

# Report

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## BOLIVIA: Neoliberalism Rejected

By Gretchen Gordon, journalist

Ed. Note: *The author wrote from La Paz before the Bolivian Congress accepted President Carlos Mesa's resignation on June 9 and both the Senate and House leaders then declined to accept the presidency. Supreme Court Justice Eduardo Veltze, who was third in line, became the new president, promising new elections within six months.*

As the Organization of American States completes its three-day session (June 6-8) debating the role of free trade and neoliberalism in fostering democracy for the continent, the country of Bolivia is on the brink of a civil war over that very question.

The sound of firecrackers and dynamite blasts punctuated the beginning of the fourth week of paralyzing protests in the Bolivian capital of La Paz. Tens of thousands of indigenous, miners, workers, students, and others once again flooded the streets to vocalize two immediate demands: a new constitution, and the nationalization of Bolivia's oil and massive gas reserves (53 trillion cubic feet).

"We want our oil and gas nationalized, so that our children can have them one day," said Japhth Mamani Yanolico, an indigenous leader from the Omasuyos Province near Lake Titicaca, as he stopped to take a break from the tear gas in the streets of La Paz. "And we want a Constituent Assembly."

Meanwhile, in Broward, Florida, George Bush addressed the General Session of the OAS June 6th, advocating increasing free trade and neoliberal policies for Latin America through trade accords which would open markets and increase privatization in the region. Bush spoke of the benefits of free trade in buttressing fragile democracies and increasing living standards. "In the new Americas of the 21st



June 14, 2005 - An estimated seven thousand Bolivian workers gather at San Francisco square in La Paz after they marched demanding Bolivia's natural gas wealth be nationalized.

Photo: Jorge Saenz, AP

century, one of the surest ways to make opportunity real for all our citizens is by opening our doors to trade," said Bush.

Bush's proposals, however, received a cold welcome from the majority of representatives of Latin American countries where, after two decades of neoliberal reforms, one in four people still lives in poverty. Bolivia, as many countries in the region, has been following International Monetary Fund (IMF) neoliberal mandates for the last 20 years, primary among these, the privatization of natural gas that occurred in the mid 1990s.

The current upheaval in Bolivia centers on the question of who controls, and who benefits from Bolivia's natural resources, one of the only economic lifelines of the poorest country in South America. The overwhelming majority of Bolivia's 9 million inhabitants are indigenous, and almost two-thirds struggle to survive far below the

poverty line. For this majority, the analysis of the impacts of neoliberal policies is clear. "Neoliberal policies together with privatization are a very important part of the current crisis because they've resulted in poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and discrimination," said Sacha

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Llorenti, President of the Permanent Assembly on Human Rights, Bolivia's pre-eminent human rights organization. "Bolivians are in a much more vulnerable state than they were 10 years ago; we're in a vulnerable state because of the application of neoliberal policies."

While earlier this month, Congress made some moves to increase the taxes and royalties paid by corporations extracting Bolivia's natural gas, the escalation of demonstrations has signaled that for those in the streets, nothing short of full nationalization is acceptable.

President Carlos Mesa, who resigned from office on June 6, handing the reigns over to Congress to determine how power would be transferred to the next President, appeared before Bolivians on national television the next night in an urgent plea for a full change of government as the only way to avert a civil war. "The country cannot continue playing with the possibility of splitting into a thousand pieces.... The only solution for Bolivia is an immediate electoral process," Mesa said. "This is coming from a president who is on his way out.... It is a call to a country on the brink of civil war."

Mesa, a moderate free trade proponent himself, came to power in October 2003 when previous president Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada was overthrown by public outcry over plans to use Chilean ports on the Pacific coast to allow private exportation of Bolivia's gas to California. The popular contender for the next presidential election is Evo Morales, leader of the Movement Towards Socialism

(MAS) and a vocal opponent of US-backed neoliberal reforms. If Morales comes to power, Bolivia would become the seventh Latin American country in recent years to move to a leftist government, opposed to US neoliberal policies.

In the Broward County Convention Center, the OAS closed yesterday with a resolution to "facilitate dialogue" over the current crisis in Bolivia. The final OAS Declaration also contained significant wins for Latin American countries by recognizing continuing poverty as one of the greatest threats to democracy, and rejecting a U.S. proposal to create a "democracy-monitoring" mechanism within the OAS, which many in Latin America viewed as a means for greater U.S. control over development in the region.

Meanwhile, in the capital city of La Paz, completely blockaded by protesters, Bolivians are beginning to run out of water, gas, and food, and tensions in

the streets are escalating rapidly. "Bolivia is in a complete and profound crisis, not just a crisis of this moment, but a structural crisis," said Llorenti. "We're at the point of defining what model of accumulation of wealth we're going to use, and what model of redistribution of wealth we're going to use. There will be a resolution. But right now we're at the crossroads of whether there will be a peaceful resolution, or a violent resolution."

While social movement leaders and political actors scramble to find some sort of resolution before a war erupts, the only thing that is certain right now is that for Bolivia, a return to neoliberalism is not an option.

Source: *Common Dreams*, June 9, 2005; <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0609-27.htm>

## HAITI: Call for Return of Aristide

By Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, MITF Advisory Board

February 28, 2005 marked the first anniversary of the forced removal of President John Bertrand Aristide from office in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. In November of 2000 President Aristide was overwhelmingly re-elected with 92 percent of the vote. Local and international observers put voter turnout at 65 percent. Gallup polls conducted in Haiti before and after the election, confirmed both the voter turnout and the numbers who voted for President Aristide.

President Aristide was forced to leave Haiti, a country he loves and has served well for many decades. Even though the US Embassy insists that the US government had nothing to do with his removal, it is not difficult to discover US involvement.

Ambassador James Foley insists that he came to Haiti two weeks before the coup to present to President Aristide a final offer on how he could remain in power. However, according to Ambassador Foley, President Aristide was adamant, simply refused to cooperate and chose to leave. In fact, the "offer" amounted to be-

coming the President in name only while others made the real decisions.

Aristide was provided with conditions that no legitimate president could accept. He would have to pretend to be acting as president, when in fact his governing power was almost totally removed, and was to be exercised under the guidance of the United States. Obviously, President Aristide is too honest a man to accept such a dishonest and evil solution to the problems that were clearly present in Haiti. He was told if he did not leave he would be killed together with thousands of Haitians. Without a real choice he was put on a US military plane to the Central African Republic, where he was to live quietly and be totally removed from Haiti and its concerns. Subsequently, the US removed all of his ministers and set up a new government.

Since that time the situation in Haiti has deteriorated. Many delegations of human rights observers from outside the country and human rights workers within Haiti have documented what has happened since President Aristide was forcibly removed from office. After 10 months under this interim government, backed by the United

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States, Canada and France, and buttressed now by a force from the United Nations, Haiti's people are caught up in an extreme situation of violence. If you travel in the streets of Port-au-Prince or other cities throughout the country, you will hear gunfire breaking out at almost any moment, you will sometimes discover bodies abandoned in the streets. You will see whole neighborhoods, where support for President Aristide is very high, cut off from the outside world. People live in fear especially in the poorest areas of Haiti. Gangs, police, irregular soldiers and even UN peacekeepers bring this fear. There is no investment in dialogue to end the violence.

Haiti's security and justice institutions fuel the cycle of violence. The police carry out summary executions. In many poor neighborhoods even honest police officers feel they must kill or be killed. When President Aristide was overthrown, the members of the former army, which he had disbanded, returned to the country, crossing the border from the Dominican Republic, armed with weapons from the United States, even wearing U S military uniforms. This restored army insists that it is the only legitimate, constitutional entity in the country. The "army" acts with brutality and complete disdain for the rights of the majority of the people.

Many times I visited prisoners in Port-au-Prince and found that the constitutional rights of these men and women have been completely ignored. They are arrested without warrant, imprisoned without charge and contrary to the law of Haiti, do not appear before a judge within 48 hours. Many have been kept in prison for weeks or months without any indication of why they are there or what law they are alleged to have broken. Obviously, they are simply people by whom the interim government feels threatened. Among these political prisoners are Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and Interior Minister Jocelerme Privert.

The situation reminds me of the situation in El Salvador in the 1980's when Archbishop Oscar Romero declared what it meant to be a poor person in El Salvador. "To be a poor person," he said, "means to be disappeared, to be tortured, to be murdered and to have your body found in the gutter." This is what is happening to the

*Haiti, continued on page 4*

## Haiti: Save Yvon Neptune

*By Brian Concannon; Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti*

May 31, 2005

Yvon Neptune, Haiti's last Constitutional Prime Minister turned himself in to police on June 27, 2004, as soon as he heard of a warrant for his arrest. Since then, Neptune has remained in prison, and until last Tuesday, had not been brought before a judge.

Neptune began his hunger strike on April 17, at first not even drinking water. In early May, an international medical team announced that Neptune did not have long to live. At about the same time, Neptune started drinking water and taking some vitamins, which has prolonged his life up until now. He is very weak, and growing weaker, although he is still lucid.

For several months, a host of voices, from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, from the UN Security Council, from the CARICOM countries, human rights groups, religious leaders and ordinary citizens throughout the world, have called on the Interim Haitian Government (IGH) to either let Neptune go to trial or let him go free.

The IGH does not allow reporters to talk to Mr. Neptune. The Washington Times reported last week that prison authorities gave its correspondent permission to interview Neptune, but higher-ups

revoked it as the reporter was driving to the interview. Other journalists have had their requests denied or ignored.

The IGH is in a position to persecute Neptune because wealthy governments, especially the U.S., France and Canada, put it there and continue to prop it up. Those governments could ensure Neptune's immediate freedom by conditioning future support on it.

Finally, Mr. Neptune was brought before a judge last Tuesday, on a stretcher, for a hearing that should have taken place 11 months ago. According to several reports, the judge did not make a determination as to whether Mr. Neptune should be freed, even though the Constitution requires such a determination within 48 hours of arrest (for Neptune, that was on June 29, 2004), so the detention is still illegal.

A formal decision approving Neptune's arrest at this juncture will not suffice. First, judges in Haiti are not independent. Earlier this year, the Minister of Justice punished two judges who released political prisoners, by illegally taking their cases away from them. Last July the Haitian Judges Association protested widespread politicized interference by the executive branch. Second, a single short hearing does not change the fact that the government has held Neptune for

*Yvon, continued on page 4*



*MITF members join Vigil at Oakland federal building - May 23, 2005*

*Photo: George Friemoth*

## BRAZIL: Landless Peasants March

By Deborah James, *Global Exchange*

*Haiti, continued from page 3*

poor of Haiti.

One of the most difficult things for the poor is that when they are the objects of direct assassination attempts or simply caught in the crossfire between the police and some of the street gangs, they are not able to receive proper medical care. They are afraid to go to a hospital because once there, they would only lie in puddles of their own blood, ignored by the medical personnel or they might even be killed by the police who come into the hospital to finish the job.

What is even worse, when they die, their bodies are trucked to the morgue where they are simply piled up. According to the law, when a body is brought to the morgue, it is to be left there for 22 days in order for families to try to locate them. However, without any refrigeration, the bodies are kept for only 5 days and are then thrown onto trucks, carried out of the city and dumped. Families never find out what has happened to a “disappeared” loved one.

The US government, some elements in Haiti, and some former supporters of President Aristide insist that the violence is a result of his encouraging his supporters to turn to violence. Supposedly he is still doing this from South Africa. But there is no evidence of this. From my knowledge of President Aristide and his deep commitment to non-violence, I know that this is not the case. At the present time there is a complete breakdown of civil order in Haiti. The only hope of ending this violence is to restore the constitutional government. This means the return of President Aristide and his lawfully appointed ministers.

It is time for people of the United States who care about justice, who care about non-violence, who care about peace for the people of Haiti, to insist with ever greater determination, that President Aristide be returned to his legitimate office to complete his term. In the short time that would be left for him, perhaps a new order of justice could begin.

Source: *The Catholic Peace Voice*, May/June 2005

On May 17th, Brazilian news media reported that 50 people were injured as landless peasants clashed with police. Like our corporate media in the U.S., this focus overshadowed the real story: that 12,000 poor landless peasants had recently completed a Herculean 150 mile, 17-day-long march across the country to raise awareness about the crucial need for land reform in Brazil.

Brazil is a land of contrasts. According to the UN, it is the 4th most economically unequal country in the world. In the face of enormous productive capacity, a dazzling geographical landscape, awe-inspiring natural resources, and amazing cultural diversity, millions of Brazilians suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and lack of access to basic social services. Unequal distribution of land—harking back to the Portuguese colonization of Brazil hundreds of years ago—is a signature cause of the human inequalities. It has created enormous divisions in society between giant landowners, who grow crops like sugar, soy, and citrus for export, and the 4.6 million families with no access to land to grow food for their children. Land reform in Brazil is absolutely essential for ending hunger, the #1 stated goal of President Lula’s administration.

For over 21 years, the landless peasants

movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST, has fought hard, life and death battles to change that inequality. The MST, one of the largest social movements in the hemisphere, has organized over 1.5 million members in 23 states across Brazil. They have successfully settled tens of thousands of families by taking over unproductive land and founding communities that work together to meet their own needs - not only cultivating food, but building water treatment systems, creating housing, and developing schools. After two decades of building a movement to change power at the roots, the MST has learned to combine savvy political advocacy with taking care of each other’s human needs, building political consciousness through popular education, and envisioning the alternative world that we collectively want to live in.

A poster of President Lula reads, “You can be sure of one thing, that if I am ever elected President, I will redistribute so much land, that you won’t know even what to do with it all.” The MST played a huge role in Lula’s election to the presidency, because he had promised to give access to land for 430,000 families by the end of his term in 2006. The results of Lula’s government for landless peasants has not just been disappointing, it has been crushing. Under the

*Yvon, continued from page 3*

almost a year without presenting evidence against him or otherwise seriously pursuing the case. Third, under Haitian law, pre-trial investigations may not exceed three months without special authorization. The “investigation” in this case has lasted almost four times that period, without any special authorization.

The IGH is hoping that last Tuesday’s hearing will make us forget about Yvon Neptune. The IGH has tried to sweep the issue under the bed by barring Haitian and international reporters from seeing him in prison. We need to show the IGH, and its international sponsors, that we will not forget about Yvon Neptune or Haiti’s other political prisoners

Source: *www.ijdh.org*

**Urgent action:** Please email, call or fax the embassy of the U.S. to let them know that: 1) you are still concerned about Yvon Neptune’s life, 2) justice in his case requires dropping the charges and releasing him, and 3) the US government can make that happen. Contact information follows:

U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, James B. Foley  
United States Embassy  
Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Telephones: 011-509-223-4711, or 222-0200 or 0354  
Fax: 011-509-223-1641 or 9038  
Email to Dana Banks, Human Rights Officer: [BanksD@state.gov](mailto:BanksD@state.gov)

*Brazil, continued from page 4*

current administration, only 60 thousand families have been settled. That's less families than were settled under the previous neoliberal government. At that rate, it would take about 150 years to ensure land for all in Brazil. Lula's government has frozen the land reform budget in order to save money that will be used to pay the foreign debt.

Coming out of a more than 20-year dictatorship in 1985, Brazilian hopes for economic growth under democratic governments have been disappointed. The largest country in South America suffers from a gigantic debt that has made policymakers subject to economic guidelines set by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, including privatization of essential services, deregulation of private industry, an emphasis on production for export rather than domestic consumption. Finally, with the 2002 election of Lula, a metalworker from a working-class background with strong ties to social movements, the vast majority of Brazilians believed that democracy would finally be combined with sensible national economic policies, and the poor could hope for a better future.

But Lula has pinned his hopes on agribusiness to export Brazil's way out of debt. According to the Ministry of Agricultural Development in Brazil, the government-run Bank of Brazil turned over \$6 billion in supports for agribusiness in 2003. The same year, 73 landless peasants were killed in incidents linked to land struggles with agribusiness. According to the Pastoral Land Commission's Antonio Canuto, "[i]t's important to demystify the agribusiness industry, because its growth is not linked to the national development, as many say; it's linked to the exploitation of workers."

What has been remarkable about the MST's political position with respect to Lula is that they have engaged critically with the government, stating loudly and in factual terms their profound disappointment, but without rescinding their support yet. During this march, it was made public that the MST was reconsidering their potential support of Lula during the elections next year. This is a key factor in holding a rhetorically but not politically progressive government accountable to its stated position, and one that we in the U.S. could learn from.



*Brazilian President Lula da Silva meets and receives lunch from MST marcher  
Photo: Robson Oliveira*

An important goal of the march was to engage the Lula government on key issues of the domestic and international political agenda. Through a mass consultative process, they created a list of 16 demands that ranged from settling the promised 430,000 families, releasing the frozen funds so that real land reform could be accomplished, doubling the minimum wage, and defending Amazonian biodiversity, to renegotiating the debt, opposing the FTAA, and refusing to expand the WTO. The linking of their domestic political agenda for justice with the global trade agenda is another hint of the incisive political analysis of the MST. In fact, the overwhelming importance of Brazilian agribusiness in the national political arena has been the determining factor in the derailment of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas and the stalemate in the WTO. The MST has recently honed in on the importance of transforming their mass mobilization against the FTAA into a strategic campaign to pressure their government to represent not agribusiness, but small farmer interests, in the WTO, as the global umbrella federation of small farmers, Via Campesina, calls for "Agriculture Out of the WTO!" US activists, who have long struggled to link global

and local issues, could take this lesson from the playbook of the MST.

But Brazilian social movements are too strategic to pin all their hopes on government. While they sharpen their analysis, engage in critical debate with the government, and mobilize thousands through farmers groups and trade unions to pressure their elected officials to represent them in international forums, Brazilians have also been exceptionally successful in deploying a lesser-utilized strategy: the visioning of alternatives. And for them, this means creating the world we want to live in by building it. The self-sufficiency and organizing capacity of the movement was clearly demonstrated during the march. Providing food, shelter, and sanitation for 12,000 marching people for 17 days is no minor accomplishment.

But the MST has also long realized that in order to grow, you have to organize. So their goals have always included not only bringing more and more landless peasants into the movement, but also growing the quality of their participation in the movement through democratic popular education. This is, after all, the country that produced the great Paulo Freire, world visionary of popular education, as well as Augusto Boal,

inventor of Theater of the Oppressed, both ardent supporters of the MST. During the daily walk, marchers tuned their headphones in to a mobile radio station that beamed political education on various topics - the economy, sustainable farming, movement building and land reform. Then, each afternoon, discussion groups were formed to debate and reflect on various topics, knowing that space must be created for each participant to share their views, reflect, grow, and learn.

Perhaps one of the most profound lessons we can draw from this movement is their vision for shifting our understanding of the human relationship to food. Though landless, these farmers have a deep sense of the sacredness of land as the sustainer of life. To those that fight their whole lives for access to land, the earth is not just a clump of dirt waiting to be turned into money. It is a public good, and we humans are its stewards; we have a right to share in its bounty, but also a responsibility to conserve it for our grandchildren. And that includes a very strong opposition to the genetic modification of seeds and plants, and a complete rejection of the patenting of life. The earth sustains life, and life is to be spent in struggle, in creation, in learning, and in celebration.

Source: *Common Dreams*, May 20, 2005; [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org)



Defense Minister Azucena Berruti and MITF's Midge Donalds at meeting in Uruguay.

Photo: George Friemoth

## URUGUAY: Progressive Politics in Latin America's Southern Clone

By *Andres Conteris, Nonviolence International*

Ed.Note: *The author led the delegation that took place January 17-2, 2005.*

On May 8, 2005, Uruguayans went to the polls to make history once again. For the second time in as many nationwide elections the people of this tiny country of 3.4 million inhabitants overwhelmingly elected progressive leaders at the municipal level following on the heels of presidential and congressional elections October 31, 2004. On both occasions, voters overwhelmingly rejected the traditional parties associated with the failed neoliberal economic policies that have brought many Uruguayans to the brink of poverty.

At the midpoint between these two elections, a delegation sponsored by the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas and Nonviolence International traveled to Uruguay to speak with those working to forge a new course for their nation. Unlike many delegations of U.S. citizens who participate in educational seminars to other countries, we were able to meet with a number of governmental leaders eager to share with us about their vision for the future of Uruguay. Highlights included meetings with the soon-to-be ministers of National Defense and the Interior as well as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Additionally, we met with a wide array of civil society leaders and came away impressed by the responsibility that Uruguayan citizens are taking for the direction that their country is heading.

Uruguay obtained independence from Spain in 1828 and, like Switzerland, was to be a buffer state sandwiched between its large neighbors, Brazil and Argentina. It later became known as the Switzerland of Latin America because of its political stability and social welfare policies. The original indigenous inhabitants initially resisted what they considered an invasion with violence and were soon wiped out by the even more violent Spanish leaving very few remnants. Immigrants from Spain, Italy, France, Germany, as well as a significant

number of Jews settled this land, many with ideas and ideals infused by anarchism, socialism, and communism. Afro-Uruguayans make their presence known especially with the infectious beat of the drums of the *candombe* groups dancing in the streets during around Carnival.

Jose Batlle y Ordúñez served twice as president between 1903 and 1915 and instituted free medical care and pensions for the elderly. Under his guidance Uruguay also made progress in separating church and state, and giving full legal status to illegitimate children. While much of Latin America was under the oppressive thumb of colonialism and dictators, Uruguay manifested its progressive ideals. According to Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano, the country instituted “free public education before England, women’s suffrage before France, the eight-hour workday before the United States, and divorce before Spain...”

In the 1950s, due to excessive dependence on cash crops, i.e. wool and beef, the economy took a severe downturn. Synthetics made their appearance on the world market in sharp competition with the sheepskins for which Uruguay was famous. Corruption in the government grew, providing fertile ground in the 1960s for the formation of the Movement for National Liberation – Tupamaros. This urban guerrilla group gained a Robin Hood image exposing governmental misdeeds and transferring money from banks and casinos to the poor. The Tupamaros mostly avoided violence until the police and military started using strong-arm tactics against them. This snowballed into a cycle of violence on both sides leading to the suspension of constitutional rights. A Costa Gravas film, *State of Siege* describes this period and the role of a U.S. official, Dan Mittrione, who came to Uruguay disguised as an AID official whose task was to bring the latest torture technology to the military junta. (See also *Hidden Terrors* by A.J. Langguth.) In 1973, long after the Tupamaro movement was completely destroyed, the military held power in a dictatorship from 1973 to 1985. Left of center political parties were banned; citizens were detained, tortured, and/or disappeared. During this brutal regime, there were more po-

*Uruguay, continued on page 11*

# The Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

By Susan Scott, attorney

Ed. Note: *The author participated in the MITF/Global Exchange delegation to Venezuela, April 8-19, 2005*

The first thing Hugo Chavez did when he was elected to the presidency of the Venezuela in 1998 was to call for a constitutional convention. For decades the country had been governed by two political parties (AD and COPEI), under an agreement (made at Punto Fijo) to exclude other parties and bounce support back and forth between AD and COPEI. Before 1998, to do anything in Venezuela, from running for political office to participating in a beauty contest, you had to be on the list of AD or COPEI.

When Chavez called for a constitutional convention there was universal support for a change. But when he proposed a way of appointing the members of the Constituent Assembly, his opponents filed suit and won. The Supreme Court (which pre-existed the Chavez administration) came up with a formula for appointing a Constituent Assembly, resulting in an assembly of 130 members from all over the country. For 10 months the Constituent Assembly worked on drafting a constitution, and community, labor, and women's groups from all over the country submitted their ideas and language, much of which was incorporated into the final document. The final draft was approved by 100% of the Constituent Assembly – including the right wing and anti-Chavez members – and was submitted to the populace at large in a referendum in 1999.

With great fanfare, the draft was overwhelmingly approved on December 15, 1999, and a new set of elections was held in 2000, under the new Constitution. Chavez again won the presidency, with almost 60% of the vote. During the ultimately unsuccessful coup d'etat in April 2002, the first decree, announced during the short-lived "Presidency" of Pedro Carmona, was cancellation of the Constitution.

Today a small blue book, the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, is given away on city streets throughout the country, and virtually every Venezuelan has a copy. As the slogan of the MVR (Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement) says: "Venezuela, *Ahora es de Todos*" (Today Venezuela belongs to all.)

Here are a few things you might want to know about the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela:

Unlike the US Constitution and the French-inspired constitutions of many countries, the Venezuelan constitution follows the model set forth by Simon Bolivar, who led the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberation movement from Spain in the area that is now Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador. Instead of the three separate and autonomous powers we have in the US – Executive, Legislative and Judiciary, the Venezuelan constitution provides for FIVE powers: Executive, Legislative and Judiciary as well as an independent "Citizen's Power" and "Electoral Power." The Citizen's Power is composed of three agencies, whose heads are all appointed by an elaborate nomination and approval process over which the President has no control. Those agencies are what we would call the Department of Justice (headed by the Attorney General), the Public Defender or Ombudsman (with a more extensive jurisdiction than our federal public defenders), and the office of the Comptroller General. The Electoral Power is headed by a commission, which is also nominated and selected by a process independent of the President.

Some other major differences between our system and the new Bolivarian system are that judges, including the Supreme Court, have limited terms (12 years for the Supreme Court) and all judges other than the Supreme Court are elected by the people. All elected officials - from the local municipal councils to the judges to the President of the Republic - are subject to popular recall and the Vice President, appointed by the President, is subject to censure and removal by a 2/3 vote of the National Assembly. Referenda on legislation can be initiated by citizens as well as legislators and civil society groups. Although our press repeatedly refers to Chavez as a dictator, he is in fact, subject to recall (as was attempted unsuccessfully in 2004), has no power to appoint the Supreme Court or Attorney General and has no veto power over legislation. The President's term of office is 6 years and is limited to two terms. So, since Chavez was re-elected in 2000, under the new Constitution, his current term expires next year and if he is re-elected, he could serve until 2012.

The Bolivarian Constitution, in 350 articles, contains most all of the provisions of our Bill of Rights, including due process, public trials, jury of peers, free speech, freedom of religion, habeas corpus, prohibitions against ex post facto laws and double jeopardy. It also contains the following provisions that do not appear in our Constitution, some of which our courts have haggled over for decades:

- No death penalty
- No penalty of imprisonment for over 30 years
- No amnesty or pardon or statute of limitations for human rights abuses
- Specific provisions against forced disappearances
- Provision ensuring state ownership of all mineral and hydrocarbon deposits and prohibition against their transfer or alienation
- Right to use one's own name and know the identity of one's parents
- Right to protection of parental rights regardless of one's marital status
- Right to health care provided by the State
- No privatization of hospitals or health care services
- Right to join a union and strike (subject to conditions to be determined by law)
- Right to Social Security, regardless of contribution, including for homemakers
- Right to a clean and healthy environment and state protection of genetic and biological diversity
- Prohibition against patenting of genome of living being
- Prohibition against importation, manufacture or use of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons
- Right to subtitles and sign language on TV (which apparently has yet to be implemented)

The entire document is written in both male and female genders, and the recently adopted Election Law contains a 50% rule, requiring that there be an equal number of female as male candidates for an elected office. •

## VENEZUELA: Myths and Realities

*By Dawn Gable, Bolivarian Circles International and edited by Dr. J. Cockcroft*

Ed. Note: *This article reflects the findings of the MITF/Global Exchange April 2005 delegation.*

1. MYTH: Hugo Chavez is a dictator

REALITY: Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998 with 56 % of the vote. After a new constitution was ratified by popular vote (80%), he voluntarily put himself up for election again in 2001. He won this election with 59 % of the vote. In 2004 he was subject to a recall referendum, a process that did not previously exist in Venezuela but that he had added to the constitution. He won this referendum with nearly 60% of the vote. The election was overseen by several international organizations, including the Carter Center, all of which declared the elections free and fair.

2. MYTH: Chavez is destabilizing South America and the Caribbean.

REALITY: Venezuela has joined in many cooperative relationships in South America and the Caribbean. Following the examples of nineteenth-century Latin American liberators Simón Bolívar and José Martí, Chavez has promoted an all-inclusive Latin American “big fatherland” (“patria grande”). A few examples of this include Venezuela’s incorporation into the MercoSur trade bloc; assistance in the creation of a South American television station TeleSur and oil enterprise PetroSur; and the building of a pipeline with Colombia, whose narco-traffickers, paramilitaries, and leftist guerrillas it seeks to prevent from crossing the border into Venezuela. Petrocaribe is a new Venezuelan proposal through which 14 Caribbean counties will receive oil at preferential prices, and currently Venezuela has an oil-for-food accord with Argentina.

3. MYTH: Chavez supports narco-trafficking.

REALITY: The US Congressional Research Service Report for Congress states: “Despite friction in US-Venezuelan relations, cooperation between the two countries at the law enforcement agency level continues to be excellent, according to the State Department’s 2003 International narcotics Control Strategy Report.”

4. MYTH: Chavez is repressing the media.

REALITY: Venezuela’s privately owned TV stations blatantly and admittedly participated in the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez (see Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Investigation Memorandum. The Venezuelan Media: More Than Words in Play,” Press Memorandum 03.18, April 30, 2003). Yet not one of the stations has been closed, and none of the station owners has been arrested on charges of conspiracy. Under Chavez, several new community TV channels have sprung up, hundreds of new “pirate” radio stations have raised antennas in every corner of the country, and hundreds of community newsletters are being printed. Even independent websites have gone up, including [www.el23.net](http://www.el23.net). The Chavez government is helping to jumpstart the TeleSur (TeleSud in Brazil.) a continental TV satellite station, in hopes of breaking the current news monopoly of CNN with its disinformation that reaches hundreds of millions in Spanish and Portuguese. Venezuela’s new Law of Social Responsibility of Radio and TV, attempts to regulate the media in the same way that the FCC in the US does. It restricts violent content during high children viewing hours and it also establishes avenues for libel suits to combat slander. The new law, just as in the United States and other countries, makes threatening the President’s life or promoting actions that threaten national security a crime.

5. MYTH: Chavez is propping up the Cuban economy and government.

REALITY: First, the Cuban economy relies mostly on tourism and is not in need of “propping up” despite nearly half a century of US economic blockade. Second, Cuba and Venezuela have entered in to various agreements, including ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative to the FTAA, based on reducing poverty rather than raising profits) and the Caracas Accord through which 23 Latin American countries receive preferential oil prices. For Cuba’s part, it has been the key player in Venezuela’s two most successful social programs: Barrio Adentro (BA) and Mission Robinson (MR). Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors are serving for free in community medical clinics throughout the country (BA). The MR literacy campaign used the UN-lauded Cuban program “Yo Sí Puedo,” as Cuba trained Venezuelan teachers and provided televisions, VCR’s, workbooks, pencils and even personal library sets to all those attaining a 6th-grade reading level. In the first year of MR more than a

million Venezuelans became literate. Cuba also has sent thousands of sports instructors to Venezuela and has treated many Venezuelans with special medical needs in hospitals in Cuba. The US is increasingly isolated in its condemnation of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution.

6. MYTH: Chavez is a “communist” or “left populist” who is centralizing power.

REALITY: According to the Webster dictionary a populist is “a believer of the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people”. The Chavez government has handed out millions of private land ownership titles. Instead of taking over the means of production, the government has allowed private enterprises to flourish; entered into joint ventures with foreign private capital, and established co-management relationships with workers who have taken over owner-abandoned factories. The government program of creating endogenous development communities that are locally governed and self-sufficient reflects a true decentralization of power to the local level. Chavez views this democratic and participatory approach to economics and political power as an alternative to neo-liberal capitalism, which causes Washington to see him as a “subversive” presence.

7. MYTH: Chavez is building up a dangerous arsenal.

REALITY: Venezuela, like any other country, maintains a means of defending itself. Keep in mind that Venezuela in 2002 underwent a short-lived coup that was backed by a foreign aggressor and shares a 1400-mile border with a country in the midst of a 50-year-old civil war that is the Western Hemisphere’s headquarters of the cocaine trade and largest recipient of modern US military equipment. The Venezuelan military consists of 80,000 soldiers (in contrast with Colombia’s 450,000). Soldiers carry obsolete rifles. Venezuela has purchased 100,000 less obsolete (1947 design) assault rifles from Russia and plans to buy 40 helicopters to patrol the Colombian border. Venezuela is also negotiating the purchase of coast guard patrol boats from Spain to combat the drug trade and a fleet of aircraft from Brazil to replace its US-built F-16’s for which the US will not sell Venezuela repair parts. Unlike the United States and its countless targets, Venezuela has never been accused of developing or possessing any non-conventional weapons or “weapons of mass destruction.”

8. MYTH: Chavez is going to cut off oil sales to the US.

REALITY: Venezuela has recently made many mutually beneficial oil agreements (and other trade agreements) with not only the US but also other huge oil consuming countries such as India and China. These latter deals, once fully implemented, will lower Venezuela's dependence on the US as its main purchaser of oil. This does not mean that oil supplies to the US would be diverted to China and India, but instead Venezuela hopes to increase its market. However, this lower dependence on the US will give Venezuela, and by "Bolivarian" definition, all of Latin America, some breathing room and unprecedented bargaining power against US hegemony. This is the crux of US hostility toward Chavez.

9. MYTH: Chavez is friendly with terrorist nations.

REALITY: The Chavez government has friendly relations with just about every nation in the world. Venezuela's relationships with Middle Eastern governments that do not have good relations with the US, such as Iraq, Iran and Libya, stem from their common membership in OPEC, which was created in 1960. And while Venezuela does not maintain close ties to terrorist nations such as Israel, some are legitimately concerned about its economic friendship with the US.

10. MYTH: Chavez government is violating human rights.

REALITY: In fact, the Chavez government is the first government in over a hundred years in Venezuela that has addressed human rights in any meaningful way. The Chavez administration's central tenet is the guaranteeing of basic human rights to the entire population. This, so far, has come in the form of universal health care, education, land distribution, subsidized food, and a participatory democracy. The Bolivarian constitution is the first in the world to recognize the rights of children to a healthy and happy life. It gives unprecedented rights and sovereignty to indigenous peoples and recognizes housework as a value-added commodity that assures women a pension for a life of housework. The signers of the 2002 coup decree that made Pedro Carmona dictator for a day and dissolved the national assembly, nullified the constitution and dismissed the Supreme Court have still not been brought to trial.

Source: [www.cybercircle.org](http://www.cybercircle.org)

## ECUADOR: Challenges for New President

By George Friemoth, MITF

On April 20, Vice President Alfredo Palacio was sworn in as Ecuador's president following the Congressional removal of then President Lucio Gutierrez amidst mass protests of the people demanding his ouster.

The freshly minted president, a cardiologist who practiced in the US for a decade, was brought in by the former president to build a national health program. He is non-political, not affiliated with any party. Dr. Palacio can be described as conservative, pro-market, pro-US on the one hand and compassionate, principled, dedicated to his new patient, his nation that he sees as sick and in bad shape.

From almost the very beginning of his vice presidency, Palacio criticized Gutierrez for being too beholden to the IMF and the "Washington Consensus," and attacked him for ignoring issues of social justice that were of vital concern for the 65% of the population who live at or below the poverty line. In March he was instrumental in getting the government to pay Ecuadorian doctors wages owed since 2002. Some 25,000 doctors employed at 1,668 public hospitals and clinics had been on strike since January.

Palacio's first challenge came only 24 hours after he was sworn in as president when Condaleezza Rice phoned from Lithuania and shocked him with her call for "a constitutional process to get to elections," as if he hadn't been already constitutionally elected. Later, Rice reassured him she did not seek his removal. Soon after though, he announced he would maintain US military bases in Ecuador and would not object to Plan Colombia, both unpopular issues. But, as a physician he did not favor chemical spraying of coca crops.

The nation's largest political party, Democracia Popular, which advocates a communitarian socialist economic platform and has 35% of the congressional seats, is expected to back Palacio until he leaves office in 2007.

On May 21, mostly indigenous residents from two of Ecuador's northern provinces seized 114 oil wells, operated by the state-run company Petroecuador, blocked access roads to oil facilities, forcing a shutdown of drilling and repair work. The purpose of seizures was to demand improvements to roads, schools, housing and health care in the region. As the strike continued on May 25, President Palacio declared a 60-day state of emergency that al-

lows the restriction of certain civil rights. The protestors ended the strike and left the oil fields after the government signed an agreement to finance roads and electrify projects in the region.

On May 24, in an effort to mend Ecuador's constitution as demanded by the majority including dissenting indigenous communities, Palacio announced his plan for restoring stability in the country over the next 18 months. He called for a "great national accord" that begins with a "People's Assembly" defining an agenda of change; the assembly's proposals would be put to a referendum, and in the same election, representatives would be chosen for a constitutional assembly.

Another challenge is dealing with indigenous resistance to petroleum development in the southern Amazon region of Ecuador. At a MITF event in late March we learned from San Francisco based writer and activist, Marisa Handler that there has been sustained political non-violent resistance to letting oil companies into the Quichua territory of the Sarayacu. An indigenous representative said, "Petroleum development has been a disaster in Ecuador, generating environmental, social and cultural crises, and ultimately causing the extinction of indigenous peoples (in the northern Amazon). We want to maintain our way of living, free of contamination, in harmony with nature."

The biggest challenges revolve around oil, bonds and debt. Ecuador with a population of 13 million is potentially rich, sitting on 4.4 billion barrels of known oil reserves and maybe more, but two-thirds of the people live in poverty, the lucky minority earning an average of \$153 a month. Palacio plans to move more oil money to social services than the 10% allowed by terms of the World Bank loan and bondholders agreements. Here it all gets complicated and here is where the president plans to hold his ground. He has made it clear that handing over 90 percent of his nation's new oil wealth would not, could not stand. "It is impossible that they (World Bank/IMF) condemn us not to have health, not to have education," Palacio lamented. At the same time he is acutely aware that no Ecuadorian president has served out his term since 1996.

Sources: "Ecuador Gets Chavez'd," by Greg Palast, *the Nation*, May 11, 2005; "The Next Domino to Fall?" *Council of Hemispheric Affairs*, April 21, 2005

## GUATEMALA: Military Repress Anti-CAFTA Protests

By Matthew Kennis, formerly with Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)

Ed. Note: *Shortly, after this article was published, there was a blitz of break-ins at eight organizations in Guatemala that oppose CAFTA. Almost all information in computers and files was systematically stolen but valuable equipment was left behind. Add this to the author's account of government repression and the use of the military to suppress peaceful protest and one is reminded of the late 70's and early 80's when Guatemala had the worst human rights record in the hemisphere.*

A Gallup poll conducted in Guatemala from March 14-23 found that, when asked the question "Do you think the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) will help or hurt the country?" 65% of those polled responded that CAFTA would hurt the country.

During the days leading up to the CAFTA ratification, the Indigenous, Peasant, Union and Popular Movement (MICSP—a coalition of grassroots organizations that came together to form a movement specifically against CAFTA) organized an ongoing demonstration of thousands in Guatemala City and throughout the country to protest the agreement that included blocking entrances to the Congress, forcing it to delay the vote. The protests also included cultural events, and the delivery of more than 25,000 signatures rejecting the trade agreement to the Guatemalan Congress. The Guatemalan government called out the army and police and employed tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets to disperse the large mobilizations. On March 14, grassroots organizations called a national strike to demand a nationwide referendum on CAFTA. Additional protests against CAFTA on March 15 in Colotenango, Huehuetenango resulted in the assassination of Juan Lopez Velasquez, a teacher and member of the Campesino Unity Committee, by State security forces.

On March 24, on the heels of the widespread violence and repression of protestors by State security forces, and amid ongoing protests, US Defense Secretary

Donald Rumsfeld visited Guatemala to formally announce the disbursement of previously frozen military aid to Guatemala: "I've been impressed by the reforms that have been undertaken here in the armed forces," he stated. In reference to the newfound cooperation around security and economic opportunity, Rumsfeld was effusive. "This is a magic moment," he declared.

Although full US military aid has not yet been renewed, Rumsfeld's visit indicates the Bush administration's desire to do so. Meanwhile, civil society groups have expressed growing concerns about the deplorable human rights situation in the country, the ongoing crisis of impunity and organized crime networks, and the role of the Guatemalan army in internal defense. The 1996 Peace Accords limit the role of the Guatemalan military to external defense.

Just days after Rumsfeld's visit, Guatemalan Defense Minister Carlos Aldana, in an interview with the Guatemalan daily *El Periodico* remarked, "...the armed forces needs to become more involved in internal security." In response to the question, "Can the United States support armies in their new role that is more focused on internal security rather than defense?" Aldana opines, "I believe this is the spirit of Rumsfeld's visit to Guatemala."

The Guatemalan government's response to the massive opposition to CAFTA has been to criminalize protest, utilizing the army and police forces to disperse crowds and intimidate social movement and human rights groups. Almost one month after the ratification of CAFTA, despite scare tactics, empty calls by the government for dialogue, and threats of more violence, social movement groups remain in the streets. Their protests center on CAFTA, the demand for a full investigation into the killing of Juan López Velasquez, and a call for the interior minister and the director of the National Civilian Police to be fired. A statement placed in the Guatemalan daily *Prensa Libre* by more than 50 organizations from North America, Japan, and Austria, demanded an end to the violence and the criminalization of protest.

Press releases issued by the MICSP highlight that the recent repression of CAFTA demonstrators is "reminiscent of

the country's recent history. To continue with such action will place the Berger administration on par with the military dictators of the past that sowed pain and mourning. Today Guatemala doesn't suffer from a military dictatorship, but rather from a dictatorship of business interests," MICSP asserts.

Guatemalan social movements strongly oppose CAFTA and see it as a new form of colonialism. They criticize a negotiation process that left out indigenous peoples, the poor, women's groups, and others, and say that they were never consulted on their concerns about the agreement. Protestors assert that CAFTA will limit Guatemala's sovereignty and the nation's ability to protect its own people. Measures such as the dispute settlement process, which effectively allows a company to sue the government for the imposition of any law that affects its profits, threaten the public interest by superceding protective laws deemed by special courts to be "more burdensome than necessary."

Groups opposing CAFTA cite the experience of NAFTA and conclude that in their country, where 60% of the population survives through agriculture, small farmers will be decimated, genetically modified food will wipe out local biodiversity, local medicinal knowledge will be patented and restricted by U.S. pharmaceutical companies, and life-saving generic medicines will be illegal for years, among many other negative impacts.

The direct contradiction between public health and CAFTA recently came to the fore when the Guatemalan Congress passed a law to protect generic medicines. Immediately, U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala John Hamilton warned in an op-ed in the Guatemalan Daily *Siglo XXII* in January: "There's no doubt that Guatemala acted out of its concern to protect the public health.... This could mean, however, that CAFTA does not pass or even come to a vote in the United States." With no reticence whatsoever about dictating domestic policy, he further noted: "We hope that President Berger acts to rectify this error this month." The Guatemalan Congress, under immense pressure from the US embassy, did indeed

*Guatemala, continued on page 11*

*Uruguay, continued from page 6*

litical prisoners per capita in Uruguay than any other nation on earth.

After growing domestic and international pressure, the dictatorship held a plebiscite, which would have legitimized its power except that it backfired, and the people voted No, making it the first time a dictatorship was voted out of power. Nationwide elections in 1984 led to a transfer of power to civilian rule in March 1985.

The traditional political parties who supported the IMF and World Bank-backed policies, the Colorados and Blancos, controlled the national government for 20 years after the dictatorship. The chink in their armor started in the 1990s when the Frente Amplio, a coalition of left of center parties founded in 1971, won the municipality of Montevideo, the capital city with half the country's population.

The previous government headed by Jorge Battle of the Colorado Party from 2001 to 2005 carried favor with the Bush administration. It broke ties to Cuba, supported the invasion of Iraq (in spite of 90% opposition), and sent peacekeeping troops to Haiti.

By 2004 the Frente Amplio united with two other progressive coalitions, the Nueva Mayoría and the Encuentro Progresista. This unity together with the message of an authentic alternative to the dominant economic model preached by the International Financial Institutions, Transnational Corporations and the U.S. Administration was enough to win the presidency, the Senate and the House of Deputies. Remarkably, the current Speaker of the House, Nora Castro, and the Senator who received the most votes, José Mujica, were active leaders of the Tupamaros in the 60s and 70s who were elected leaders of the legislature with the Frente Amplio.

The legacy of tyranny from military rule is still felt decades later with the struggle to bring to light the truth about the torment lived by those who were disappeared, brutally treated, and murdered. An impunity law adopted after civilian rule returned in 1985 absolved the armed forces of most human rights crimes, but Article 4 requires an investigation similar to the work of Truth Commissions in other countries for victims of the crime of forced disappearance. The traditional parties have allowed Article 4 to go unenforced. The current government promises to make truth the *sine-qua-non* of authentic reconciliation in the post-dictatorial era.

Since 1999, poverty bourgeoned by 108%,

capturing nearly 40% of the nation's population. Montevideo shantytowns have grown 10% annually from 1999 to 2003 as people, unable to pay rent, squat on vacant land, building small homes with recycled materials. In 2002, following the Argentine financial collapse, Uruguay's peso was severely devalued, real wages plummeted, and unemployment reached a historic high of 23%. During this time, 30,000 citizens, mostly the young and educated, left Uruguay annually for jobs in other countries.

A common strategy used by U S capitalists to get a nation to submit to its market demands is to provide needed capital in a way that creates impossible long-term debt obligations. Southern nations around the world are now calling this 'odious debt' and declaring that it is impossible to repay, given high interest rates and the ongoing need for more cash and credit. The International Financial Institutions impose conditions that contribute to underdevelopment and to the transfer of wealth from the southern to northern nations. Moreover, the current main export of Uruguay is sugar cane and the main importer, the US, uses this trade relationship to apply pressure, at times bordering on economic blackmail.

In spite of this, the Tabaré Administration is implementing a National Plan for the Social Emergency, an audacious and carefully designed plan responding to the basic social rights of the people to health, education, employment and housing. The government is

implementing specific programs in all four areas to help those who suffer the most from devastating poverty, unemployment, sickness and malnutrition, and lack of housing and education. The new social programs will provide subsidies to mothers and unemployed heads of households; funding for community daycare centers with nutritional meals; worker subsidies, and fortifies primary and secondary training centers in districts with social exclusion problems.

From 1984 till the present, Uruguayan social movements have succeeded with plebiscites that have rejected privatization. To date they have avoided privatization of electricity, telecommunications, state-owned gas and oil and most recently, water.

During the financial crisis of 2002, the Battle Administration signed a Letter of Intent with the IMF committing to extend the privatization of water to the entire country. The Uruguayan portion of the Guaraní Aquifer, the second largest reserve of sweet water in the world, together with other water reserves, was offered as collateral. Civil society groups began organizing against this and formed the National Commission to Defend Water and Life and proposed a constitutional referendum to prevent water privatization. This historic referendum was overwhelmingly successful with 64% of the voters signaling their support. Thus Uruguay became the first country in the world to pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting privatization of water. ●

*Guatemala, continued from page 10*

overturn its own law in March.

In Guatemala, MICSP wants a seat at the table on trade and economic policies to propose sustainable development strategies that benefit the majority of Guatemalans. Massive protests will continue in Guatemala and legal action is underway to challenge the constitutionality of the agreement.

Guatemalans are not alone in their opposition to CAFTA. There are movements opposed to CAFTA all over Central America and in the United States. Although Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have passed the agreement, CAFTA is still a very contentious issue in the US, where it faces a ratification vote in the near future.

The Bush administration has thrown its weight behind passage of the agreement, but Congress is still several votes shy of approval. For the safety and security of

workers in the US and the survival of millions of rural and indigenous Guatemalans, CAFTA should be blocked.

**Action Alert:** Soon, members of the House and Senate Foreign Operations subcommittees will be deciding whether to lift the ban on US military aid to Guatemala. The Bush Administration has already released some military aid that remained in the "pipeline" since military aid was frozen in 1990, and it is asking Congress to permanently lift the ban on military aid, education and training. Tell Congress NO, to US Military Aid and NO to CAFTA. The Capitol switchboard is 202/224-3121.

Source: April 13, 2005, *International Relations Center (IRC) Americas Program*, [www.americaspolicy.org](http://www.americaspolicy.org), [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org) & <http://stopcafta.org>

## US/Mexico Border: Death in the Desert

By Sean Mariano Garcia, Latin America Working Group

Ed. Note: *This article was edited for length, leaving out details of 40 individual deaths that occurred in May 2005*

More than 2000 people have died along the U.S.-Mexico border in the past five years, coming to this country in search of a better life. In an effort to educate the public about the direct link between U.S. policy and these deaths, the Washington, DC based Border Working Group will be providing you with information twice a month to highlight each death of the summer. The Border Working Group is a coalition of over one dozen churches and human rights groups working to end the deaths on the border.

In 1993, the United States Border Patrol initiated a strategy to curb undocumented migration into the United States across the border with Mexico. Known as the Southwest Border Strategy, it aimed to effectively seal off US urban areas, under the logic that migrants would not risk their lives to enter the United States.

Ten years after this policy began, the consequences are clear. Migrants do risk their lives to find work in the United States. Because urban areas are now sealed, migrants are forced to travel through remote

and dangerous stretches of desert that kills hundreds of people a year. Since 2000, the Border Patrol has documented 1854 migrant deaths to date – a staggering number for four and a half years. This does not include migrants whose bodies have not been found.

The Southwest Border Strategy has dramatically increased the resources going to the Border Patrol, yet migration to the United States has not decreased as a result. Since 1993, the number of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border has more than doubled; there are now more than 9,500 agents patrolling 2,000 miles of border. That's five agents per mile. This summer, more than 2000 agents will patrol Arizona, one agent for every 1000 feet of border. The border patrol has also built over 78 miles of fencing in urban areas across the southwest border at a cost in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Despite these resources, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (now the Bureau of Immigration and Citizenship Services) has acknowledged that approximately 75,000 more undocumented migrants entered the U.S. per year between 1990 and 1999 than they originally estimated. Current estimates put the number of unauthorized entries at over 350,000 per year.

Current Border Patrol policies along the southwest border are untenable. They have

failed in their mission, and the only result of increased Border Patrol surveillance is the deaths of thousands of people. Last year, Congressman Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) acknowledged that 99% of the people crossing the Southwest border are not a threat to national security. He has acknowledged, as many are beginning to do, that the only way to reduce undocumented migration is to reform our immigration system. These reforms will also reduce the number of migrant deaths each year by providing workers with a legal way to enter the U.S.

In addition to a reform of our immigration policies, border security needs to be reoriented from a policy focused on deterring migrants to one focused on terrorism. The strategies, tools, and resources going to border security do not address this problem in an adequate way. Rather than continuing to reinforce our current system, the Border Patrol needs to devise a new strategy that can address this mission, and reorganize its use of staffing, technology, and infrastructure to meet this new challenge.

Source: *Latin America Working Group, [www.lawg.org](http://www.lawg.org). Bimonthly updates on immigration, legislation and border deaths can be obtained from the author, [sgarcia@lawg.org](mailto:sgarcia@lawg.org)*

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