence for a case against Morales, it would turn the petition to Guatemala's Congress, where lawmakers would decide whether or not to remove Morales' immunity from investigation and proceed with a probe against him.

The arrests form part of the investigation into the March blaze, which became a major scandal in Guatemala, especially after it emerged that the girls had been locked in a classroom after an escape attempt. The girls set mattresses on fire to try to call someone's attention.

The fire broke out in a wing of the government-run Virgen de la Asuncion home near San Jose Pinula, southwest of Guatemala City, which housed abused girls, as well as boys.

Three of the five people arrested were charged with manslaughter and abuse of minors. The other two were not charged with manslaughter, but face accusations of abuse, the attorney general's office said.

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Sandra Moran and Leocadio Juracan, the two leftist lawmakers from the Convergencia party who filed the case against the president, accuse Morales of having the ultimate responsibility in the tragedy for his role in staffing the social services ministry that ran the shelter.

"We presented a criminal complaint against the president on March 14 for four crimes: abuse of authority, torture, non-compliance of duty and murder," Moran said by phone.

Morales' spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The government called a press conference for later on Monday to talk about the situation.

(Reporting by Sofia Menchu; Editing by Richard Chang)

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