

# Report

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## HAITI: US Backing Overthrow of President

By George Friemoth, MITF

In international circles, no country can be seen as backing the overthrow of a democratically elected president. That is a big 'no no' under international law. Yet, the US is managing to do so by pursuing with vengeance its unjust, indecent and ruinously counterproductive strategy against Haiti's President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the democratically elected government of Haiti.

Washington's vendetta against Haiti, generally, and Aristide in particular has historical roots. It goes back 200 years when the US was stunned by Haiti's abolition of slavery some 54 years before our Civil War. Haiti's example became an inspiration for the abolitionist movement in the US and around the world and hastened the demise of slavery worldwide.

When Aristide became president he did the unthinkable in that he abolished the Haitian army and questioned the US neoliberal agenda. Washington's response was vitriolic and it imposed an embargo against the poorest country in the hemisphere. In 1996 the US cut off \$500 million in loans and aid that the international community had determined was absolutely necessary for Haiti's survival after the 1991-1994 coup.

For the past four years the US goal has been to get rid of President Aristide and his popularly elected Lavalas government by actively and tacitly organizing and supporting an opposition, call the Democratic Convergence (DC). The DC is made up of Haitian elites, intellectuals and business people who are angry with Aristide for such things as raising the minimum wage and insisting they pay taxes for the first time in their lives!

Millions of US taxpayer dollars have flowed into the DC through the International Republican Institute (IRI) to build



*New Years, 2004: The New York Times reported that this was a "small crowd." The Times later retracted the statement.*

Photo Haitian Government

up an opposition to overthrow the government. The IRI receives funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, which is in turn funded by USAID. The IRI consists of a small group of extremists, with strong ideological ties to the Bush Administration and former Senator Jesse Helms, who simplistically see Aristide as the Caribbean's next Fidel Castro. They unfortunately still guide US hemispheric policy, with the likes of Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs (once an aid to Helms) along with radical right colleague Otto Reich (former Ambassador to Honduras during the Contra War in the 80's), Special Presidential Envoy to the Western Hemisphere.

On New Year's Day, as hundreds of thousands of Haitians danced in the

streets celebrating their bicentennial anniversary, and dignitaries from around the world thanked Haiti for opening the door to independence for oppressed people everywhere—the celebrations were stained with threats of violence from the Washington-backed opposition and calls for

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Aristide to step down. What started in December as violent opposition with public protests is now leading to an openly anti-democratic insurrection, as anti-Aristide forces turn Haiti into a hellish war zone.

Adopting an inflexible policy of non-negotiation, armed groups have recently taken over several cities demanding the resignation of President Aristide. These groups claim affiliation to the opposition, the DC and the Group of 184 that recently joined together under the banner of the Democratic Platform. Spokespeople for the opposition have congratulated the armed groups for their efforts.

André Apaid Jr. heads the Group of 184; he is one of Haiti's richest men, owning 15 factories, operating sweatshops, evading taxes and being rabidly anti-Aristide. Apaid is a Devalier supporter and demands a return of the military. He allegedly holds an American passport and obtained permanent residency in Haiti through deceptive means. There is compelling evidence that Apaid brainstormed the current violent campaign to oust Aristide and enjoys the tacit if not overt support of the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince.

The US media and Bush Administration officials would like people to believe that the Aristide government is prolonging the political stalemate and failing to establish a "climate of security," but they neglect to acknowledge that it is the intransigence of the US-sponsored opposition that has crippled democratic processes in Haiti.

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The opposition's refusal to participate in the electoral process is understandable since they know they have no chance of winning any elections in Haiti.

In regard to failing to provide a "climate of security" for democratic process, the US Embassy ordered the US forces not to disarm the dismantled Haitian military in 1994. So today it is estimated that there are 7,000 ex-military and paramilitary personnel with countless guns and other weapons. Later, when Aristide attempted to bring in 100 police trainers through an agreement with the OAS Special Mission in order to help professionalize the national Police and teach disarmament tactics, the US denied the training funds. Recently, the US denied Haiti's request for weapons, including tear gas, leaving the police highly vulnerable in dealing with the current marauding forces.

The Haitian people, realizing that there are only 4,000 police for a country of 8.5 million, have taken to the streets in massive numbers to repel the armed rebels. For them, preserving their democracy and

allowing President Aristide to serve out his five-year term are of primary importance.

Given the opposition's ideological and financial ties to the US—they have been generously funded through the IRI – the Bush Administration could stop the bloodshed tomorrow. An open condemnation by Washington of the obstructionism could have an electrifying positive effect in Haiti. Yet, that is not likely given the mindset of those who run Secretary Colin Powell's hemispheric branch in the State Department. The best thing Americans can do is to pressure the Bush Administration to reverse its destructive course and send a clear message to the State Department: NO COUP IN HAITI!

**URGENT ACTION:** Please contact Secretary of State Colin Powell: Phone: 202-647-5291 or 7098; Fax: 202-647-2283 or 5269.

*Source:* The Council of Hemispheric Affairs Press Memorandums, January 15 and February 10, 2004.

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## Banned In Cuba

*By Jim Hightower*

*Ed. Note: As of this writing MITF is still taking delegations to Cuba on its religious and humanitarian license.*

As a patriotic, taxpaying American, I, for one, am proud to see that George W. Bush is defending our shores against one of the more important terrorist threats to the American people: Cuban cigars.

It almost brings tears to my old red-white-and-blue eyes to see our president stand like a rock, using the full powers and majesty of his office to protect you and me from the unnerving possibility of incoming Cuban tobacco. To prevent a cigar invasion, our brave leader has boldly issued a presidential directive to stop American citizens from traveling to the Cuban island, which, as we know, is such a formidable threat to our national security. Words are inadequate to express the depths of my feelings toward George W for taking away your and my freedom to travel.

It seems that tens of thousands of Americans have been taking people-to-people tours to Cuba to see for themselves

the pluses and minuses of that country under Castro. Many have returned impressed, not only with the beauty of the island and the people, but with Cuba's healthcare and educational systems.

However, this independent judgment doesn't fit with Bush's official doctrine of demonizing Castro and economically punishing the Cuban people, and it also infuriates Bush's wealthy supporters in Florida's Cuban-exile community. So, as of January 1, we Americans are banned from seeing Cuba for ourselves.

Bush's crackdown on free travel has been building for months, as federal agents have harassed legitimate travelers to Cuba by, among other things, ransacking their luggage. But 45,000 baggage searches turned up only 600 violations - most of them for bringing cigars and rum back to the U.S. Harassment hasn't stopped intrepid Americans - so now Bush simply dictates that we can't go there.

*Source:* [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org)

## EL SALVADOR: The FMLN's Presidential Campaign

By *Caroline Dutton, MITF*

In 1980, the FMLN, a coalition of progressive Salvadoran organizations rose up in arms to fight for the poor. They had tremendous popular support and would have been successful in transforming the Salvadoran economic and political system if the US had not financed a 12-year bloody war to suppress the people's movement. Since the peace accords in 1992 the FMLN has been a legal political party. They now occupy a significant number of elected seats in the national assembly, and head many municipal governments. They have a good chance of winning the presidency in the March 2004 elections.

Due in part to the dire economic situation, many now see the FMLN as the only political party that defends the nation's economy. A broad-based coalition, including transportation, small and medium sized businesses, military, and agriculture, have come together to form the Alliance for Change.

An Alliance representative a retired military officer spoke of Shafik, the

FMLN's presidential candidate. "We tried to capture him 20 years ago during the war, but today we realize that we didn't understand who the real enemy was. The enemy is those who create poverty, not the people who defend the poor. We are now fighting together with the FMLN against the real enemy – ARENA."

The right wing ARENA party has ruled El Salvador for the past 15 years. Privatization guru Tony Saca is ARENA's presidential candidate. As the president of the Salvadoran National Association of Private Enterprise, Saca oversaw the privatization of a seaport and the national railway system and demanded the privatization of the public health system, which sparked the nine-month healthcare strike. Saca is completely committed to CAFTA and the FTAA.

If CAFTA passes, even a progressive government will have no power to control its own economy and pass laws limiting privatization of public services, or protect farmers and local industry from unfair competition from foreign corpora-

tions. Despite massive demonstrations and strikes the ruling ARENA party is doing its best to privatize health care and education and have CAFTA approved before the elections, in order to tie the hands of any future government

The FMLN proposes overcoming the economic crisis by replacing the neoliberal model with one based on human needs. Their platform advocates increased spending for public education and health, lower taxes for workers and small business, increased taxes for high income sectors, no privatization of public services, increased salaries, the elimination of sales tax on food, medicine, and agricultural products including seed and fertilizer, and the establishment of a national development bank with low interest loans for small and medium sized business and farmers. They propose working with allies like Brazil to increase exports.

The race between ARENA and the FMLN may be very close. This election is crucial to El Salvador's future. MITF member Sue Severin will be monitoring the elections this March 21. ●

## GUATEMALA: Berger Wins Presidency, Rios Montt Loses Immunity

By *Dale Sorensen, MITF*

Oscar Berger won Guatemala's 2003 elections and will serve as President for the next four years. This news was secondary to many Guatemalans, who cared more about the fate of a candidate who suffered early defeat than about the eventual victor.

On November 9, over half the registered voters turned out for Guatemala's general elections and voted down the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) presidential candidate, former military dictator Efraim Rios Montt. Despite the attempts to guarantee Rios Montt's victory through bribery, vote buying, intimidation, and misleading populist discourse, the Guatemalan people soundly rejected him at the polls.

Rios Montt's electoral demise was in one sense no surprise: he was trailing by a large margin in the polls, and he had been attacked and stoned at campaign rallies, run out of town, and booed while voting. Nevertheless,

the General's defeat was by no means a foregone conclusion. Indications of pre-electoral fraud, manipulation, and threats of violence had led many to question whether the elections would be fair and transparent.

Therefore, human rights defenders and war survivors breathed a collective sigh of relief as the notorious ex-dictator went down in the polls. His defeat and resultant loss of immunity will facilitate citizens' efforts to prosecute him for the atrocities that took place under his leadership twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, the presidential defeat did not completely strip Rios Montt or his backers of power. His party maintained significant representation in Congress, and the military will continue to wield influence in the new government.

Oscar Berger, who hails from Guatemala's traditional elite, supports neoliberal free trade agreements and perks for big business. He is a partner in a number of national businesses and sits on numerous company boards as

well as economic councils of Central America.

Berger's campaign on the Grand National Alliance party ticket (GANA) used simple slogans, vague promises, and an avalanche of political propaganda. He won by a large margin in Guatemala City, where he served as mayor from 1996-1999, a position considered the second most political office in the country.

Meredith Kruse, MITF's current accompanier in Guatemala wrote, "In Iloam all of the witnesses in the genocide case supported Oscar Berger and were elated, yet cautious, when news came that he had won. Given that only two parties actively campaigned in Iloam (FRG party of Rios Montt and GANA of Berger) one can understand why people had chosen the lesser of two evils. Witnesses explained their support for Berger in pragmatic terms – as a way to

*Berger Wins, continued on page 7*

## MIAMI FTAA Protesters Brutalized but Win

By George Friemoth, MITF

Gandhi, the world-renowned icon of non-violent protest often told his followers what to expect from the powers-that-be: First, they ignore you, second they slander you, third they beat you, and then you win.

Well, that is what happened in Miami, but not before a new, brutal and repressive model of Homeland Security was put into effect by over 2500 heavily armed riot police backed up with armored vehicles, imbedded reporters and supported by a well-orchestrated information management program. As Henry Kissinger once said, "It is not a matter of what is true that counts, but a matter of what is perceived to be true."

Several MITF members joined thousands of other people in Miami who went to demonstrate against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), November 19-21. Trade ministers from all the countries in the Hemisphere, with the exception of Cuba, met there to negotiate an agreement similar to NAFTA.

Participating as a trained legal observer of the National Lawyers Guild, I found that, out of our 35 observers, clearly identified with our bright green hats, eight were arrested, including three who were beaten by police and had their privileged notes and at least one camera confiscated. Judge Richard Magolius, who was presiding over cases of the "free trade" protesters, said in open court that he saw "no less than 20 felonies committed by police" when he was on the streets during the November demonstrations. He would have been arrested if a police sergeant had not recognized him and waved other police off.

Dr. Eowyn Rieke, the media representative who volunteered at the Miami Wellness Center, reported 125 injuries of protesters, including bone fractures, serious facial lacerations, exposure to chemical agents and a host of ailments. He said, "I'm an MD and I've worked emergency rooms, but this is really some of the worst assault injuries I have ever seen." To top it all off, police attacked the Wellness Center itself!

Legal observers estimated about 270 arrests

with 12 hospitalizations. Police wielding billy clubs, tear gas, pepper spray, rubber, wooden and plastic bullets randomly attacked protesters. Among the arrested were five journalists who were on the streets with the protesters and not embedded with the police as CBS and NBC reporters were. Once police determined that journalists were "not one of ours", they targeted them for arrest and took some of their equipment. There were reports of undercover police acting as agent provocateurs.

If Gandhi had been in Miami in November, he would have chalked up another win against repression. The protesters were not only beaten but freedom of speech and assembly also took

ing' vision of the FTAA to an a la carte approach to ensure that the FTAA lives to stagger on another day." By "single undertaking", Wallach was referring to the final agreement that was to be an all-or-nothing package creating binding commitments in nine areas: market access, agriculture, services, investment, government procurement, intellectual property, competition policy, subsidies and antidumping, and dispute settlement. Those issues were not even discussed.

In an effort to avoid a collapse of negotiations similar to the breakdown of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the ministers agreed to an "FTAA light", that means any country can opt out of one or more of the nine disciplines. "It is hard to overestimate what a huge shift this is in the US position," said Wallach.

A commentary in the Miami Herald on November 27, 2003 put it this way: "Thanks to the cops, the anarchists are the winners. Their goal wasn't to cause \$2 million in property damage.

If they had wanted to do that, they could have gone to South Beach and torn things up. Their goal was to equate the free-trade talks with repression. And we obliged them by turning downtown into an armed camp with 3,000 cops in riot gear."

Speaking of the demonstrators who boldly acted and denounced the WTO in Cancun and the FTAA in Miami, Blase Bonpane of the Office of the Americas said, "Perhaps some don't understand that Cancun and Miami represent demonstrations for world peace. The current forced trade system is simply another facet of the war system." Dr. Bonpane concludes, "2003 was a good year for the peace and justice movement which the New York Times describes as the other superpower."

**SUGGESTED ACTION:** The Save Our Civil Liberties Campaign has formed to raise public awareness of the shocking suppression of political dissent and the unjustified use of force at the FTAA in Miami and to hold accountable individuals and organizations who were responsible for those violations. For information, contact [www.saveourcivilliberites.org](http://www.saveourcivilliberites.org)



a beating. Up to 90 buses carrying retirees and union members were blocked from entering the city, effectively taking away their First Amendment rights. The "powers that be", Congress and the Bush Administration, diverted \$8.5 million of the \$87 billion for the Iraq war to Miami to provide Homeland Security and repress peaceful dissent by US citizens.

The National Lawyers Guild, ACLU, and the AFL-CIO have all announced legal actions challenging the repression, the violations of due process, illegal search and seizure, violence and more. As United Steelworkers president Leo Girard wrote in a letter to Congress, "How can we hope to build democracy in Iraq while using massive force to dismantle it here at home?"

The US tried to paint the FTAA meetings in Miami as a success, but in reality the opponents pulled off the victory. The trade talks ended abruptly a day earlier than planned. All that was agreed was to scale back the FTAA's comprehensive scope and punt all the hard decisions to an undefined future venue in order to avoid making Miami the Waterloo of the FTAA.

According to Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, the US "chose to move away from its 'single undertak-

## CHIAPAS: EZLN and NAFTA Mark 10 Years Together

*Ed. Note: Excerpts of articles written by author John Ross and MITF's Carolina Dutton. Both attended the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, on January 1, 2004.*

Just after midnight, the pitch-black New Years night suddenly came alive with the slap-slap of rubber boots striking the slick pavement in military cadence. Dark columns of men and women with features hidden behind ski masks advanced on the strategic center of San Cristobal de las Casas, the capital of the Maya highlands of Chiapas.

In the highland Caracole of Oventic, Carolina Dutton and Diana Bohn trudged through the mud and rain with many old friends from Schools for Chiapas, Pastors for Peace, the Human Bean and Cloud Forest Initiatives joining the Zapatista festivities. Actually, the ski-masked insurgents were celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their clandestine founding in late 1983, as well as their 10<sup>th</sup> year in public. In Oventic we learned that each of the five regional *caracoles* (political and cultural centers, literally spirals) and about 25 autonomous municipalities in southeastern Chiapas were having their own celebrations—reveling in the success of establishing regional autonomy as a living reality.

The Zapatista rebellion began on January 1, 1994, in the very first hour that the beacon of corporate globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. Ever since that frigid midnight, the fates of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and NAFTA have been irrevocably intertwined in adversarial roles. One of the preconditions of NAFTA was the privatization of *ejidos* and *comunidades*, the two collective forms of landholdings for poor farmers, a pillar of agrarian reform for which Emiliano Zapata had given his life. Complying with US condition, former president Carlos Salinas pushed through a constitutional amendment that ended collective land distribution to the landless.

The EZLN saw the change as a betrayal

of Zapata and a deathblow to Mayan farmers. Fearing that the massive importation of heavily subsidized US corn would rob them of their Mexican corn market, they declared war on Mexico. At that time, they foretold the dire consequences of the free trade agreement (called a treaty under Mexican law).

Many credible studies have clearly documented the negative impact of NAFTA. Even the World Bank report issued in anticipation of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NAFTA pointed out that Mexico has one of the widest income disparities between rich and poor outside of Africa and that NAFTA only aggravated that, most agonizingly in the countryside and on the farms where the poorest Mexicans live. As the Zapatistas predicted a decade ago, the trade treaty has already driven 6.5 million rural peasants off the land and into the migration stream, and the worst-case scenario is rapidly coming true.

Since that starry night 10 years ago, the Zapatistas have been invaded, occupied and massacred. Hundreds have been murdered by military and paramilitary forces, which still infest the region (18,000 Mexican Army troops patrol the highland and jungle). Thousands more have died of curable diseases. The Mexican Congress, political parties and the court mutilated their Indian Rights bill (San Andres Accords). But the Zapatista movement has survived. With a boost from national and international solidarity and a fair trade price for their organic coffee, they are expanding their infrastructure.

Last summer the Zapatistas reformed their organizational structure, creating regional authorities called Committees of Good Government, made up of representatives from each autonomous municipality. There are now 38 autonomous municipalities, their walls ablaze with striking murals that depict their beliefs, culture and struggles.

The EZLN has changed Mexico in important ways. The Zapatistas are fond of saying that they put on their masks to unmask racism, and unquestionably they have also unmasked sexism. There were always women in the *comandancia* of

the EZLN, but now there are women on the civilian autonomous councils in some municipalities.

Now in the vanguard of social change, the number of Zapatistas in Mexico is said to have increased from 10 to 20 million in the past 10 years—not as a result of high birth rates but rather because *mestizos*, now proud of their indigenous roots, today identify themselves as Indians.

The rebellion galvanized the support of civil society that rescued the rebels time after time from government persecution during the most difficult years. Young people particularly continue to bring new energies to the movement. Some of the nation's top bands have drawn tens of thousands and raised small fortunes for the sustenance of the *caracoles*. Even the older generation has learned from the Zapatistas the truth about NAFTA and organized events to honor the Zapatista anniversaries.

Across borders, the Zapatistas have been in the forefront of the struggle against corporate globalization, sowing the seeds of Seattle, Cancun and Miami. While NAFTA moped out in the cold with no known celebrations, thousands gathered in US cities and Europe to celebrate with the Zapatistas on New Years 2004.

The masked speaker who ushered in the New Year in Oventic said, “We are not waiting for the *mal gobierno* (bad government) to give permission so that we can live in liberty and with autonomy.” He said that in 2003 “more autonomous municipalities had formed and our work has been reorganized to strengthen our resistance.” He concluded, “We give thanks for the support and solidarity of many thousands of national and international brothers and sisters. Because of your support we have survived during these ten years of war. We ask you to continue your support as you can, but also to organize and struggle in your own towns and nations against the common enemy, which is neoliberalism that is leaving millions of people in poverty throughout the world.” ●

# Hogtied and Abused at Fort Benning

By Kathy Kelly

Ed. Note: *Kathy Kelly is the founder of Voices in the Wilderness, a human rights group based in Chicago that worked to lift the economic sanctions against Iraq.*

On Sunday, November 23, 2003 I took part in a nonviolent civil disobedience action at Fort Benning, GA, to protest the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA, now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation — WHISC).

Shortly after more than two dozen of us entered Fort Benning and were arrested: US Military Police took us to a warehouse on the base for processing. I was directed to a station for an initial search, where a woman soldier began shouting at me to look straight ahead and spread my legs. I turned to ask her why she was shouting at me and was ordered to keep my mouth shut, look straight ahead, and spread my legs wider. She then began an aggressive body search. When ordered to raise one leg a second time, I temporarily lost my balance while still being roughly searched and, in my view, "woman handled." I decided that I

shouldn't go along with this dehumanizing action any longer. When I lowered my arms and said, quietly, "I'm sorry, but I can't any longer cooperate with this," I was instantly pushed to the floor. Five soldiers squatted around me, one of them referring to me with an expletive (this f\_ \_ \_ er) and began to cuff my wrists and ankles and then bind my wrists and ankles together. Then one soldier leaned on me, with his or her knee in my back. Unable to get a full breath, I gasped and moaned, "I can't breathe." I repeated this many times and then began begging for help. When I said, "Please, I've had four lung collapses before," the pressure on my back eased. Four soldiers then carried me, hogtied, to the next processing station for interrogation and propped me in a kneeling position. The soldier standing to my left, who had been assigned to "escort" me, gently told me that soon the ankle and wrist cuffs, which were very tight, would be cut off. He politely let me know that he would have to move my hair, which was hanging in front of my face, so that my picture could be taken. I told him I'd appreciate that.

I was then carried to the next station. There, one of the soldiers who'd been part of pushing me to the floor knelt in front of me, and, with

his nose about two inches from mine, told me that because I was combative I should know that if I didn't do exactly as instructed when they uncuffed one hand, he would pepper spray me. I asked him to describe how I'd been combative, but he didn't answer.

After the processing, I was unbound, shackled with wrist and ankle chains, and led to the section where other peaceful activists, also shackled, awaited transport to the Muskogee County jail.

At our bond hearing on Monday, Nov. 24, a military prosecutor told the federal judge that the military was considering an additional charge against me for resisting arrest. I explained my side of the story to the judge, grateful that there were at least several witnesses upon whom I could call.

The federal judge determined that most of us were "flight risks" and increased by 100% the cash bond required before we could be released, from last year's \$500 to \$1,000.

Today I have a black eye and the soreness that comes with severe muscle strain. Mostly, I'm burdened with a serious question, "What are these soldiers training for?" The soldiers conducting that search must have been ordered not to tolerate the slightest dissent. They were practicing intimidation tactics far beyond what would be needed to control an avowedly nonviolent group of protesters who had never, in thirteen years of previous actions, caused any disruption during the process of arrest. Bewildered, most of us in the "tank" inside the Muskogee County jail acknowledged that during the rough processing we wondered, "What country do we live in?" We now live in a country where Homeland Security funds pay for exercises which train military and police units to control and intimidate crowds, detainees, and arrestees using threat and force.

This morning's aches and pains, along with the memory of being hogtied, give me a glimpse into the abuses we protest by coming to Fort Benning, GA. As we explore the further invention of nonviolence in our increasingly volatile time, it's important that we jointly overcome efforts to deter our determination to stand together against what Martin Luther King once called, "the violence of desperate men," — and women.

Source: November 27, 2003 by Common Dreams, <http://www.commondreams.org>. For more information, contact [info@vitw.org](mailto:info@vitw.org), phone (773) 784-8065 or [www.vitw.org](http://www.vitw.org)



In January 2004, 27 defendants stood trial for "crossing the line" during the Nov. 2003 vigil to close the SOA/WHISC. They were found guilty & received sentences ranging from 12 months probation to 6 months in prison and a \$1,500 fine.. Photo: SOA archives

## 2004: The Year to Stop CAFTA

By Dale Sorensen, MITF

In January several MITF members and I attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> Hemispheric Forum against the FTAA in Havana Cuba. The meeting brought together 1,230 participants from 32 countries representing organizations of campesinos, indigenous, unions, educators, religious, and other activists from all over the hemisphere. After four days of panels, workshops and other meetings, all agreed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) poses a formidable threat to the achievement of economic and social justice due to the US neoliberal economic agenda. Fidel Castro gave the closing address noting that the US had done Cuba a favor by excluding it from the free trade negotiations.

The large Venezuelan delegation which included students studying for free at the University of Havana put forth their alternative to FTAA (ALCA in Spanish), the ALBA plan which emphasizes freedom from hunger, dignity for all people, respect for different cultures and sustainability.

The final declaration emphasized the importance of popular struggles being waged on the continent. Notable indigenous activist Evo Morales spoke of the struggle in Bolivia that recently brought down the president of the country. The declaration denounces the fact that, despite changes in the region, the US still wields the formidable lever of foreign debt, "an instrument of blackmail and control over our nations."

Defeating the FTAA in all its versions, bilateral or sub-regional was the first goal of the approved Plan of Action. That involves linking popular struggles to the prevention of militarization in the Americas and to the global movement against war, debt and corporate globalization. Joint mobilizations on key dates that coincide with other mobilizations like March 20, against war were emphasized.

While in Cuba, US delegates met with Central American civil society groups involved in the campaign to stop the US-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), a precursor to the FTAA. Trade negotiations in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua concluded on December 17, 2003. Costa Rica signed an agreement in January. The US Trade Representative said that President Bush and the Central American presidents would officially sign the agreement

in April and send it to their respective Congresses for ratification. Bush will try to ram CAFTA through Congress to avoid having a vote too close to the November elections. **The vote on CAFTA can come as early as June or July.**

Labor unions and social movement groups across Central America are coordinating mass actions in the coming months with the hope of building enough opposition that their own country's legislatures will vote against CAFTA. But despite tremendous popular opposition to the agreement in Central America, the best chance for stopping CAFTA is in the US Congress. Given the resources and spin of the corporate lobbying, our victory must lie in a coordinated grassroots pressure campaign that touts the concrete reasons that CAFTA is bad for the majority of people in Central America and the US. US corporations recently came together to form a pro-CAFTA lobby group that is deceptively promoting the "benefits" of CAFTA; but even though governments and private industry have millions of dollars to put towards propaganda, we can still beat CAFTA!

Congressional representatives will be in their home districts four times before the CAFTA vote. These periods are our chance to lobby Reps that are on the fence, shore up support with those who are on our side, and take action against those who blindly support "free" trade. The first Congressional home-

work period is Presidents weekend, February 17-20. Take the opportunity to meet with your rep, do educational outreach, and get the CAFTA debate into your local news. Future home work periods are as follows: April 5-16, May 24-31 June 28-July 5.

### TAKE ACTION TO STOP CAFTA!

1. **Download the CAFTA Activist Organizing Kit and CAFTA Grassroots Lobby Kit at [www.stopcafta.org](http://www.stopcafta.org). It includes ideas and resources.**
2. Begin planning for the larger, nationally coordinated action in April. Bring together a coalition of labor, religious sector, immigrant rights, and solidarity groups in your community to organize an action in April. Join the Bay Area Stop CAFTA group: [bayareastopcafta@lists.riseup.net](mailto:bayareastopcafta@lists.riseup.net)
3. Contact your representative and tell them to vote NO on CAFTA and to speak out publicly against the agreement. Call the US Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and give them your zip code; they'll connect you to your representative.
4. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. See the CAFTA organizing kit for sample letters.

### *Berger Wins, continued from page 3*

secure monetary support in the form of solar panels and payments for their years of obligatory service in the Army's civil patrols. (Yes, witnesses and ex-pacs are sometimes one in the same.) So while witnesses had organized and voted for Berger with great personal risk, they also held no illusions that the government would make drastic changes to improve their lives in the future. Witnesses were definitely relieved when Rios Montt was defeated but, like Berger's victory, this event seemed to reinvigorate, rather than lessen, their participation in organizations like CALDH (Center for Human Rights Legal Action) as a means to pressure and hold accountable a government structure still deeply disturbed."

Guatemala also elected 158 congressional representatives and 331 municipal officials on

November 9. Alvaro Arzú, former president of the country from 1996-99, won the race for Guatemala City mayor. Analysts view the election as simply a recycling or just another reshuffling of the old oligarchic business elites backed by international capital.

The election of President Berger has successfully replaced the military-based party of Rios Montt with its strong ties to organized crime that has been at odds with the private sector for the past four years. Now, with his loss of immunity Montt can be tried for genocide.

*Sources:* NISGUA's Report on Guatemala, Winter 2003; Z Magazine, February 2004 ([www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org)); Friends and Family letter from Meredith Kruse, January 30, 2004



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