

Report

FALL 2004

PUBLISHED BY MARIN INTERFAITH TASK FORCE ON THE AMERICAS

Venezuela: The Pen and the Sword

By *Kate McCoy, Maryknoll*

Ed. Note: On August 15, headlines around the world proclaimed the overwhelming referendum victory of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The National Electoral Council confirmed 60 percent of voters supported Chavez and there was a 90 percent voter turnout. The US Carter Center and the OAS confirmed the Chavez victory.

When I was first preparing to come to Venezuela several months ago, a young, middle-class Venezuelan woman living in the U.S. sighed and lamented to me, “It’s so hard to get rid of Chavez.”

Now that I live in rural Venezuela, in a community in which many houses don’t have running water or indoor plumbing, I am learning why it, indeed, has been so hard to

get rid of Chavez. It is not for lack of funds (the political opposition has a seemingly endless supply, including from Washington), or support of rogue states (for while Venezuela and Cuba maintain a close relationship, Cuba is hardly a superpower), or because of heavy-handed repression (despite rumors to the contrary, the Chavez government has arguably shown greater respect for human rights and freedom of expression than any of its predecessors). In fact, the stumbling block to getting rid of Chavez is the 80% of Venezuelans who live in poverty and who roughly account for Chavez’s constituency—in effect, the problem is the democratic majority.

And so now, on the eve of a national referendum to decide whether Chavez’s presidency should be cut short, even a casual ob-

server in this village outside of the city of Barquisimeto could guess why nearly every front door is emblazoned with a red “NO”. Chavez’s political promises have taken shape in the “missions”—the massive health, education, employment and nutrition campaigns directed at poor communities throughout the country and funded by the state’s oil industry. Five nights a week, you can see adults of all ages carrying their pens and notebooks to a local house or community center to participate in Mission Robinson—the basic literacy course which has enticed hundreds of thousands of poor Venezuelans to learn to read and write (an elderly Mission Robinson graduate from a Barquisimeto barrio recently told an acquaintance of mine, “I’m voting “No” because, for the first time in my life, I can read the question on the ballot and answer the way I want”). There is also the health mission, “Inside the Barrio”, which brings Cuban doctors to communities where wealthier Venezuelan doctors dare not go. There is always a steady stream of patients waiting for their free medical care, including eye care and dental. And then there are the government-run stores with affordable, subsidized food staples, the organic community gardens, the employment “missions” offering intensive training courses in everything from ceramics to car repair...all leading to the Chavista slogan: “Vote NO—for the Missions!” Even the opposition to Chavez has had to guarantee that if Chavez lost, their (still undetermined) candidate would keep



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the missions in place.

The missions have contributed to an evolving understanding of what this Chavez era is all about. On the one hand, and in combination with Chavez's charisma, they seem to have contributed to "Chavez worship." When I co-facilitated a youth retreat in a rural area in mid-July, Andres, a stoic young *campesino*, confessed to me that the only time he has ever seen his grandfather cry was when Chavez was temporarily deposed in a two-and-a-half day coup in 2002. (The joke amongst Chavistas is that "on the third day, He rose again"). "Chavez is the only president who has ever recognized that we exist," Andres exhorted. At the same time that Chavez is cast as the liberator of the people, there is also a sense that the people liberated Chavez, and that they have taken ownership over the "Bolivarian" process towards creating a more democratic, just and inclusive society. It was People Power—along with a breakaway faction of the military—that brought Chavez back into power on that fateful third day. And it is people now who are coming down from the urban slums and the rural areas to defend their Constitution, their missions, and their president. Many people prefer not to be identified as Chavistas, but rather as being "with the Process"—an attempt to identify more with the massive social reforms underway than with Chavez as Christ or caudillo.

Chavez himself has been very skillful at harnessing this energy and directing it towards a NO vote on Sunday, August 15. He has likened the referendum to a famous battle against the Spanish during Venezuela's struggle for independence, and has called on

all "loyal" Venezuelans to "meet [him] at the Battle of Santa Ines." The role of the Spanish "devil" in this scenario is played by the Yankee imperialists, who are seen as the true face of the opposition to Chavez (this has not been helped by the fact that the opposition has no single candidate of its own, leaving President Bush as the proverbial devil). This sense of Washington as the true face of the opposition is reflected in another pro-Chavez graffiti which has surfaced with the referendum: "Dile No al 'YES'" (say NO to the "YES"). While most Chavistas admit to knowing some good and decent people within the political opposition, there is an overwhelming sense that this vote is not between Venezuelans of one political orientation vs. those of another, but rather, of "true" Venezuelans vs. Washington and the Miami crowd (Venezuelans who have adopted

more of a U.S. identity). This, in turn, makes it easier to justify some of the battle rhetoric that Lt. Colonel Chavez has adopted with regard to August 15. And statements by former President Carlos Andres Perez that Chavez should be removed by force and should "die like a dog" don't exactly help matters. It remains to be seen whether the Battle of Santa Ines will be limited to the peaceful "battle-ground" of the ballot box, or whether it will spill over into the battlefield of the streets of Venezuelan cities and towns. For Venezuelans, many of whom can read the question on the ballot for the first time in their lives, the 15th will be a question of whether the pen is indeed mightier than the sword.

Kate McCoy is a sociologist and Catholic lay missionary who lives outside of the city of Barquisimeto, Venezuela.

CUBA: MITF's Trips Targeted by OFAC

By George Friemoth, MITF

Recently, MITF requested another two-year renewal of our license to travel to Cuba for "religious activities, humanitarian donations and support of the Cuban people activities." We were informed that our request did not conform to the new guidelines issued on August 18 as part of the Bush Administration's aggressive new policies calling for regime change and tighter economic sanctions.

According to Roger Noriega, Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, the US is developing plans, effective June 2004, "to bring an end to the regime of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and to prepare to assist a post-Castro Cuba." Just for starters, the restrictions to tighten the embargo will cost US taxpayers some \$59 million to increase support for Cuba's dissidents, enforce the travel ban and remittances to the island, step up propaganda efforts and exert more international pressure on Cuba.

The US Treasury department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is charged with responsibility to trace the financial asset of terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden as well as enforce the Cuban embargo. According to the Washington Office on Latin America, OFAC has assigned four agents to trace terrorists while

more than 20 agents work on enforcing the embargo on Cuba. How a little island like Cuba came to be viewed as a top priority for regime change is truly mind-boggling.

So it was not surprising to find MITF was not licensable under the new restrictions after four years of being granted licenses. In fact, OFAC appears to have had MITF in mind when it gave an example of a non-licensable organization: "A group that seeks to promote interfaith understanding applies for a license to take an interdenominational group to Cuba to participate in religious activities ranging from Catholic mass to Santeria. This group is not a religious organization for purposes of this section." Now, the only licensable organizations are specific churches that have their own dogma and denomination and work with the same churches in Cuba for purposes of proselytizing others to their faith. Ecumenical or interfaith organizations are no longer licensable.

Given the new restrictions, MITF has decided to wait until after the November election to see if John Kerry is elected. Kerry has said if elected, he would remove the travel ban on US citizens traveling to Cuba. Recently, Pastors for Peace announced their July 2005 caravan to Cuba that will challenge the restrictions on US citizens travel to the island nation. Stay tuned! •

MITF on the Americas Report is published quarterly by the Marin Interfaith Task Force on Central America.

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The Tragedy of Haiti: Victims of the Storms

By Kevin Pina, journalist

A political storm hit northern Haiti long before Tropical Storm Jeanne came along. On March 20th, Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue flew into Gonaives where a huge and boisterous crowd of thousands welcomed him. Latortue embraced gang elements and the former military that helped overthrow the democratic government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide as “freedom fighters.” Since then, Latortue and his government have done little to take control of Haiti’s third largest city; and instead they have allowed gang leaders like Buteur Metayer and Wilfort Ferdinand to run it like a private fiefdom. This has had serious consequences since Tropical Storm Jeanne arrived to stake her claim of Haiti’s misery.

The political storm took many victims as well and left Haiti ill-prepared for the devastation brought about by Tropical Storm Jeanne. One of its first victims was the Civil Protection Office following a rampage led by the “freedom fighters” against suspected Aristide supporters. This politically benign institution had been established in cooperation with the local municipal government by grants provided by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and administered through the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF). PADF’s own website confirms, “PADF’s emergency response and reconstruction efforts are complemented by community training in disaster preparedness. Mitigation training promotes the development of civil action plans that enable communities to identify priorities and reinforce key infrastructure. Last year, 23 local civil protection committees were formed and over 5,000 people were trained in disaster awareness, leading to safer communities.” Unfortunately, with Washington, Paris and Ottawa ushering in a man-made disaster with the destruction of constitutional authority in Haiti, all of the tax dollars USAID invested in preparing for natural disasters like Tropical Storm Jeanne were wasted as well.

Tropical Storm Jeanne is exactly the type of disaster USAID and PADF’s programs were set up to manage. There were components that monitored incoming tropical storms and provided an advanced warning and preparedness network designed to plan a response BEFORE disaster struck. Plans in-

cluded advising communities in advance of approaching storms and preparing for them by storing large supplies of drinking water, food, medical supplies and portable tents for those displaced from their homes. When Tropical storm Jeanne hit, these structures no longer existed and all of the trained and competent participants in the program had long been driven out of the area and their offices pillaged and burned. Nowhere was this more evident than in Gonaives where many associated with the Aristide government and the Lavalas party were reportedly dragged through the streets and burned alive.

Instead of reasserting control of the State and rebuilding the necessary infrastructure that was destroyed following the coup of February 29th, Latortue followed a policy of benign neglect and accommodation with thugs in the region that has led to needless death and suffering in the wake of Tropical Storm Jeanne. In all fairness, the fault does not lie exclusively with the US-installed government. The Bush administration shoulders much of the blame for the current situation with an ill-conceived regime change that has replaced what they considered a failed state with an even more failed state.

The United Nations also bears a large responsibility for the armed gangs and elements of the former military currently hampering relief efforts in northern Haiti. Like Latortue’s accommodation of the gangs in Gonaives, the UN forces have stood by while the former military has taken over several towns in the north. The official excuse of the UN has been that they do not have enough forces on the ground to challenge the former military from seizing control of the region. It seems that by the time they do have the necessary forces, they will wake up to find themselves bunkmates with the very forces they claim to want to keep out of power. This does not bode well for the inhabitants of Port au Prince should a natural



Violence broke out throughout the Capital of Port au Prince on Sept. 30th after police fire at unarmed demonstrators

Photo: Haiti Information Project

disaster ever strike the capital to combine with the current political disaster as it has in Gonaives.

In the end, the UN and Latortue are victims of their own failed policies and ultimately the failed policy of the Bush administration in Haiti. The ones who will suffer the most as a result of these failures are the very people they claim to have come to this island nation to help. The disregard for institutions destroyed during the latest coup and the lack of planning and response for natural disasters is only a symptom of a political storm that is far from over in Haiti—a storm that is being fed by poor political judgment. Sadly, this has resulted in more needless suffering for the people of Haiti during this time of crisis.

Kevin Pina is an independent journalist, filmmaker and Associate Editor of the Black Commentator, and currently resides in Haiti.

Haiti Emergency Relief

The latest reports put the death toll at 2500 with many still missing or without adequate food & water.

Make your check to MITF and designate "Haiti Flood Relief"

CHIAPAS: MITF Report from June Delegation

By Carol Costa, Camilla Schneider
and Caroline Dutton, MITF

“We are all brothers and sisters. We’re all in a yoke and we all need to be saved from it.” The struggle of the Zapatistas is not just focused on the indigenous of Chiapas but linked to all peoples’ struggles world wide against the neoliberal corporate agenda. Their wish is to make “a world in which many worlds are possible.”

In support of this struggle, eight of us joined the MITF trip to the Chiapas highlands to learn about the situation of the Zapatistas and to deliver financial aid to various projects that MITF has been supporting. The highlands of Chiapas are so utterly beautiful, green with spectacular, steep mountains. Only when you concentrate on the corn patches growing on the steep sides of hills, the goats tethered next to the roadside, and the humble dwellings do you realize that there is so much poverty.

We spent our first day in San Cristobal de las Casas walking across town in the fresh morning air to attend informative meetings with local nongovernmental organizations about the situation among the indigenous people of Chiapas. We learned about political and economic factors that severely impact their lives, including Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), NAFTA, biotechnology, and the use of the military to impose agreements in the interests of multinationals like Coca Cola. NAFTA has meant the loss of markets for half of the *maize* farmers and the introduction of GMO corn, a monoculture, has meant the loss of corn’s biodiversity. PPP means imposition of huge macro economic projects including highways, hydroelectric dams, canals, ports, and *maquiladores* stretching from Mexico to Panama to create a corridor for transportation

of goods. This project will impact biodiversity, destroy jungle areas, force migration of populations to allow corporate access to resources. Land that is needed for food production will be used to graze cattle or produce monocrops for export and people will be forced into *maquiladora* factories where they will produce goods as ‘slave labor’ for the multinationals.



Caroline Dutton & Dale Sorensen request permission from members of Junta to visit communities and donate aid from members of Junta. Photo: Camilla Schneider

After the great Zapatista March to Mexico in 2001, the Mexican National legislature failed to implement the San Andreas Peace Accords that would have granted autonomy to the indigenous communities of Mexico. The Zapatistas realized again that they could not count on the government; therefore, they decided to unilaterally implement their own autonomy.

To build more decision making from the bottom up the Zapatistas reorganized into five *Caracoles de Resistencia* (Snails, or Spirals of Resistance), each led by a *Junta del Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Council). The military wing of the EZLN separated itself from the civil government of the municipalities saying, “The military has no place in government.” When a group of Zapatista families becomes strong enough, the families can declare themselves an ‘autonomous community’ which means they will set up a parallel government (schools, clinics, cooperatives, etc.) and begin refusing services and aid from the state and federal governments. Many of these communities in the same area could then form an autonomous municipality.

We visited the Caracol of Oventic in order to ask permission of the Junta to visit the autonomous municipalities and to deliver our MITF donations; we were summoned down the hill and into a simple building with benches along the walls. We met with the Reception Committee of masked men and a masked woman. They asked questions about our visit and called in representatives on duty from the autonomous municipalities and the coffee cooperative Mut-Vitz. We were then led to a small building to meet with the *Junta*. Two masked men awaited us behind a desk and in front of a painting of Subcomandante Marcos. They carefully discussed with us where we wanted to go, filled out permission slips for our visits and received the MITF donations for the autonomous Zapatista secondary school, food for Polho refugees, and medicines for the autonomous clinics.

Everyone we met was friendly, the children were delightful, and not one of them ever asked us for anything. Men and women

M E X I C O

seemed exceedingly proud and very serious and determined to continue on in their struggle to create a better society in spite of the tremendous odds that they face. But the situation is not good. They are in constant danger of attacks by the paramilitary groups or members of the PRI and PRD parties. It was so sad to hear in many places that the earth was depleted, beans were not producing, and the corn harvest was poor.

That afternoon we visited the secondary school, grades 7 through 9 in Oventic that MITF funding helped build. The school barely makes it economically even though the students go home every two weeks to get a supply of toasted tortillas and beans. Teachers are not paid so they make and sell embroidered items to survive.

We met with members of the Cooperativa del Café de Mut-vitz. In 1999 the cooperative began to export a little coffee and now export fifteen containers a year. They would like to own their own means of transportation and storage facility and need help expanding the market.

At San Juan de La Libertad people arrived out of the darkness to meet with us in a school-house situated among steep mountain slopes. Their greatest wish is to have a small building to house their autonomous county seat. That evening we made our way down the mountains to San Cristobal with hearts full of the events of the day and a desire to help these dignified brave people realize their dreams.

Traveling to Magdalena we, standing in the back of a truck, had great fun, riding out in the free breeze in the hills. We visited the women's collective where the profits from the sale of their beautiful weavings belong to the community and they support one another and help if someone gets sick. There are many needs in every family, much poverty and much suffering.

In Acteal we attended a memorial in honor of the 1997 massacre. On December 22, 1997 the paramilitary asked for money to purchase weapons to protect the community from Zapatistas. As pacifists they refused and forty-four people were massacred. Each month they have a ceremony to remember the dead because "The blood that was spilled here has not stayed here. It has gone all over the world and from it many flowers bloom." The memorial was deeply moving. The Acteal Chorus sang and then a point of comedy occurred when they asked us to sing for them. We struggled through an off key shaky version of "We Shall

Overcome" which was warmly appreciated.

One of MITF's projects is to support Polho, a refugee village of 6,000. In addition to the monetary donation, we took four huge sacks of beans. The Red Cross once provided minimal food for the refugees but decided there was less need and moved on to Iraq. Meanwhile, the people have no food source since they cannot return to their land for fear of paramilitary violence. Frequently, we heard people say, "They treat us like animals." Since our return to Marin we learned that a man from Polho returned to his home to plant corn and was killed by paramilitaries who operate with impunity. The government has freed known assassins from jail in the name of peace and reconciliation.

The next day a visit to four communities in Zinacantán brought us the following story of struggle. Prior to the declaration in late 2003 that some families were in resistance, relationships between the Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas were fairly good. In April 2004, the PDR cut off water to Zapatista families. Zapatistas from other municipalities united to bring water to fill the *ollas* (water holes). Upon leaving, they found the only exit road blocked by police trucks and PRD supporters attacked with rocks and guns. Many families fled into the mountains. One man said, "We were here in this house, what were we going

to do? We thought that maybe the hour had come to die." After 15 days people were escorted by the EZLN, civil society and the press back to their homes where they found some animals dead from lack of care and that they were no longer welcome in the school and at church.

The communities in Zinacantan still don't have their water or electricity restored. The Zapatistas refuse to pay high prices for electricity since it comes from the damming of their rivers in Chiapas. When we asked how we could help the community, the women, most of whom don't speak Spanish, began to speak excitedly among themselves. They want to start a weaving cooperative and need start up money to buy thread.

Since Vicente Fox became president of Mexico the situation has really not changed, except that there is less direct military intervention because the government wants to keep things quiet in order to attract international investors and tourists. President Fox's program is one of 'low intensity warfare' designed to wear out the Zaptistas and eventually force many from their land. Everywhere we went we found that international support had dwindled. Sadly, the need is still great and the struggle goes on.●



Members of delegation preparing to go to Magdalena in the highlands of Chiapas

Photo: Camilla Schneider

Go Fair Trade---Bananas!

By David Funkhouser, TransFair USA

Outside Berkeley Bowl on a recent Saturday morning, a pallet of 50 neatly stacked boxes of organic Fair Trade Certified™ bananas awaited their appearance in the produce department, where shoppers could make a choice to purchase a product that carries the guarantee of a fair deal for farmers. Bananas are the latest certified product to be introduced by TransFair USA, the Oakland based third-party certifier of Fair Trade products in this country. Bananas, mangoes, and pineapples were launched in retail grocery outlets earlier this year, adding to a growing line of Fair Trade Certified products, including coffee, tea, cocoa and chocolate.

One of the most popular fruits around the globe, bananas are big business. And the history of banana production is not a pretty one. More than 10 million people around the world depend on fruit production for a living, and on non-Fair Trade fruit plantations, workers often earn less than \$3.50 a day. The cost of living in Ecuador (where those Bowl bananas came from) is estimated to be almost \$10 a day, and this has led to the widespread need for children to work with their parents to supplement income. Besides the child labor issue, banana workers typically have suffered horrific effects of heavy chemical and pesticide use. In Nicaragua, for instance, thousands of banana workers have recently organized to demand reparations for decades of exposure to the deadly chemical Nemagon that has claimed at least 400 lives and poisoned countless others. (Get the story at www.nicanet.org/alerts/nemagon).

Fair Trade addresses these concerns. Fair Trade means workers are paid a living wage, and farmers receive an extra premium for investment in community development and environmental protection. Fair Trade certification ensures that international labor standards are met on banana farms. Worker organizations and unions are able to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions, housing, healthcare, and education. Use of chemicals is strictly controlled, and technical assistance promotes sustainable

farming methods. Fair Trade challenges the old “Banana Republic” paradigm and offers an alternative system that benefits farmers, the environment, and consumers who enjoy the sweet and nutritious product.

Your purchase of Fair Trade Certified™ products is a vote for a more just and sustainable system of trade. You also enjoy quality products grown with care and gain the satisfaction of knowing that your purchase makes a difference in the lives of farmers in places like Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Honduras.

In the Bay Area, Fair Trade bananas can be found at Berkeley Bowl, El Cerrito Natural Market, Elephant Pharmacy, and Rainbow Grocery Cooperative in San Francisco.

Look for Fair Trade coffee, tea, and chocolate as well, and ask your local supermarket to carry these products, especially Safeway, Real Foods, and Whole Foods.

For more information, visit TransFair’s web site: www.FairTradeCertified.org



N E W S B R I E F S

EL SALVADOR: Justice in Archbishop Romero Murder Case

In September, Federal Judge Oliver Wanger, US district Court in Fresno, California found a former Salvadoran Air Force Captain legally responsible for the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980. Alvaro Saravia, who has lived in the U.S. since the late 1980s, was charged with arming and paying a gunman to kill Romero. Calling the murder “a crime against humanity.” Judge Wanger fined Saravia \$10 million in civil penalties. Saravia’s whereabouts in the US are unknown.

The Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) in San Francisco brought the civil case against Saravia with the help of the firm of Heller Ehrman White and Mc Auliffe, LLP. Professor Patty Blum, CJA’s Senior Legal Advisor stated, “With this victory, US courts join with national and international courts throughout the world in recognizing that egregious acts—so atrocious that we label them crimes against humanity—must not go unpunished. Judge Wanger has provided Salvadorans, both in El Salvador and here in the US, with a measure of justice de-

nied to them in their own country, for the loss of their most beloved leader, who was truly the “voice for the voiceless” during one of El Salvador’s darkest times.”

Matthew Eisenbrandt and Almudena Bernabeu, CJA attorneys who litigated the case, were guest speakers at the MITF annual dinner October 3. See www.cja.org.

COLOMBIA: Indigenous on the March

On September 7, close to 500 Nasa/Paez indigenous people successfully negotiated the release of two leaders who had been kidnapped by the FARC. The indigenous who refuse to engage in armed conflict, used their peaceful strategies that have worked in the past to secure the releases.

On September 14, 50,000 indigenous, campesinos and Afro-Colombians marched 60 miles along the Pan American highway to Cali to protest the civil war and the free-trade agreement (FTAA) currently being negotiated between Colombia and the US. In this year alone, 57 indigenous people have been killed and 4,500 have been displaced as

a result of the war. They also view the FTAA as a threat to local economics and indigenous sovereignty.

Earlier, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled against the Colombian government in July for the ongoing killing of indigenous Colombians and also for a massacre by right-wing paramilitaries. The court, a part of the OAS found the government responsible for failing to protect an indigenous group in the northern part of the country. In a second ruling the court ordered the Colombian government to pay \$6.5 million for the 1987 massacre by paramilitaries of 17 vendors in Central Colombia after finding that the government supported the paramilitary groups at that time.

Sources: Colombia Week # 65 (9/6/04); # 66 (9/13/04); Inter Press Service 7/13/04.

PANAMA: Cuban Exiles Pardoned

Martin Torrijos, son of left-populist military leader Gen. Omar Torrijos who died in a mysterious plane crash in 1981, began a five-year term as president of Panama, succeeding Mireya Moscoso. President Torrijos called Moscoso's term in office "five years of wasted opportunities." The new president criticized her pardon of four Cuban-born right-wingers the week before she left office; they were serving sentences in prison for endangering public safety with possession of arms and explosives in connection with an alleged plot to assassinate Cuba president Fidel Castro while he was visiting Panama in November 2000.

Among the four convicted Cubans exiles was Luis Posada Carriles, the 76-year-old who faces charges in Venezuela for masterminding the 1976 bombing of a Cuban commercial airliner that killed 73 people and is wanted in Cuba. Posada Carriles, using a false US passport was dropped off in Honduras where he went into hiding; the other three flew to Miami where there was jubilation among some Cuban-Americans. The US was noncommittal about the pardons.

Source: Washington Post 9/1/04; Miami Herald, 9/10/04

GUATEMALA: Mayan Indians Seize Dam

On September 7, in a carefully planned operation, some 500 indigenous campesinos displaced by the construction of the massive Chixoy hydroelectric dam in the northern Guatemalan department of Alta Verapaz took over the dam complex and threatened to shut off the flow of water to turbines that generate up to 60% of the country's electricity. The protestors demanded compensation that the government had promised to 3,400 people in 18 affected communities in the 1070's before the project began—promises that were never fulfilled.

With mediation by the government's Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, the protestors reached an accord with the National Electricity Institute on September 8 for new talks about compensation. The mostly indigenous campesinos agreed to begin new talks on September 16 and include representatives of President Oscar Berger, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. The dam has been operating since 1982.

In its 1996 mission, the World Bank acknowledged that compensation and resettlement had not been fulfilled completely and identified obligations that had not been met, such as free electricity and water for the resettled communities. Readers may recall that one of the affected communities was the site of the Rio Negro massacres in March 1982 when Guatemalan military and paramilitary killed 257 men, women and children, throwing their bodies into a ravine.

Source: Associated Press 9/7/04; Environmental News service 9/8/04; Reuters, 9/8/04

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Free-Trade Plan Suspended

On September 27, the US government suspended plans to ratify the free-trade agreement with the Dominican Republic (DR) after lawmakers passed a 25 percent import tax on US corn syrup last week. Bucking warnings from US trade officials that the tariff violated the free-trade agree-

ment reached in August, which is still pending approval by congresses in both countries, the Dominican Senate went ahead and passed the tax. While President Leonel Fernandez opposed the tax, it is not likely that he will be able to eliminate it because the opposition party controls the Congress.

In 2003 the US exported about 33 tons of corn syrup, worth \$25,000 to the DR. Despite the small amount, lawmakers argued that without the tax, the US corn syrup competition would eventually devastate the Caribbean nation's sugar cane business, one of its largest and most lucrative agricultural industries. The US Ambassador Hans Hertel said, "This constitutes a violation of the free-trade agreement and impedes us from recommending (to Congress) that the DR be included along with the Central American agreement (CAFTA)."

Source: Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, 9/27/04

NICARAGUA: Privatization of Water Loan

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has extended a loan of \$13.9 million (US) to the government of Nicaragua to privatize the management of water and sewage services in Nicaragua. The IDB extended the loan knowing full well that there was strong opposition by civil society to the privatization of water or its delivery.

In 2003, Nicaragua passed Law 440 that prohibits any type of concession over water or water resources until the legislature passes a general water law. The moratorium on the privatization of water is currently being debated in the National Assembly in two separate bills.

Concerned citizens here and abroad are encouraged to write to Dr. Enrique Iglesias, President of the IDB, Washington DC, 20433 urging him to cancel Loan 1049/SF-NI that finances the privatization of water because of its illegality under present laws in Nicaragua and because it only represents further indebtedness for the Nicaraguan people.

Source: Nicaragua Network, 10/1/04; nicanet-hotline@afgj.org

C A L E N D A R

October 31: Presidential Election in Uruguay

November 17: "Women Weavers from Chiapas", First United Methodist Church, San Rafael

January 16-21, 2005: MITF Delegation to Uruguay (see insert)

January 26-31, 2005: World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil

Students, nuns, workers,
veterans, moms and com-
munity organizers say...

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