

Report

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THE BORDER

By Gwen Meyer, photographer, Marin County CA

Ed. Note: Author was one of several participants sponsored by the Task Force to the Arizona-Mexico border delegation organized by Borderlinks. The delegates spoke with Rev. John Fife, a founding member of the Sanctuary Movement of the 80s and currently working to end the deaths of migrants in the Arizona – Sonora borderlands. He will be the honored guest speaker at the Task Force Annual Dinner on September 28.

From the air, flying south of Phoenix, a perfect grid of roads divides the land into large squares of farmland that are interrupted occasionally by irrigated crop circles, or mountains. Past a certain point the Sonoran desert becomes desert again, stretching south past Tucson, Nogales and beyond, miles and miles of dry scrub land seemingly empty of life.

The Sonoran desert however, is currently the busiest sector for migrants' crossing. Known as the Tucson sector, it is here that a substantial amount of migrants are apprehended daily by border patrol; 378,000 in 2007 alone, an average of more than 1,000 a day.

The Tucson sector covers 262 miles of desert, from Yuma county line to the Arizona, New Mexico state line. The 'immigration highway' travels through tough and dangerous desert terrain, the way through is impossible without paying the 'coyotes' or guides. Thousands of people risk it everyday in an attempt to reach America and the possibility of work, and many don't make it through; they get lost

and die of dehydration or exposure, get picked up by Border patrol, or become victim to gangs that prey on them.

At the comfortably air conditioned Tucson Federal Court, one can witness Operation Arizona Denial Prosecution Initiative in progress. The initiative, in effect since January 2008, is Arizona's latest response to illegal immigration and is modeled on a similar initiative in Texas. The initiative criminally prosecutes 60 'randomly selected' migrants out of

ported migrants.

Nogales Mexico is divided from Nogales, USA by a border wall constructed out of decommissioned landing strips from the first Gulf War. Flat roofed houses spill over the sides of brown eroded hills. There are some work opportunities here in the US owned *maquilladores*, but most deportees will return to a 'port of entry' further south to try and enter the US again.

According to the Center for Migrants

(Centro Comunitario de Atención a Migrantes y Necesitados), CCAMYN, 65% of migrants attempting to enter illegally fail on their first attempt; most will try to 3-5 times, and as many as 96% eventually make it. Whether the criminalization of illegal entry will change these numbers remains to be seen.

One and a half hours south of Nogales, the town of Altar, Sonora, Mexico, is a hub for migrants preparing to cross. It is connected to the border town of Sasabe by a 98 km dirt road. Mi-

grants come from as far south as Central America to this bleak, dusty town to find a coyote to lead them from Sasabe on the four-

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Photo: Gwen Myer

Deportees walking across Mariposa border after being transported there by Wackenhut.

every 1000 detained by border patrol. This daily quota of 60 detainees is criminally charged 'en-masse' for illegal entry. The entire court proceeding is approximately 45 minutes long. Those caught with no previous convictions are given a criminal misdemeanor record and are deported: those with prior convictions are sentenced and sent by the Federal Marshall to a private prison facility in Florence which is operated by the privately owned Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). CCA receives between 10 and 12 million dollars a month from the government for this service. Deportees are transported to the Mariposa border gate at Nogales, by a private security transport firm, Wackenhut. Wackenhut has a five-year 250 million dollar contract with the government to transport de-

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Guerrero: Marginalization and Repression

By Camilla Schneider, Task Force on the Americas

Ed. Note: Three members of the Board of the Task Force participated in an international delegation to Guerrero, Mexico that was organized by SIPAZ (International Service for Peace), a local human rights organization based in Chiapas. While the international community is aware of and responding to human rights issues in Chiapas and Oaxaca, there is less awareness and solidarity with the peoples of Guerrero.

Guerrero, a state rich in resources, is 17% indigenous and includes the most marginalized area of Mexico where the people face poverty, migration, violence and militarization. These conditions threaten indigenous and *campesino* rights to live on and maintain their traditional land and to participate in decisions impacting their daily lives. Most indigenous people live in the mountain region where nearly 80% do not earn an income and over 80% of the housing has dirt floors with no running water. Illiteracy runs 50% to 70% in indigenous communities where 45% (mostly women) never attend school. Malnutrition is high and medical services few.

The delegation focused on four areas of repression of the rights of the people: the proposed La Parota Dam, militarization, the right to maintain indigenous traditions, and migration both within and beyond Mexico. We focused on the violence and repression used to close the social space for dialogue

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and participation of the people in decisions which impact their lives.

The indigenous peoples view land as sacred and land ownership is collective. This vision is in conflict with the commercial vision that reduces land value to its resources or material value and privatizes property. This conflict of land visions and the desire of the authorities to maintain control set the stage for violence.

Our delegation began in more wealthy and commercial Acapulco, then traveled east to the Costa Chica and north through the *montañas*. After an orientation to the issues we met with over 30 *campesinos* at a road block established to prevent government access to the roads into their *ejido* (communal) lands where the Federal Electrical Commission (CFE) has been planning to build La Parota hydroelectric dam since the 1970's. Although the law requires the government to get the community's agreement before expropriating communal land, the planning process was hidden from the people until the government built roads into the area in 2003. As heavy equipment began moving in, the people learned of the dam which would flood 13 communities, displacing about 25,000 people and drain water resources from another 70,000.

The dam would create electricity for big cities and tourist centers, *maquiladoras*, and hook into the electrical grid of the southern United States. Development benefiting the local people is not in the plan. The people say that taking the *campesino* off the land is like taking a fish out of water so it's a "Dam of Death."

We visited the blockade, people shared their struggle including the governments' refusal to share information about the real impacts of the project like the fact that the new clinic being built would actually be under water when the dam was finished. To get the required legal 'consensus' the government held rigged meetings where pro-dam votes were bought, the dead and people not living locally voted, and those in opposition were



Photo: Camilla Schneider

These women are part of the road block that prevents government access to their land.

deliberately excluded. Even though the courts ruled these signatures invalid, the state refuses to accept the 'no' vote of a more legitimate community meeting.

At Xochistlahuaca the delegation met with members of the Me'phaa community at the Ñomndaa community radio they established in 2004. Struggling for freedom of expression, they claim their right to have a radio station that helps express and maintain their culture, customs, heritage and rights as indigenous.

The staff was enthusiastic and dedicated. They expressed that the Mexican Constitution does not recognize them as a people capable of thinking and feeling - that they're regarded as objects of interest not legal subjects. "Thus others decide how we should live without regard to the richness of our way of life, a way of understanding our lives and our respect for culture." They said the struggle is "not about letting us transmit, it's about letting us live."

Without a state license, and being in disfavor with the local cacique, they are under great pressure to shut down. David, a coordinator of the station, said accusations involving kidnapping were brought against him to intimidate the station. The station has survived many attempts to shut it down. They expect further repression and indeed after our visit, on July 10, 2008, thirty agents of the Federal Investigation Agency burst into the booth damaging the computer and transmitter. Three hundred people defended the sta-

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Venezuela Solidarity Symposium

By Marc Becker, *Latin America*
historian, based in Madison Wisconsin

Ed. Note: *The Venezuela Solidarity Network* (www.vensolidarity.net) sponsored the symposium.

Leading academic scholars and grassroots activists gathered at historic Howard University in Washington, DC, from April 18-20 for the national symposium "What's Up With Venezuela: Participatory Democracy or Democracy as Usual?" The meeting provided an opportunity for 200 solidarity activists from across the United States to study the revolutionary changes sweeping through Venezuela.

A principal theme that ran throughout the symposium was that the Bolivarian Revolution is not a movement built around one person. James Early, Director of Cultural Heritage Policy at the Smithsonian Institution said, "Chávez is not the revolution, but a conduit for it." Supreme Court justice Fernando Vegas explained institutional divisions of power in Venezuela to make his point that Chávez is not a dictator and does not control everything in the country.

Instead of emphasizing Chávez's role, most of the presenters stressed the importance of constructing a participatory and protagonistic democracy to build new relations between the government and popular organizations. "Democracy is not just formal institutions," labor leader Gonzalo Gomez with the National Union of Workers (UNT) said, "but also the mobilization of people." Venezuela Solidarity Network organizer James Jordan argued that participatory democracy begins with organizing at the grassroots level.

While the presenters defended Chávez, they did not give him their uncritical and unqualified support. Gomez argued that much of the positive progress that has been made in Venezuela is not due to Chávez's leadership, but from dedicated activists pushing him in a leftward direction.

Jorge Guerrero, Venezuelan Consul in New Orleans, explained the growing role of communal councils that are leading toward self government. In the future, Guerrero predicated, they would not need mayors because people will solve their own problems. Julio Chávez, the mayor of Torres, Venezuela, said that he was one of those working to realize that goal. "How can they accuse of us being au-

thoritarian and centralist," Chávez asked, "when we are giving power to the people?"

The communal councils are only one example of the many fundamental transformations in Venezuela. Antonio Gonzalez from the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project noted that Venezuela's wedding of multi-party, participatory elections with a socialistic redistributive process is rather unique. This has led to success for the Bolivarian Revolution.

Although there have been significant advances, there are still numerous bureaucrats from previous governments who are still in positions of power. Perhaps more dangerous are political opportunists who paint themselves as Chavistas, but are not ideologically committed to the Bolivarian Revolution. Increasingly, however, career diplomats and government bureaucrats are being replaced by movement activists who are committed to pushing the country toward socialism.

In addition, institutional interests can also place a break on revolutionary change. The Venezuelan Embassy's Labor Attaché Marcos García emphasized that leftward pressure comes from people (workers) rather than institutions (labor unions) that too often become bogged down in bureaucratic concerns. Social movements are important so that the government does not sell out a revolutionary and socialist project. Gonzalo Gomez called these social movements the "motor of the revolution."

Clara Herrera from Venezuela's Central University observed that Chávez is just the tip of the iceberg of changes sweeping through the country as people become increasingly energized through grassroots popular movements. Omar Sierra and Jorge Guerrero from the Boston and New Orleans consulates discussed the roles of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants in the Bolivarian Revolution. Sierra said that changes in Venezuela are not the will of only one man, but the result of 500 years of Indigenous struggle.

Guerrero presented Chávez as a tool that embodies the hopes and aspirations of historically oppressed and excluded peoples to build a new protagonistic and participatory system. Imperialists are opposed to the Venezuelan government because it has allied with the downtrodden. This extends to international policies, as Venezuela has significantly expanded its diplomatic relations with Africa and the Caribbean. For example, students from

Mali are studying textile manufacturing in Venezuela so that they can help their country gain value from cotton production rather than exporting the raw materials.

Miguel Rodríguez, Vice-Minister for the Environment, discussed the challenges of attempting to improve standards of living while still preserving the environment. Venezuela is energy rich, and seeks to develop a sustainable economy. Although as a petroleum exporter gasoline is cheap, the government has emphasized public transit and produces most of its electricity from hydroelectric dams. Furthermore, the government emphasizes conservation as a way to meet peoples' needs. "Socialism of the twenty-first century has to be ecological," Rodríguez said, "and it also has to be materially possible."

The US government and mainstream media, both in Venezuela and internationally, have engaged in a relentless disinformation campaign against the Bolivarian Revolution. Steve Ellner said that the hostility has little to do with Chávez's style, but rather his economic and social policies. In Venezuela, the intransigent opposition to Chávez is based on conservative support for neoliberal policies that advocate shifting resources from the poor and marginalized and back towards the wealthy and privileged elite.

Without a popular media, Gonzalo Gomez said, a participatory and protagonistic democracy will not be possible. This does not happen automatically, but we need to get people accustomed to using these tools. The Venezuelan government has facilitated a move in this direction by creating spaces for community radio. Journalist and sociologist Greg Wilpert positioned himself as a free speech advocate, and argued that the media is too important to be held in private hands that respond to corporate interests. Rather, public accountability is important to democratize the means of communication.

Venezuelan lawyer José Pertierra pointed to the hypocrisy in US attempts to classify Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism. While there is no evidence that Venezuela sponsors or engages in terrorism, the US military is in the midst of its own torture scandals. More blatant is the case of Luis Posada Carrilles who blew up a Cuban airliner in 1976 as it left Venezuela. Not only was Posada Carrilles a CIA operative, he also currently lives freely in the US. Refusals to extradite him to Venezuela mean that the US supports terrorism. ●

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tion by surrounding it until the agents left.

In San Luis Actalan another expression of the indigenous community claiming their rights was La Policia Comunitaria or Community Police, an indigenous committee formed according to “*usos y costumbres*” (traditions) to respond to local crime. Compared to the punishment based system of the U S, the indigenous approach is to have the perpetrator of the crime give time to community projects for recompense. One of them said that, while a US prisoner sits in jail, their system is more demanding as the perpetrator works for the community in the hot sun building a school or other project as determined by that community. The state uses intimidation to oppose this effort by accusing the Community Police of ‘kidnaping’ when they arrest a local indigenous person who has committed a crime.

At Ayutla we learned of the militarization of the struggle and links to US funding of the Mexican military and U S Army training. The government uses guerrillas and drug trafficking as its public rationale for militarization when the people felt it really was intended to close the space for public dialogue of social issues through fear, violence and bribery, including rapes of women with impunity for the aggressors. In 2002, Valentina was raped by the military, which confiscated meat from a cow her husband had just killed, accusing them of stealing it. Her brother was recently killed. Another victim of rape, Inez was gang raped by soldiers while washing clothes at the river and was denied care at the hospital because the staff didn’t want trouble with the military. With no possibility of justice from the military, these women have filed their cases with the UN Human Rights Commission and continue to suffer intimidation.

A fourth issue was that of immigration both external and internal. Viewing the poverty and barren land one comes face to face with the reality that, for many, there is only immigration, growing drugs, or slow death. Whole families immigrate seasonally within Mexico where multinational corporations use labor from Guerrero to grow crops, 90% of which go the U. S. and Canada. Others, risking their lives, cross the U S border. Both types of immigration leave villages nearly empty or populated with women, children and elderly. With hunger pushing them, migration is the only option for survival for the 73,000 who migrate to the

United States annually.

In Chilpancingo we met with Armando Chavarria Barrera, *El secretario general del Gobierno*, who immediately took control of the dialogue by explaining that the government’s justification for its actions lay in the violence of the resistance and that the government was not going to impose a plan for the dam if the people didn’t want it. He seemed to think that we would see things his way if he phrased them as issues of legality. However, Marina Pages, our spokesperson, ably represented us with questions reflecting our concerns about the consistent human rights violations. As the vice-governor had allowed his press ‘friends’ to be present, our visit engendered much publicity in the local newspapers.

Throughout many meetings we heard over and over that Guerrero is a very militarized state with violence, false arrests, repression and intimidation used to stop legitimate social dialogue on issues defining the life of

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day walk through the desert, to Tucson. Altar has profited immensely from the migrant economy. Once not much more than a cow town, it has doubled in size in the last 10 years, providing lodging, food, transport and coyote guides to migrants. In the town square, migrants gather to find a coyote. Stores surrounding the square sell backpacks and water bottles.

Migrants are also known as ‘chickens’ and the coyotes that lead them as ‘*polleros*’. The migrants stay in cheap and rudimentary hospitality houses in Altar and are at the mercy of their guides, literally placing their lives in their hands. A coyote can cost as much as \$3000 US. The town has an impression of lawlessness; certainly there is no visible sign of police. A well controlled system of hundreds of numbered vans and buses regularly make the trip to Sasabe. The cost is approximately 70 pesos. Armed, masked men reportedly control the road, and traveling without their protection is extremely dangerous.

The official figure is that 500 people a year die trying to cross the desert, but it’s probable that only one third of the dead are found, as a body can decompose and disappear within 10 days in this environment. Causes of documented death include exposure, hypothermia and the victims of gangs

the more marginalized people. People trying to engage in dialogue are called terrorists. Governmental actions are designed to keep the government and other authorities in control of a struggle that on the surface may be described as legality over legitimacy but at its core is anything but legal.

The delegation’s conclusion recognized a pattern of marginalization and poverty with the great crime of the people being that of defending their rights. They say that “the government isn’t worried about them,” rather it is there “to help the corporations and so tries to destroy us.” It is a huge struggle for a people who can’t read to defend their rights yet they say that “having taken on this history of pride, of our roots, we will defend our land.” It is important to them that international organizations also denounce the government’s violence; our solidarity is surely needed.

Source: *Tlachinollan Human Rights Center of the Montaña, Guerrero*

that rob them of the little they are carrying, often leaving them with nothing and, sometimes dead. Coyotes mislead their chickens into believing that the journey will only take a few hours, and not three to five days of strenuous walking through intense heat with only the water they can carry.

Crossing the border was not always such a daunting, dangerous task. In the early 1990’s the San Diego and El Paso sectors of the border were the busiest. Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, begun in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper, in San Diego, provided added patrols and checkpoints to those sectors and in effect, funneled the migrant traffic through this southwest desert area, perceived by most to be too difficult to cross by foot or vehicle due to the rugged terrain and desert.

NAFTA was supposed to reduce immigration by bolstering Mexico’s Gross Domestic Product (a standard of living measurement) with free trade initiatives. According to a report by The Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “It was ebulliently predicted by these incorrigible NAFTA optimists that by approximately 2024, Mexican GDP per capita would be half that of the United States and through trade liberalization policies, immigration would no longer occur in such high volumes as to create concerns.” In actuality, GDP in Mexico was less than one quarter that of the US in 2006 and as a result of NAFTA migration to the US has greatly increased since 1994. ●

PARAGUAY: Historic Election Ends Colorado's 60 Year Rule

By George Friemoth, Task Force on the Americas

After 61 years of power, the Colorado Party of Paraguay lost the presidency to a progressive former Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo in a landslide victory on April 20. The loss ended the longest continuous run in power of any political party in the world and includes the 35-year dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1954 – 1989).

Without fanfare President-elect Lugo said simply, "Today we can affirm that the little ones are also qualified to win." Known as "the Bishop of the Poor" by his supporters and "the Red Bishop" by his right-wing opponents, he formed a coalition made up of 10 political parties, mostly left or center-left, 20 social organizations, trade unions, small farmer and indigenous associations.

Lugo's appeal was that he was not seen as a politician, but rather as a religious man who had a genuine concern for the poor, untainted by political corruption, greed, or self interest. He ran as a candidate on three central policies that were unprecedented and clearly resonated with many Paraguayans: anti-corruption; social reform in favor of the poor that included poverty-reduction and bold land reform measures, and a strong stand in favor of national sovereignty.

While his first policy against corruption was not new, nevertheless it was effective given the Colorado Party's discredited image. His land or agrarian reform program was most significant because it addressed Paraguay's highly unequal distribution of lands that, after Bolivia, is the second most unequal country in Latin America, where 40% live in poverty and 20% in absolute poverty. His appeal to national sovereignty entailed a strong commitment to renegotiate the Itaipú and Yacyretá hydroelectric dam projects with Brazil and Argentina respectively. He argued that Paraguay's larger neighbors were involved in unjust fiscal practices. His argument struck a strong chord among Paraguayans and received an almost national consensus. These three policies permitted Lugo to present himself as a fundamentally different candidate who offered a new way for social and economic change.

His chief opponent in the presidential race was the Colorado Party's candidate Blanca Ovelar, the first woman presidential

aspirant in Paraguay's history. His other opponent was former General Lino Oviedo, a former presidential hopeful from the old right who gained fame in Paraguay by participating in the uprising that overthrew Stroessner. Lugo won with 41% of the vote, far higher than polls had predicted. Blanca Ovelar won 31%, while the populist ex-general came in third with 22%.



Fernando Lugo, newly elected president of Paraguay

When election results were announced the capitol of Paraguay exploded with fireworks and thousands of people were in the streets of downtown Asunción sharing, embracing, reveling, hugging, smothering each other in kisses, and dancing until wee hours in the morning.

On the international front, Lugo's electoral victory put long-forgotten Paraguay in the limelight. It confirmed once again the continuing trend of electing left or center left governments in Latin America. While world leaders applauded Paraguayans for finally breaking with the past, Washington was hard pressed to deal with yet another country that opposes its neoliberal policies. The State Department's favored candidate, a staunch supporter of the US lost early in the primary elections – the US Ambassador was slow in congratulating Lugo.

As president, Lugo faces huge and very difficult tasks. First of all, his alliance has only minority representation in Congress, meaning his reform will depend on cooperation from conservative groups in Congress.

The 1992 Constitution gave extensive power to Congress, at the expense of the executive. Secondly, his land or agrarian reform, a central part of his electoral campaign and poverty reduction strategy will be challenged not only by Paraguay's gargantuan agro-industry but also by multi-national agro-producers like Monsanto, Dupont, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland and others, who gain more and more stake in the production of soy, corn, wheat, sunflower and rapeseed.

Paraguay is the world's fourth largest exporter of soybeans. The vast majority of Paraguayan farmers have been literally poisoned off their land either intentionally or as a side effect of more than 24 million liters of hazardous pesticides dumped by soy cultivation every year. When farmers saw their animals die, their crops wither, sick families and contaminated wells, most packed up and moved to the city.

While Fernando Lugo represents change from the Colorado's long rule, many Paraguayans view him as a long-awaited step in the right direction but not as a radical heir to the Liberation Theology movement or like leftist leaders being elected across Latin America. He is seen as a centrist, who finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being a radical alternative to the 60 year Colorado rule. In fact, when his chief opponent Blanca Ovelar's popularity was on the rise last September, Lugo said he could work with her as a vice president or vice versa. He is proof that to be considered a "leftist" in Paraguay only requires having political views that are "less right."

In summing up, president-elect Lugo has a herculean task on his hands in confronting powerful political and economic vested interests in Paraguay and abroad. But his strength lies in widespread political support, high political capital and a popular mandate to address his country's indefensible inequalities and corruption and fulfill some of his campaign promises. He has already established a good working relationship with Venezuela president Hugo Chavez.

Source: "Dissecting the Politics of Paraguay's next President" by April Howard and Benjamin Dengl, *Upside Down World*, 10 April 2008; "New Era for Paraguay" by Peter Lambert, *NACLA*, July/August 2008

BOLIVIA: Revolution on Hold

By *Andres Lyubarsky, Columbia University*

When Evo Morales was elected the first indigenous president of Bolivia in 2005, he swept to power with a huge and unprecedented popular mandate, crushing his nearest opponent by a 25-point margin. The country's traditional political classes were discredited and divided after the failures of twenty years of neoliberalism to produce much except misery for the majority of Bolivians. The *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) was a formerly revolutionary party responsible for the nationalization of Bolivia's mines and a 1950s era land reform that destroyed the hacienda system in the Andean sections of Bolivia; but later the party became the main technocratic engineer of neoliberal reform, had been bathed in blood and polled less than ten percent. Just two years earlier, the party had produced almost 90 deaths in repression of demonstrations under the presidency of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who subsequently had to flee to exile in the United States. The main right-wing opposition party, *Poder Democrático y Social* (PODEMOS) consisted of the remnants of the political movement of General Hugo Banzer, a 1970s era dictator whose brief democratic return to power was marked by repression of coca growers and social movements fighting against water privatization. In addition to pursuing unpopular policies, they had to cope with the legacy of military rule that had usurped the popular will of Bolivian democracy.

The ideological hegemony of neoliberalism had been broken, although its actual structures and regulating structures remained operational. No longer was there a broad consensus in Bolivian society that the "tough medicine" of privatization, trade liberalization, flexibilization of the labor market, and gutting of the social welfare state was the necessary price to pay in the changing global economy. Morales' *Movimiento a Socialismo* (MAS) strode boldly into this vacuum, promising a new kind of politics that would recuperate the resources that were systematically sold to foreign investors in the last twenty years and place the focus on the indigenous and economically disadvantaged majority of the country. The movement, with strong roots

in the popular movements that had flourished in the resistance to the preceding right-wing governments, would seek to revalorize Bolivian culture in the context of a political project opposed to what Morales called a "savage capitalism" imposed by the United States.

As part of his new popular politics, Evo cut his own salary by 57% and demanded a similar austerity from MAS politicians. In January 2006, he undertook an expansive world tour, meeting with leaders of major European, Asian, and African powers and working to drum up alternative investment sources to lessen the country's historical dependency on the United States. He began to flex his political muscle, declaring on May Day that all foreign national gas companies would have to renegotiate their contracts, granting vastly increased proceeds and control to the Bolivian state. In August of that year, he convoked the Constituent Assembly, charged with the lofty task of rewriting the Constitution. While the opposition fought his every step, the MAS government had achieved clear popular support for their policies. What seemed impossible only a couple years before seemed to be coming into reality – Bolivia was on the brink of a radical social change that would begin to address the historic inequalities of the country's social structure.

Two years later, Evo Morales cannot travel to five of the country's nine departments for fear for his personal security. The constitutional project that was the centerpiece of his administration has fallen into question, with the right-wing line that it does not represent a genuine social contract achieving wide credence among middle-class sectors that had previously

been receptive to the Morales message. "Evo murderer" and "Evo dictator" graffiti dot the streets of middle-class neighborhoods throughout the country, even outside the main center of opposition to his government in Santa Cruz.

Morales has called for a referendum on his presidency, as well as the governors in Bolivia's departments on August 10. Although the faithful allegiance of popular sectors allow for the stability of the government itself and make an electoral defeat extremely unlikely, the mandate that MAS had to transform Bolivian society has effectively evaporated. Popular discourse is no longer about social change and alternative economic models – it is about an elite-driven departmental autonomy movement that has successfully cast the government as authoritarian, arbitrary and centralist in order to stop its proposals for social change that would challenge their political power and economic status.

There is no doubt that hope remains that the Morales government will be able to prevail in the current crisis, regain the popular support it once had, and continue with the historical mission it was elected to fulfill. However, despite the declarations of officials and MAS loyalists, the process is unmistakably stalled and losing momentum to a right-wing regionalist populist resurgence. The manner in which this happened, offers a lot of lessons for leftist social movements globally – moving from *protesta* to *propuesta*, from an oppositional stance towards a proactive governing body, can be tremendously problematic.

Readers can access the complete article at: www.Zcommunications.org/Znet, 7/1/08

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NICARAGUAN POLITICS

By Roger Stoll, Task Force on the Americas

This past May, a delegation of the Task Force on the Americas and the Nicaraguan Center for Community Action (NICCA) visited Nicaragua to try to learn what has and has not changed in Nicaragua since the November 2006 electoral victory of President Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista Party (FSLN).

We found Nicaragua still the second poorest country in the hemisphere. Wealth distribution is among the most unequal in the world. In the capital city Managua, beggars of all ages walk the streets. This society of poverty and exploitation has been carefully constructed, from colonial days to neoliberalism. The construction of poverty was briefly interrupted by the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, which ended the kleptocratic dynasty begun fifty years earlier when US Marines crushed Augusto Sandino's peasant rebellion and installed Anastasio Somoza I.

The Sandinista government of the 1980s began health, education, housing and land redistribution programs. Rates of infant and maternal mortality dropped and illiteracy fell from 51% to 13%. But US intervention, which began even before the revolution, culminated in the Contra War in which a US-

backed mercenary army targeted civilians, schools, health clinics, and peasant collectives, ultimately taking 50,000 lives.

In Nicaragua's 1990 elections, the US told the country that should the Sandinistas be reelected, more war and possible invasion by US troops would follow. War-weary Nicaragua elected the US-backed opposition. During the next 16 years virtually everything was privatized under "structural adjustment" programs compelled by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Life expectancy dropped by seven years and school enrollment plummeted, as did other social indicators.

The 2006 victory of Ortega and the FSLN is a defeat for the US, which had backed the opposition, even threatening to expel Nicaraguan residents from the US and halt their remittances if the FSLN won.

The new government has departed significantly from past policies. The budget of Nicaragua's public health ministry (MINSa) has been increased, along with health care worker salaries. Health education, childhood vaccination, mosquito abatement and water treatment have all been expanded. But the most significant change is that health care, when accessible, is now free.

Education through secondary school is also free now, funded through the national

education ministry (MINED). Enrollment has vastly increased. Public sector wages, including the wages of doctors, nurses and teachers, have been raised 16% above IMF mandates. The minimum wage has been increased 33%.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAGFOR) has launched two new government programs called "Zero Hunger" and "Zero Usury" to finance and support 170,000 new small farmers to grow staples for domestic consumption. The government has also expanded programs to distribute food at subsidized prices, construct housing for the poor, and reforest the countryside.

In international relations the new government has tried to move toward independence, and solidarity with Latin America and the Caribbean nations. In 2007 Nicaragua joined the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), an organization launched by Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela to promote fair trade, unity and solidarity among member countries. It is intended to counter so-called "free trade." Through ALBA, Venezuela has canceled Nicaragua's \$32US million debt, agreed to meet Nicaragua's oil and gas needs and build the country an oil refinery, all on terms generous to Nicaragua.

In response to the March 1st US-Colombia attack inside Ecuador on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the new government sharply distinguished itself from previous administrations. It gave protection to two guerillas and political asylum to a Mexican student, three survivors of the assault, and joined numerous Latin American governments in condemning Colombia's aggression.

Nicaragua announced it may stop sending military officers to the infamous School of the Americas/Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (SOA/WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia. And Nicaragua has joined Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina in rejecting the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declaration on the global food crisis. The six nations complain the declaration fails to mention subsidized agriculture in the US, EU and Japan, neoliberal policies, or food used for biofuel – all causes of a collapse of agriculture in Central America, the Caribbean and the Andes, resulting in dependence on imported food.



Photo: Carlos Porrata
Carlos Porrata (left), Don Fausto, Doña Mercedes and George Friemoth enjoying their 20-year reunion in Chompipe, Nicaragua.

Nicaragua, continued from page 7

Yet these accomplishments of the new government have not transformed Nicaraguan society or significantly reduced widespread poverty and insecurity, and critics say pacts and accommodations with parties of the right have radically transformed the once-revolutionary FSLN.

Under a 1999 pact with the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) the FSLN has collaborated in passing CAFTA-DR (the US-backed "free trade" law) and, shockingly, a ban on therapeutic abortion. The FSLN agreed to US efforts to make Nicaragua an "immigration barrier" and to collaborate with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), historically a tool of US intervention.

Unsurprisingly the FSLN has been denounced by the Nicaraguan left, including many FSLN members. Still these same critics generally praise the changes in health care and education as steps in the right direction, however small and flawed in execution.

Our delegation met with four members of the teachers union who agreed with the government's intent of getting every child into school, yet the schools remain woefully underfunded and understaffed. Even pre-school classes have as many as sixty students, and the teachers reported that the elimination of fees discouraged parental involvement in the schools. Poverty and unemployment remain an attendance-barrier to many children: older children often stay home to care for younger siblings while their parents seek work.

Critics note that most of the financial benefit of the ALBA-Venezuela oil contract will accrue to private enterprise, since the infrastructure to store and distribute oil and gas was privatized under past governments.

Many have criticized the top down style of the FSLN, citing for example the Councils of Citizen Power (CPC's), ostensibly a way to bring people into local decision-making processes but in practice headed by party appointees who view many grassroots activists as opponents.

Controversy surrounds the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), which postponed 2008 elections in three municipalities devastated by Hurricane Felix in 2007. As of late spring in the municipalities, most of the population still lacked housing; election registers were lost or damaged and many voting ID cards were lost. Three opposition parties objected to the decision.

A second controversy attends the CSE's decision to disqualify the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) and the Conservative Party (PC) from the November elections based on new rules designed to eliminate the smallest parties from elections. On June 27, 2008 the MRS, PC and twelve civil society organizations marched in Managua in protest of the CSE decision and what some have called "the Ortega dictatorship." The decertification of the PC and MRS has drawn criticism from officials of the US, EU, World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, and from well-known international writers and activists Noam Chomsky, Eduardo Galeano and others.

Among the sharpest left critics of the FSLN are supporters of the MRS, which holds five seats in the 92-member National Assembly. This party includes some of the most well-known leaders of the guerilla struggle and the revolutionary government of the 1980s: Monica Baltodano, Ernesto Cardenal, Carlos Mejia Godoy, Sergio Ramirez, and Dora Maria Tzllez. The MRS has occasionally joined parties of the right in protests and legislative action, even when these formations received the backing of the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a well-known tool of US intervention.

Most social movement activists and NGO workers we met agreed with much MRS criticism of the FSLN and respected its leaders. But few supported the MRS electorally, and they noted that it had little support outside the larger cities.

We met a number of representatives and supporters of the FSLN, all with distinguished histories during the revolutionary period and the Contra War. They acknowledged the limitations of FSLN government but blamed the party's support for the abortion law, free trade agreements, and other backward steps on right wing forces with which the FSLN has had to contend. The changes in health care were acknowledged to be merely a beginning. The education reforms were considered insufficient, but in the words of a MINED official we met, "A year and a half is not enough time to undo sixteen years of neoliberalism."

Dorothy Granada, a nurse with the women's clinic at Mulukuku, told us that while the abortion ban was certainly undesirable it made little practical difference, since for the vast majority of women legal abortion

had already been unattainable in Nicaragua.

As for the CSE decisions, an FSLN mayoral candidate in a rural district said that hurricane damage justified the election postponement; decertification of the MRS and the PC was also necessary since in the past, when twenty-five parties had participated in elections, there was chaos not democracy.

One FSLN supporter, though critical of the party, noted that the capitulation of the FSLN (e.g., CAFTA-DR and the abortion law) was part of the sixteen year struggle to win elections, and on balance it was better that the FSLN and not the PLC had won the 2006 elections. He also noted that the new government has had to contend with the oil and food crises, the hurricane and geopolitical realities.

Similarly, the FSLN mayoral candidate emphasized the constraints placed on the party and the government by the global political and economic context and sixteen years of privatizations that had enriched and empowered Nicaragua's elite. This point seems well-taken. One could add that the global context is enforced militarily by the US, UN and other alliances, and through US destabilization operations, election interference, coups and economic sabotage.

And so Nicaraguans remain poor and ill-served by their political structures. Contrast the 1980s, when Nicaragua had a popular government with the power to govern with the view that the reason for government is to bring economic security and social development to all.

But the balance of power in the world was different then, as a recent revelation from government archives in Germany shows. In June the press reported that in the 1980s the Stasi intelligence service of the GDR (East Germany) had uncovered Pentagon plans for an invasion of Nicaragua in 1984 with 50,000 US troops. Accordingly, the USSR's KGB intelligence service assured the Nicaraguan government of Soviet support in the event of a US invasion. US troops never invaded.

This international balance of power still offered some degree of political space in the 1980s in which Nicaragua could begin to transform itself. This raises a crucial question: not whether the FSLN, the MRS or some other party can effect necessary and fundamental social transformation, but whether a people subjugated by the global system have any electoral answer at all.

Source: www.nicanet.org

What Really Happened in Colombia?

By Clifton Ross, writer and director of the 2008 documentary, "Venezuela: Revolution from the Inside Out"

What drew me to the Sunday edition of *Diario Vea* wasn't just the headline "Venezuela will never again be a colony of anyone" and a cover photo of women soldiers in full uniform, wearing make-up and carrying bazookas on their shoulders. I confess to a weakness for strong women and this was so very Venezuelan: The women, demonstrating the strength of the nation, nevertheless didn't neglect putting on eyeliner, eye shadow and lip gloss. And for me the clincher was the woman in the middle of the photo, looking over her bazooka at the camera and smiling widely, as if to say, "Even in war we won't lose our warmth or our sense of humor." But if you spend any time at all in Venezuela it's hard to avoid that conclusion.

I was trying to catch a bus to Tabay, just a half hour outside of Merida, and I didn't want to carry the Sunday tomes the other papers offered with glossy mags and advertisements stuffed inside what is essentially a fluffy journalistic taco. *Diario Vea* is dependably lightweight on Sundays as it carries no advertising other than the lackluster government ads that seem to be the paper's major source of income. *Vea*, as its known, is a left paper run by Guillermo García Ponce, rumored to be an old Communist who has lined up behind Chávez. Indeed, *Vea* is the only pro-government paper available in Venezuela, and that was the real reason I wanted to read *Diario Vea* today. Experience has taught me that US media shows and government lies broadcast as gospel have a life of maximum one week before reality bleeds through the cell doors where it's locked away and tortured by those same media conglomerates and lying government. Keep in mind that five or so corporations control 90% of all we hear, see, read and, ultimately, therefore, think. Those five corporations form our opinions for that crucial first week after a story, which is about when the alternative media, like *Diario Vea*, have a chance to pick up the real story and get at the truth concealed by the "facts."

Such has been the case this week in the wake of the "dramatic rescue" of Ingrid Betancourt, the three US mercenaries and ten or so soldiers and police flown by heli-

copter into Bogotá while US presidential candidate John McCain coincidentally toured the country. The whole event, even as broadcast here in Venezuela on government television stations, had the look and feel of an event staged for the screen and today's *Diario Vea* points out that the reason was because it was, indeed, an event staged for the screen and the "facts," which remain unacknowledged by the mainstream press in the US and Colombia, tell a very different story from the media's fairy tale version of the event.

In reality, French and Swiss negotiators, acting on behalf of the Colombian government arranged the release of the hostages with the FARC. The Colombian government secretly paid the FARC \$20 million in exchange for the release of Ingrid Betancourt, the three US "contractors" and other Colombian citizens. This story was broken by *Mediapart* in France and *Radio Suisse Romande*. *Mediapart* also reported that France and Colombia guaranteed safe asylum in France for some members of the FARC as part of the deal. This confirmed what Colombian Senator Piedad Córdoba said on June 3, a month earlier. She said that the government of Colombia was negotiating a deal with the FARC to trade money for the release of Betancourt and the US mercenaries.

The story entitled, "There was no such rescue but a media show" that appeared in today's *Diario Vea* was drawn from the work of Bolivarian Press Agency writer Narciso Isa Conde and the Popular News Agency of Venezuela. According to the article the FARC had agreed to turn over Ingrid Betancourt and the other hostages to Swiss and French negotiators who agreed to arrange to pick up the hostages from various locations in two helicopters. The Colombian military got wind of the upcoming release and took control of the helicopters. The collusion of the US in the media spin, while yet to be proven, is quite likely, especially since McCain just "happened" to be in the neighborhood and would be able to take the spotlight in a crassly opportunistic attempt to boost his pathetic presidential campaign.

And so the "rescue" ironically turned out to be a hostage taking in reverse in which the FARC's goodwill gesture was

blindsided for the glorification of the paramilitary, drug-dealing President Uribe and his friend, John McCain, as the armed forces of Colombia seized two civilian helicopters full of prisoners, who had, in fact, been released, and not "rescued." But presidential vanity wasn't the only thing behind this media show. The mainstream media leaked what may have been the major motives. In the July 5 edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, Bennett Roth writes in a story entitled, "Hostage rescue (sic) will likely reinforce US ties," that the media show which Roth calls a commando operation, "will strengthen...security ties with the United States" and Colombia. The article quotes Riordan Roett of Johns Hopkins as saying that the non-event of the "rescue...validates to a great degree Plan Colombia."

In an AP story on the same page, a headline announces that, "Chavez [is] left on the sideline by the bold rescue," and that the Venezuelan leader, "could do little more than phone congratulations to President Uribe," as if Chávez's role as a world leader consisted only in his work to free the FARC hostages. The article ends with a statement by Betancourt that with, "the help of our neighbors the FARC could be shown that there's room in Latin America to win power the democratic way."

Excluded from the version edited by US and Colombian media are Betancourt's comments that she felt used by the while situation and that the operation put the lives of the prisoners at risk while a diplomatic solution, like the one pursued by President Chávez, would ensure their safety. Her press conference was broadcast in its entirety on the Latin American news network, *Telesur*, but only bits and pieces were shown on CNN, FOX news and other corporate news channels.

So much for the lessons about this "bold rescue" from the perspective of the US press and Ms. Betancourt. Colombians who have suffered terror and worse at the hands of the narco-government of Alvaro Uribe with his media shows and many other Latin Americans who have watched the civil war in Colombia for many years know otherwise. In this same issue of today's *Diario Vea* there is an exclusive interview with Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, "Gabino," the commander of the National Liberation Army,

Colombia deal is a bad one

By Arnie Alpert, New Hampshire program coordinator, American Friends Service Committee

Ed. Note: According to the United Workers' Federation of Colombia, in the last 20 years, 2,562 trade union activists have been assassinated in Colombia. So far in 2008 paramilitaries have as murdered 24 union members.

Supporters of a new trade agreement with Colombia have said that the deal would bolster efforts by the South American country to improve human rights and spur economic development, to the benefit of both countries. However, a closer look suggests that corruption and violence run so deeply within the Colombian government that any talk of "free trade" should be met with skepticism.

Colombia's political and economic climate is entrenched in deep inequalities. Decades of conflict with guerrilla groups, the rise of right-wing death squads tied to the military, and trafficking in illegal drugs contribute to widespread poverty in a country rich in natural resources.

Additionally, the Colombian government and army received \$6 billion, in mostly military U.S. aid since 2001, to "fight the war on drugs and terror" — despite the fact that both the government and military are closely linked to right-wing death squads that are responsible for most of the country's human rights abuses.

Furthermore, after seven years of anti-drug counterinsurgency aid, the "war" model clearly has failed. Production of cocaine is up.

Moreover, high-level corruption is part of a pattern of widespread human rights abuses. Today more than 60 members of the Colombian Congress are under investigation for ties to right wing death squads. Among them is President Alvaro Uribe's cousin, former Senator Mario Uribe Escobar, who was recently arrested. Former intelligence officer Rafael García, himself imprisoned for his role in covering up the criminal histories of paramilitary leaders, testified that members of the armed forces and government ministries, too, are enmeshed with the illegal militias.

Additionally, Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country for trade unionists, based on the number of assassinations that take place each year.

Arguments that the rate of political mur-

ders is on the decline are unconvincing. The National Labor College, based in Medellín, reported a "worrying increase in assassinations against unionized workers" which in the first three months of 2008 occurred at nearly twice the rate of the same period last year.

There is no reason to believe a trade agreement would improve the situation. To the contrary, an influx of duty-free agricultural products and increased pressure for production of cash crops for export will most likely force out small farmers, just as NAFTA did in Mexico. Farmers who cannot earn a livelihood will feel increased pressure to migrate or join the drug trade.

What Happened, continued from page 9

Colombia's other major guerrilla, composed of revolutionary Christians, Marxists and workers from the oil fields and others. He reminds readers of *Diario Vea* that the last time leftists laid down their arms and took up legal paths of political struggle, the Colombian state and oligarchy murdered six thousand militants, beheading the legal left of Colombia. For Gabino, Chávez can play a much greater role in the conflict as mediator, despite his recent calls for the Colombian guerrilla to what appears to be an unconditional surrender. "His declarations are no obstacle to his being a facilitator for peace in Colombia. His essential role as ruler and his status as leader on the continent haven't changed."

So far the US press, unfortunately including much of the alternative media, have largely gone along with the "official" version of events in Colombia, a story in which a "terrorist" guerrilla insurgency has plagued the country with irrational kidnappings, drug dealing and massive violence which can only be defeated by the combined forces of the U.S. and its faithful sidekick, the Colombian government.

Nevertheless, *Diario Vea* presents a very different picture of the country. As the interview with Gabino highlights, it is the paramilitaries, allied with the government and oligarchy of Colombia, that have been most involved in the drug trade and the violence, including kidnappings. Since Uribe has been in power, over four hundred union activists have been killed by those same forces. In defiance of international law, the Colombian military has bombed Ecuador to

In a country where nearly 4 million people have already been displaced by civil war, that is a recipe for instability, not security.

For Colombia, a trade agreement with the United States will make a bad situation even worse. For the United States, a trade deal with Colombia will add to economic insecurity at home with no boost for security abroad.

Source: *New Hampshire Business Review*, June 6, 2008; *Citizens Trade Campaign*, www.citizenstrade.org

ACTION: Urge Senators to co-sponsor the Trade Reform Act of 2008 (S.3083).

kill members of the FARC and the government still offers no guarantees of protection to a legal left. Hopefully in the future, media in the US will follow suit with *Diario Vea* and Venezuelan news agencies and do a more critical analysis of the joint fabrications of the US and Colombian governments.

Source: www.Counterpunch.org, 7/07/08; www.brazil.indymedia.org, 7/05/08



In Mexico, starving people are being driven from their land. In Haiti, people are eating dirt cookies (see previous newsletter for recipe). Benefit sale of art work, clothing and donated items. Call Marin Task Force member Doug Orcutt 415-488-9102 to donate tax deductible items or your yard for the sales.

HOME FRONT: Appeals Court Rules Against the Cuban Five

On June 5, a three-judge panel of the 11th US district Court of Appeals in Atlanta vacated the sentence of three of the Cuban five, including two serving life terms and returned the three cases to a federal judge in Miami for re-sentencing based on findings that the three men had gathered no classified information.

Two of the three-judge panel upheld the conspiracy to commit murder conviction. The panel voted 2-1 to affirm the life sentence for Gerardo Hernández, who was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in the deaths of four Miami-based pilots shot down by Cuban jets in 1996. The dissenting judge wrote that the government failed to present evidence sufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Hernández agreed to participate in a conspiracy to shoot down planes over international airspace.

The National Lawyers Guild believes that politics influenced this federal appeals court decision, in light of the fact that the Cuban five's mission was to gather information on Miami-based exile groups planning terrorist actions against their island nation.

In other news, 56 members of Canada's parliament signed a petition on July 11 demanding justice for the Cuban Five. "Nothing justifies keeping them behind bars"... "We cannot allow this extremely painful situation for these five Cubans and their families to drag on," the petition states. Canadians joined with 110 members of the British parliament, who denounced earlier the condition of isolation imposed on the Five and their irregular trial in Miami, Florida.

In addition, on June 19, the European Union agreed to lift the sanctions against Cuba. The sanctions consist of limiting governmental visits, reducing EU participation at cultural event in Cuba and inviting counter-revolutionaries to organized receptions in the EU. The sanctions were imposed in 2003 at the insistence of Spain's ex-president Jose Aznar, a close ally of George W. Bush. In addition to eliminating sanctions, the EU seeks to reactivate political dialogue with Cuba.

Source: *National Lawyers Guild press release, June 5, 2008; Granma International, July 11 and July 20, 2008*

HAITI: Victory for Massacre Victims

On May 16, a group of massacre survivors from one of Haiti's poorest neighborhoods gave the world a lesson in perseverance. After a 14-year fight for justice in Haitian and US courts, they collected \$400,000 in compensation for damages they suffered in the April 22, 1994 Raboteau Massacre. The victims' courage and insistence on formal justice should also be a lesson to their own government.

On April 22, 1994, the Haitian army and its thug allies descended on Raboteau before dawn. The neighborhood was the only community that continued to openly protest the overthrow of Haiti's democratic government in 1991. The attackers were determined to shut the neighborhood up, so they surrounded Raboteau by land and by sea. They ransacked houses, beat men, women and children, and shot at those who tried to flee. No one knows how many people were killed—relatives were prevented from recovering the bodies, so many washed out to sea, or were buried in shallow graves on the beach. But the survivors were terrified enough that the whole neighborhood, perhaps 4,000 people or more, fled.

The San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) filed two civil suits on behalf of the victims to recover over \$3 million of lottery proceeds won by former Haitian Colonel Carl Dorélien who fled to the US in 1994 after the massacre. The first lawsuit was filed in Miami Federal Court under the Alien Tort Statute, a law that has been used against human rights violators from El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina and other countries. The second case was filed in Florida State court to enforce the Haitian civil judgment.

Earlier in September 2000, a Haitian court convicted 53 Haitians, including the dictatorship's top leaders for murder and other crimes, committed during the 1994 Raboteau Massacre. The conviction of the leaders was in *absentia* as all the leaders fled to Panama, Honduras and the US ahead of the restoration in 1994. The court also delivered a civil judgment for a billion Haitian Gourdes (\$28US million today). The leaders are all subject to immediate arrest and to enforcement of the civil judgment. The six-week trial was broadcast on national television and radio, and the people

of Haiti saw and heard how the justice system could be used by the poor to defend their constitutional rights against the rich and powerful. International law experts viewed the Raboteau trial as "a huge step forward" for Haiti and "one of the most impartial human rights cases anywhere in the Americas."

Source: *Brian Concannon, Director, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), June 19, 2008* (www.Haitijustice.org)

BOLIVIA: Thousands Protest US Asylum

On June 9, several thousand protestors from El Alto marched into La Paz and surrounded the US Embassy. The mostly indigenous protestors demanded the return of ex-President "Goni" (Gonsalo Sanchez de Lozada) and former Minister of Defense Sánchez Berzain to Bolivia. Both men face charges of ordering the murder of 67 civilians over the 2003 "Black October" massacre.

The angry protestors, including many students from the National University of El Alto threw firecrackers over the wall of the Embassy, in an attempt to get their message through the gates and bashed in cars parked nearby. The National Police, wearing riot gear managed to secure the perimeter around the embassy and parked their security vehicles in front of the gates to prevent protestors from breaking through. In response, they threw rocks and firecrackers at the police. The protestors left the area after police began tear-gassing and spraying them with water cannons, but the tension remained.

The protest was sparked by a press release earlier on June 3 issued by Goni and Berzain's US lawyers who affirmed a Bush Administration finding that Berzain's application for asylum was credible and granted him refugee status, i.e. one who is unable or unwilling to return to Bolivia "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of...political opinion."

The press release stated that ex-president Goni had the full support of the US government in 2003 and enjoys that same support today. It argues further that the former president is also immune from prosecution as an ex-head of state.

The affirmations of strong US govern-

ment support for Goni and Berzain has rekindled resentment over past US intervention in Bolivia, and continuing frustrations among residents of El Alto (where the majority of the deaths occurred in 2003) about the lack of judicial consequences for the deaths.

An official Bolivian government request to the US for extradition of both former officials is still pending.

Source: *Andean Information Network*, June 10, 2008 (www.ain-bolivia.org)

GUATEMALA: Conviction in Río Negro Case

In May, a Guatemala Court found five former Civil Defense Patrollers (indigenous paramilitaries known as PACs) to be guilty

of 26 killings in the March 13, 1982 “Río Negro” massacre and sentenced them to life in prison. In Guatemala a life sentence is 30 years.

The main problem with the sentence is that the military created and backed the PACs who were poor Mayans themselves. They are the least of the guilty parties. They were forced to participate in the massacre by soldiers and Army lieutenants who were following orders given by their ranking officers all the way up to the generals. The ranking officer Colonel Solares who ordered the massacre and is named in the case has not been detained or tried; neither have any soldiers. An eyewitness to and survivor of the massacre said he would prefer that these men not go to jail, as they were following orders.

The intellectual authors of the massacre continue to have impunity, so have the

World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) that funded and developed the Chixoy River hydro-electric dam project. To this day, neither the WB nor the IDB have paid compensation or reparations for the forced evictions and massacre caused by their dam project. According to a UN study, a total of 74 adults and 107 children were killed; many of the women were forced to dance, some were raped and others were tortured before being slain. A few children were spared to work as virtual slaves of patrollers. The victims died for refusing to move from the site of the Chixoy dam project. Three paramilitaries were convicted earlier in May 2004 and warrants are outstanding on three others.

Source: *BBC, Rights Action*, June 1, 2008 (www.rightsaction.org); June 1, 2008

**2nd Hemispheric Gathering Against Militarization
October 3-5, 2008. La Esperanza, Honduras**

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