

# Report

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## Myrna Mack Case: Hope for Justice Prevails

*By Aura Aparicio*

Salvadoran Generals Found Guilty of Torture

By Jan Bauman, MITF

In a federal courtroom in Florida last July, two former Salvadoran generals were found responsible for torture, rape and other atrocities committed by military forces under their command. In a landmark case, General Jose Guillermo Garcia, El Salvador's Minister of Defense from 1979-1983, and General Eugenio Vides Casanova, Director General of the Salvadoran National Guard during the same period, were ordered to pay \$54.6 million to three Salvadoran plaintiffs, all of whom had been victims of gruesome torture inflicted by the US backed Salvadoran security forces.

Two years earlier, another Florida jury had cleared the two generals, both trained at the US Army School of the Americas, of complicity in the murder of four US churchwomen in El Salvador on December 2, 1980. In that case the jury was persuaded that the Reagan/Bush administration would not have supported the generals had they not been successfully carrying out US policy. Kurt Klaus, attorney for the generals, argued that, "These men were doing basically what the US government wanted them to do." In the second case, organized by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability, the plaintiff's legal team presented an impressive array of expert witnesses to document widespread patterns of torture and demonstrated that the generals refused to denounce, investigate or prosecute the torturers. Attorney James Green, one of two lead counsels for the plaintiffs, emphasized that the generals knew what their subordinates were doing. Green charged that the acts of terror carried out by the state, under the leadership of the generals,



*The author and Helen Mack. Photo: courtesy of Aura Aparicio*

were systematic and deliberate. Experts testified that both generals chose never to punish a single officer but, rather, promoted known human rights abusers while purging young officers who complained. Former US Ambassador to El Salvador, Edwin Corr, called as a witness for the generals, said that, "One would have had to be a dunce, blind or deaf not to have known." The jury also heard chilling testimony from the three Salvadorans, who now live in the US. Dr. Juan Ramagoza, from Usulután, was the first witness. While a medical student, Ramagoza and other students began a free medical clinic at the University of El Salvador where they treated the poor and survivors of torture. During his residency he witnessed the military enter the hospital to

kidnap one patient and gun down another.

On December 12, 1980, the day of the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Ramagoza and several other doctors and nurses went to offer their medical services in the small town of Santa Anita in Chalatenango. Two trucks bearing members of the National Guard and members of the army came into town. Without warning, the armed men began machine-gunning the crowd. Ramagoza was wounded in the head and foot, arrested and transferred to a helicopter, where his captors threatened to throw him out. Taken to a jail cell where he was stripped naked and chained spread-eagled to the floor, he suffered unspeakable torture for 22 days. Knowing he was a doctor, the torturers broke his arm and fingers, so that today he lacks normal function and movement in his hand. Blows to the head damaged his hearing. His last days in the National Guard headquarters were spent in a coffin. During his horrible ordeal, he was never charged with any crime, never brought before a judge or allowed to speak to anyone. When Ramagoza was finally released, he weighed only seventy pounds and was so weak that he had to be carried from prison by his uncle, a

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Myrna Mack, continued from page 1 member of the military. As he was carried out, he saw another uncle standing with Vides Casanova.

Ramagoza went into hiding after his release and could not receive medical care in a hospital. He treated himself, removing a bullet from his infected leg. He knew he had to leave El Salvador, and hiding in a truck full of onions, he fled to Guatemala and later made his way to the US where he was given political asylum. For several years Ramagoza lived in San Francisco and often demonstrated in front of the Salvadoran Consulate in San Francisco. His chilling testimony to members of MITF and other groups in the mid 1980s brought home the brutality of the US backed Salvadoran military.

Today Ramagoza is a US citizen and lives and works in Washington, DC, where he is Executive Director of the Clinica del Pueblo that serves the Salvadoran and other Latino communities. At the conclusion of his testimony, Ramagoza told the jury how one day his torturers told him that the "big boss" was coming to see him. From under his blindfold as he lay chained to the floor he could see the shiny boots, pants and special belt buckle of Vides Casanova, the man his captors also referred to as "my colonel." Showing no regard for Ramagoza's well being, Vides Casanova interrogated him about his uncles in the military. In the courtroom Ramagoza

identified the general as the man whose voice he had heard in his torture cell and the one he saw upon his release. In 1984, Ramagoza's sister, Morena, her husband and their two children also

## MITF Accompanier is in Guatemala

By Dale Sorensen, MITF

Thanks to your generosity, MITF began funding its first volunteer for the Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP) in late August. We are sharing the cost of a long-term accompanier with the Unitarian Universalist Central American Network in Seattle. Our volunteer is Kimberly Bush, a 62 year-old educator and writer who is fluent in Spanish. Kimberly has a wide range of experience in human rights work, both nationally and internationally. Here's how he described the work he'll be doing in Guatemala.

"Starting in September, I will be living in the *Ixil* region, the mountainous heart of *Quiché* Mayan country. Many massacres of indigenous peoples took place in this part of Guatemala in 1982-83; some of its current residents have agreed to be witnesses in a genocide trial against General Lucas Garcia and Efraim Rios Montt, President of Guatemala at the time. My job will be to accompany these witnesses as they and others in the country prepare for the trial. It's an amazing opportunity for me to learn about the Mayans by liv-

came to the Bay Area as refugees from the conflict. The sisters at the Dominican Convent in San Rafael gave them sanctuary and a home at the convent, where they lived for several years. Only recently was the family able to gain am-

Still and our hope is that we can help them. In his suit against the generals, Ramagoza was joined by Neris Gonzalez, a former church worker, and Carlos Mauricio, a former college professor, whose work with the poor led them to be accused by Salvadoran security forces of being leftist guerrillas.

The *Quiché* department, where our accompanier works, was the hardest hit during the Guatemalan civil war, with 344 massacres. In the *Vicente* on December 26, 1979, she had been working with the poor as a lay catechist with the local Catholic church. Despite the fact that Neris was eight months pregnant, the torturers did not spare her. She was subjected to electric shock, burned with cigarettes, cut over her body with razor blades, and repeatedly raped. At one point a metal bed frame was placed on her distended belly as two Guardsmen stood on either end. She was also forced to watch the torture of others and to witness the murder of a young boy. When she was later dumped unconscious, outside of San Vicente she was taken to a church in San Salvador where she received medical treatment. As a result of the torture, her baby boy, NISGUA/GAP holds one-week training sessions in the US three times a year. For more information contact: nisgua@gap.org or visit www.nisgua.org. Gonzalez fled El Salvador and eventually was granted political asylum in the US.

She still suffers from severe physical and psychological injuries. The same works with the poor in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago.

Carlos Mauricio, a professor at the University of El Salvador, was targeted by a challenge to Canadian sovereignty. A team of four defense attorneys, and with peasants in the countryside. Kidnapped from his classroom, he was taken to police headquarters, where he was asked a US Federal Judge in Philadelphia to overturn the jury's guilty verdicts on grounds of "enormously damaging" misinterpretation by US prosecutors. As a result of the beatings, two ribs were broken and the vision in one eye was permanently damaged. Mauricio's release came after his father-in-law, a retired army officer, and the university campaigned for his release. As

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## Appeal of Canadian Citizen's Conviction of Violating the Cuban Embargo

Canada has a Foreign Extraterritorial Act that requires Canadian citizens not to comply with the US embargo on Cuba. Canadian citizen James Sabzali was convicted of violating the US Trading with the Enemy Act for selling water purification supplies to Cuba in a US federal court. His employers are based in the US but the water purification supplies were manufactured outside the US. Prosecutors maintain the sales were a "national security issue".

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Two years earlier, another Florida jury had cleared the two generals, both trained at the US Army School of the Americas, of complicity in the murder of four US churchwomen in El Salvador on December 2, 1980. In that case the jury was persuaded that the Reagan/Bush administration would not have supported the generals had they not been successfully carrying out US policy. Kurt Klaus, attorney for the generals, argued that "These men were doing basically what the US government wanted them to do."

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*Neris Gonzalez and Carlos Mauricio speaking in San Francisco about their court victory. Photo: Alma Munoz*

*Salvador, continued from page 3*

Clinica del Pueblo that serves the Salvadoran and other Latino communities.

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In 1984, Ramagoza's sister, Morena, her husband and their two children also came to the Bay Area as refugees from the conflict. The sisters at the Dominican Convent in San Rafael gave them sanctuary and a home at the convent, where they lived for several years. Only recently was the family able to gain amnesty and permanent residence.

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Mauricio, a former college professor, whose work with the poor led them to be accused by Salvadoran security forces of being leftist guerrillas. When the National Guard kidnapped Neris Gonzalez from the market in San Vicente on December 26, 1979, she had been working with the poor as a lay catechist with the local Catholic church.

Despite the fact that Neris was eight months pregnant, the torturers did not spare her. She was subjected to electric shock, burned with cigarettes, cut over her body with razor blades, and repeatedly raped. At one point a metal bed frame was placed on her distended belly as two Guardsmen stood on either end. She was also forced to watch the torture of others and to witness the murder of a young boy. When she was later dumped, unconscious, outside of San Vicente she was taken to a church in San Salvador, where she received medical treatment. As a result of the torture, her baby boy was born with multiple injuries, broken bones and indentations on his face. He died at the age of two months.

Gonzalez fled El Salvador and eventually was granted political asylum in the US. She still suffers from severe physical

and psychological injuries. Today she works with the poor in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago.

Carlos Mauricio, a professor at the University of El Salvador, was targeted by the National Police because of his work with peasants in the countryside. Kidnapped from his classroom, he was taken to police headquarters, where he was brutally tortured for several days. He was kept blindfolded, handcuffed and repeatedly beaten. Kept without food, he was also hung by his arms from the ceiling. As a result of the beatings, two ribs were broken and the vision in one eye was permanently damaged.

Mauricio's release came after his father-in-law, a retired army officer, and the university campaigned for his release. As Mauricio left the prison, an officer told him that next time they would kill him. Three weeks later he fled to the US.

After the verdict was announced, Mauricio, now a science teacher at Balboa High School in San Francisco, said, "This is a great day for all Salvadorans. At last we are going to get justice. We have sent a loud message that torture is not permitted, and there's no impunity any more."

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## MITF Funds Water Project in Nicaragua

*By George Friemoth, MITF*

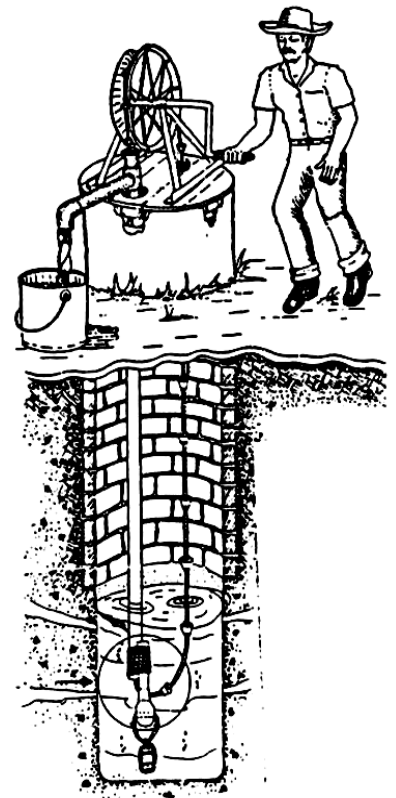
The people in the remote community of Las Mesas, located on top of a mountain west of Ciudad Dario in Matagalpa province, are elated. They have just received word from El Porvenir, a Sacramento-based organization specializing in water, latrines and reforestation projects in Nicaragua, that funds have been secured to complete their large well project.

Las Mesas is a poor but well-organized farm community with a very active town council. There are 86 families, with 238 adults and 149 children under 18 years of age. The majority of these 387 inhabitants are farmers who grow corn, beans and wheat. Others are artisans who make clay pots, pitchers, and plates. Still other families have domestic animals, and a few work as teachers in the three-room primary school. There is no electricity, and the village can only be reached by horse or four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Years ago, CARE-Canada drilled a seven-foot-wide hole and found a good source of water at a depth of 80 feet. Last year, Caritas Nicaragua provided funds for bricks and mortar, and community members completed the first 15 feet of the well wall, but then the funding ran out. Since that time, women and children have used the well despite the obvious dangers to health and safety.

Two existing small wells on the outskirts of the community and one private well are not sufficient, especially since fourteen new families have joined the population in the last three years.

According to El Porvenir, the people in Las Mesas need only \$2,000 to finish their well by lining it with bricks and mortar, making a concrete top, and installing a rope pump. Now \$800 has been secured from another US funding source, and MITF has agreed to provide the rest.



## The Struggle Continues in El Salvador

By Alicia Grogan-Brown, Bay Area  
CISPES

[Ed. Note: The writer was recently in El Salvador as a delegate with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES).]

"Ten Years of Poverty and Misery, 1992-2002 - Struggle Must Continue," the graffiti on a wall along the coast of El Salvador, effectively defines the current situation in the country. In El Salvador, one thing is very clear: the war did not end with the signing of the 1992 peace accords; it merely changed its face. Today in El Salvador, although bombs are no longer falling on communities, the right-wing perpetrators of this new phase of warfare are using words like "development" and "freedom" to cloak their own greedy motives. While the language of neo-liberalism may sound good, the people of El Salvador know that it is just another extension of the US attempt to exploit the human and natural resources of Latin America.

The 1992 peace accords have not dealt with the serious economic problems that El Salvador faces. Rather, the process has been to sell off public services into private hands, so that the economy is effectively controlled from outside the government. The process of privatization takes public services like health care, education and potable water systems and makes them private property, controlled by an elite group or corporation. All profits from these basic services then go to that group, which can charge higher prices without being held accountable to the people.

The Salvadoran electrical workers' union (STSEL) gave CISPES delegates a clear example of how the process of privatization works: A successful businessman was put in charge of the government's electrical distribution system. Although this man had previously led extremely efficient systems in private industry, he mysteriously failed while working for the government. Citing his poor management, the World Bank's Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)

ordered privatization of the country's electrical industry. Since then, prices have gone up 250 percent.

The FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation) have been expanding their grassroots political power and currently govern around 60 percent of local government in El Salvador. They are poised to win more seats in the 2003 Legislative Assembly elections and perhaps even the presidency in 2004. This makes the US-backed right-wing ruling party, ARENA, nervous, since they would like to destroy community organizing in El Salvador at its base. One tactic has been to establish control of the economy from outside the government by selling off public services to corporate owners, many of whom have strong connections to ARENA party members. The



Five electrical workers fired for organizing.  
Photo: Alicia Grogan Brown

government is trying to move this process along quickly so that as the FMLN gains power it will have fewer assets with which to govern and more difficulty reversing established laws and agreements. When the people are increasingly unemployed and unable to afford basic sustenance, they will be less able to actively defend their rights.

As another part of its attempt to crush the social movement, ARENA, alongside elite business owners, has been firing unionized workers in the public sector. This is especially true of those who play a leading role in the struggle to stop privatization and trade agreements such as CAFTA (Central American Free

Trade Agreement) and PPP (Plan Puebla-Panama). The goal is to make sure that workers have no collective bargaining power, so that the owners won't have to listen to the unions' proposals for modernization without privatization.

The "development" that this neo-liberal war brings to the Salvadoran people actually condemns the workers of the region to low wages and poor working conditions, denying them their basic right to free health care, public education, and clean water. This economic war seeks to squash the resistance of Salvadorans, who want to be able to make autonomous decisions on how to organize their own communities. Repression of the social movement is reaching heights unheard of since the signing of the peace accords in 1992, and, as always, the US is quite involved. Emboldened by the

passage of Fast Track in July, leaders in the US and Central America have speeded up the "trade promotion" process in hopes of getting formal CAFTA negotiations underway by the end of 2002.

But the people are resisting. One community has maintained an around-the-clock direct action protest since August 8, physically blocking with their bodies the construction of a highway bypass around San Salvador. On September 5, the healthcare workers' union declared a national strike calling for an end to privatization and CAFTA. Together with the doctors' union, they have paralyzed the social security health care system nationwide. STSEL is also ready to go on strike, and countless protests by students, sugar cane workers and environmental groups have been erupting across the country. The FMLN is mobilizing with communities and working hard to keep the government accountable to the people. In response to popular pressure, the legislative assembly recently approved a decree that prohibits any further privatization of public services. Salvadoran President Flores is expected to veto the legislation, making it all but certain that resistance and struggle will continue.

For more information on CAFTA and the resistance in El Salvador, contact Bay Area CISPES: 415-648-8222.

## Fast Track: Putting America on the Wrong Track to FTAA

By Carleen Pickard, *Global Exchange*

Fair traders working to stop further erosion of the democratic process in the United States had their worst fears confirmed when the Trade Promotion Authority bill (Fast Track) went to a vote on July 26. After tremendous opposition by citizen, labor, environmental and religious groups, as well as local governments expressing their rejection of the bill through the passage of local resolutions, the House voted 215-213 to pass the bill. The bill was pushed through at 3:30 in the morning as the last item of a marathon session before the Congress broke for summer recess.

Signed into law on August 6 by President Bush, the law grants him total control to negotiate international trade law, restricting the House and Congress input to only voting 'yeah' or 'nay' on the future of US trade policy. On issues of trade, our elected representatives have essentially relinquished their ability to represent the people who elected them.

Upon signing, Bush said that he immediately planned to move trade negotiations "out of park" and would begin negotiations with Chile and Central America right away. Fast Track also ensures that the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations will continue with little or no citizen input and with only cursory nods towards labor and environmental standards and human rights. The FTAA agreement is the proposed trade agreement that will expand NAFTA to the entire western hemisphere (33 countries, excluding Cuba). If the many failures of NAFTA are indicators of our future, we are in big trouble.

However, the news is not all doom and gloom. Hundreds of groups across the US came together to oppose Fast Track. These networks and individuals now see defeating the FTAA as their next challenge. While no one opposes international trade in theory, it is clear that the United States is on the WRONG TRACK. Official FTAA negotiations do

not involve citizen input; one has to be a powerful business leader to be invited to participate in the upcoming hemispheric trade summit in Ecuador.

As a result, groups across the US will be conducting a series of public hearings this fall. They aim to educate the public about the FTAA and its effects on local communities, developing countries, women and workers. We can create a better world through building a powerful base of vocal activists in local communities.

The public hearings are part of a national campaign called the People's Consultation, which is in direct response to the government's unwillingness to dialogue directly with the people. Similar consultations are occurring throughout the hemisphere to propose changes in trade policy that will meet OUR concerns.

For more information visit: [www.peoplesconsultation.org](http://www.peoplesconsultation.org) and [www.art-us.org](http://www.art-us.org).

## Colombian Government Attacks National Mobilization

By Nathalie Alsop and Ramon Acevedo, *Committee for a New Colombia*

[Ed. Note: Alsop and Acevedo are Bay Area college students who have family in Colombia. They sent this report to MITF.]

Bogota, Colombia, September 17, 2002 On September 16th, only one month after President Uribe Velez took office, more than 800,000 people throughout Colombia protested the government's policies of war and repression. When the national mobilization was mentioned publicly, the minister of defense, Martha Ramirez, said that the guerrillas were behind the mobilization and threatened numerous repercussions for those who participated. Despite this climate of state intimidation, the Colombian popular movement took to the streets in an impressive demonstration against not only the Uribe government but also US intervention in Colombia.

The day after the march the Colombian press and Uribe government were intent on downplaying the importance of

this huge national mobilization. The press described the day as one without much turmoil, even though the state forces attacked numerous marches and arbitrarily detained and beat protesters throughout the nation, while paramilitaries threatened campesinos in at least two departments. But what really happened? A strong popular movement demanding peace with social justice encountered repression imposed by a corrupt government directly supported by the US.

The national mobilization was a merger of different sectors of society, primarily state workers and, secondarily, campesinos and youth. Each group took action with a set of demands that spoke to their particular needs. Workers demanded the elimination of three economic reforms currently in Congress that cut wage and pension benefits. The campesinos demanded a repeal of the agrarian reform, which is not a reform at all but a continuation of the neoliberal economic policies that force small and

medium farmers off their land. And the youth group demanded their right to state education on all levels and the right to political and public participation in the practices of the state. Even though each had separate demands, they also supported the demands of the other sectors of the Bay Area's El Comité Guatemala Nunca Mas. She works at Global Exchange. As the world mourned the tragic events of September 11th, Guatemalans also shared in the pain as we remembered a tragic loss of twelve years past.

Colombia, whether it be economic, military or political. Despite the strength of this popular movement, the justice of their demands, and the democratic and peaceful nature of their protest, the Uribe government carried out its threats of repression. In Bogota, more than 3,000 youth from all over Colombia marched from the National University to join unionists and campesinos in a march to the Plaza de Bolívar where more than 60,000 people and who yearn for justice in Guatemala. During the late 1980s, Mylna Mack reported on the military's scorched-earth campaign of massive displacement and

# Indigenous Resist Corporate Globalization in Chiapas

By *Caroline Dutton, MITF*

This July MITF sent a small delegation to Chiapas, Mexico. We drove for many hours on muddy roads to arrive at an autonomous community called La Culebra, located within the Montes Azules Biosphere, in the Lacandon Jungle. We had been hearing reports about a military buildup in this region. Twenty-eight indigenous communities (half of them Zapatista) had been threatened with eviction, supposedly in the interest of "conserving the biodiversity of the jungle."

The Lacandon Jungle is a 4 million acre region located in the southeast corner of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala. The Montes Azules Biosphere, the largest tropical rainforest left in North America, is home to the endangered toucan and jaguar, ancient Mayan ruins and present-day Mayan villages. Because of the diverse flora and fauna of the Lacandon, Mexico is considered one of five countries having the richest biodiversity in the world. The jungle is also abundant in water, precious hardwoods, and petroleum.

The Montes Azules Biosphere was created by a presidential decree that granted 614,000 acres of land to 66 Caribbe families originally from the state of Campeche who had emigrated to the

Lacandon over a period of 200 years. When the Mexican government granted the concessions in 1978, it purposely referred to the Caribes as "the Lacandons." In fact, Spanish conquistadors had annihilated the original Lacandons several centuries earlier, but the Mexican government wanted to por-

tray the Caribes as the legitimate stewards of the land. For their part, the friendly Caribes offered no resistance as the government fraudulently exploited the jungles' resources with extensive logging and cattle ranching.

The Zapatista communities, on the  
*Chiapas, continued on page 8*



"500 Years of Resistance." Photo: George Friemoth

*Colombia, continued from page 6*  
gathered. They encountered continual state intimidation and police repression. At least 70 protesters were arbitrarily detained and beaten. Twice the police shot canisters of tear gas at the youth group and tried to split the joint march, unsuccessfully. In Bucaramanga 15,000 protesters took to the streets, and over 300 campesinos took over the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform. In the department of Tolima, 5,000 people blocked the roads. In the same department, the military raided a gathering of campesinos preparing to march to the blockade, stole all their food and arrested twelve people. In Cauca, paramilitaries stopped campesinos from demonstrating in the municipalities of La Vega, Argelia, Balboa, Corinto, Peindemo, and El Tambo with threats of death. In Caldas, 90 families from the indigenous commu-

nities were detained by the army merely for attempting to join the demonstrations there. These actions, and many others like them, show that the Uribe government intends to repress the popular movements, which are a just manifestation of the unjust social and economic conditions.

Uribe's policy of war and repression is only possible because of the billions of dollars that the US has given to the Colombian government, furnishing it with the weapons it uses to repress anyone who speaks out for a more just society. Until the US increased its military aid to Colombia in 1998, the military was a poorly trained conscript force, under-equipped and ineffective. Now, after 2 billion dollars in mostly military aid from the US, Colombia has a trained force of 50,000 paid soldiers, fleets of US made helicopters and advanced intelligence

and combat equipment. Moreover, the connection between the military and the national police is much stronger in Colombia than in the US. The aid given to Colombia has gone to both forces, which participated directly in repression of the national mobilization on September 16. This repression is not limited to that one day, but is now a common practice for both the national police and military and their paramilitary allies.

Because of the direct connection between US tax dollars and the Colombian government's widespread repression of movements calling for peace with social justice, it is imperative that people in the United States take responsibility. Support the Colombian people's right to self-determination by demanding an end to all forms of US intervention in Colombia. Comité por la Nueva Colombia [www.nuevacolombia.org](http://www.nuevacolombia.org)

*Chiapas, continued from page 7*

other hand, have objected strenuously to these activities. Even though the Zapatistas see themselves as protectors of the jungle, they are being accused by the Mexican government and US-based Conservation International (CI) of destroying it. The CI is considered by many in Chiapas to be a front for corporate interests, particularly biotech companies that want to exploit the area's medicinal plants. The Mexican Grupo Pulsar, one of the top ten biotech companies in the world, and CI have several "biological research" stations in the Lacandon. The autonomous Zapatista communities view this research as "biopiracy."

The Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) recently announced the initial funding of 250 million dollars for five dams on the Usumacinto River. Under Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), the dams will displace thousands of indigenous people and inundate the Mayan ruins of Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras. We visited the former site and were awed by its beauty, archeological significance and by the abundant flora and fauna that surround it.

Our delegation met with the autonomous council of Ricardo Flores Magon, one of the two autonomous municipalities within the Montes Azules made up of representatives from many autonomous communities. The council extended their meeting in La Culebra an extra day because representatives believed it was very important that we understand the situation in the Biosphere and that we share the information with others when we returned home.

Most of the members of this municipality were Tzeltal speakers from other parts of Chiapas. Their families had been

encouraged to settle in the jungle 25 to 30 years ago by the Mexican government as a way of alleviating land shortages. Clear cutting and large cattle ranches, previously encouraged by government incentives, had already deforested this area. Though La Culebra itself was founded in 1967, before the Montes Azules decree, some members relocated there after being displaced from their communities by the military following the Zapatista uprising in 1994.

The real problems began in 1995, when the military entered the area, built roads, set up permanent encampments and formed paramilitary groups. Since then there has been harassment, patrols, threats of arrests, and paramilitary violence. In 1998, the army attacked and tried to dismantle the new autonomous municipality of Taniperlas. The council told us that even though the army succeeded in destroying a building, the strength and consciousness of the community were stronger than ever. They have set up an autonomous government with health, education and justice systems based on traditional values. And they continue developing and organizing for a better life, even though they have few material possessions.

They told us that the government wants them to leave because their presence discourages foreign investment. Chiapas contains at least 40 percent of Mexico's fresh water, making it a prime target for new markets in a country becoming increasingly desperate for water. Coca Cola has already entered, donating basketball courts and building classrooms, even when the communities don't want them. Coke has gained important access to local aquifers by pressuring for

water privatization through preferential zoning laws.

The autonomous council told us that the people would not leave. They said, "This is our home and our only hope. We are taking care of the jungle, and within our organization we have made agreements not to cut trees, not to burn, but to plant our crops, reforest, and care for the animals."

Fifty percent of the electricity in Mexico comes from Chiapas, but La Culebra is dark at night except for a few candles and flashlights. Five dams proposed for the nearby Usumacinta River would create more electricity for export, but not for the local communities. If these people are displaced, they will have no choice but to work in the new maquiladoras as part of the PPP.

Since our return from Chiapas, the situation has worsened. In one month, paramilitary groups have assassinated four leaders in three different autonomous municipalities. Two of the dead were from Ricardo Flores Magon.

The Mexican Supreme Court recently upheld the bogus indigenous rights law passed by congress last year. The indigenous people of Mexico overwhelmingly rejected the law because it does not uphold indigenous autonomy over their land and resources. Days after this decision, the Mexican government and CI called again for the removal of "guerilla communities" from the Montes Azules. We are afraid that the renewed threats of eviction, militarization, and paramilitary violence are the beginning of a new effort to finally remove the indigenous Zapatistas from the Montes Azules by any means possible.

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## Visit to *Mut Vitz* Coffee Cooperative

*By Monika Firl*

*[Ed. Note: Firl is a former MITF volunteer who worked on sustainable agriculture in El Salvador and, later, in Chiapas, Mexico. She currently lives in Canada with her husband and young daughter.]*

There's nothing like a trip to the heart of coffee country to bring Fair Trade aspirations back into focus.

Once again, I had the good fortune to be needed as a facilitator and translator during the now annual Cooperative Coffee Roaster Delegation to meet the producers from the Chiapas coffee supplier, *Mut Vitz*. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn about their progress and see how well they are meeting the daunting challenges facing the cooperative

during these desperate times—times when international coffee prices are as low as they've been in more than a 100 years, and the general political and social atmosphere in Chiapas is very unstable.

The cooperative *Mut Vitz* (Bird Mountain) is comprised of some 600 producers from 24 communities lo-

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cated in the Northern Highlands of Chiapas in six municipalities: El Bosque, Simojovel, Bochil, Jitotol, San Andres Larrainzar, and Chenalho. The potential for total annual production is calculated to exceed 15,000 quintales (100-pound bags) of high-altitude coffee. The cooperative was "self-organized" by its members in 1997, and is now legally recognized under Mexican law. *Mut Vitz* acquired its export license in February of 1999 and the Georgia-based Café Campesino imported its first container of coffee the same year.

The producers are applying all appropriate practices for sustainable, shade-grown coffee. The first group of producers received organic certification from CertiMex/Naturland this year, and all members expect to be certified organic by the following harvest. The cooperative was incorporated in the FLO International Coffee Producer's Register in September of 1999.

*Mut Vitz* coordinates a network of some 48 organic promoters working in community groups to maintain a participative process for the transfer of technology and the practical know-how for organic coffee production. The producers have already made great strides towards fortifying their own organizational structures and local leadership.

The timing of our visit couldn't have been better. The day we arrived in the community Unión Tierra Tzotzil, the coffee "acopio" (gathering) was in full swing. The organic certified groups from half of the communities were designated to bring their coffee into the office for weighing and quality control for the Cooperative Coffee contracts that day.

It was a long morning of hauling and weighing, watching and waiting, but it was a good day for producers. Spirits were high as producers watched their four-sacks-apiece of coffee begin the long journey North.

It was a great day for us to gather images and impressions of what it takes to bring in quality coffee. Sell-

ing through Fair Trade importers is one way that *Mut Vitz* is looking to provide sustainable and autonomous development for member producer families and their communities.

The following day, we were able to visit the coffee fields and meet with the producers from the community of Alvaro Obregon. Community representatives were amazingly well prepared and coordinated. They showed us their work in three of the coffee plots, two organic producers and one producer still on the second-year transition list.

After climbing up and down the steep paths cutting through their fields, we were taken to the center of the community, where fresh tortillas and bowls of steaming chicken soup were waiting. "Home grown pollo de rancho," said Manuel, our gracious host and the community's organic promoter.

A group of some 40 *Mut Vitz* members were gathered to speak with the group. One message that came across loud and clear was the need for the producers' group still in transition to find any kind of market—better than the local price—for their coffee this year, and how to

find fair market prices for a larger percentage of their coffee for next year's harvest.

One of the biggest challenges ahead will be to maintain their organic certification through CertiMex, the body that requires *Mut Vitz* to write up its internal regulations and necessary reports from its own internal organic inspections.

CertiMex's requirements for extensive documentation are not uncommon practices. Such is the reality of organic certification today. But for a campesino organization, the amount of paperwork is daunting. For this year's inspection, a number of specially commissioned representatives will again work together to review all required information and prepare the appropriate documents.

For *Mut Vitz*, this is certainly a year full of challenges and hard work ahead, but it will also be a year for definition and collective growth.

*MITF is working to increase demand for Fair Trade coffee in Marin County. We have Mut Vitz Fair Trade, organic, shade-grown coffee from Café Campesino available for sale. Just call the office at 924-3227.*

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## OAS Urges Unblocking Aid to Haiti

On September 4, the Organization of American States unanimously approved a resolution (OAS 822) urging the resumption of humanitarian aid to Haiti due to wide concern of a possible "humanitarian disaster" in the hemisphere's poorest nation. The rather surprising US vote, was attributed to mounting criticism of the Bush Administration by Congressional Democrats over maintaining a policy that was only hurting the people of an impoverished country.

While the resolution was touted as a major shift in US policy to Haiti, it is in reality only a subtle change that requires the Haitian government to fulfill a long list of burdensome conditions before any aid can be resumed.

Among the conditions or obstacles are the following: Pay back of \$40 million in debt arrears to financial institutions; acceptance of the OAS Special Mission's role in future elections; disarmament of all illegally armed groups and individuals; payment of reparations to "victims" of Dec. 17, 2001 "coup"; Restoration of a climate of security in Haiti; privatizations of state-owned enterprises, and sacrificing social services for future debt repayment.

Concerned citizens and all who are involved in the "Let Haiti Live" campaign need to redouble their efforts to change US policy. As former Congressman Ron Dellums pointed out, "Using humanitarian aid to exact a political settlement is illegal and inhumane."

## C A L E N D A R

### Globalization & War

#### Labor & Globalization Activists Delegation to Colombia

January 15 - 27, 2003

**THE COLOMBIAN PEOPLE** need our support as the US government continues fanning the flames of war in Colombia. Workers and activists courageously struggle within the context of the US supported war in Colombia.

**CONTACT:** Gail Phares, **WITNESS FOR PEACE SOUTH-EAST**, 919-856-9468, RPhares105@aol.com *or* Sandra Alvarez, **GLOBAL EXCHANGE**, 415-575-5534, sandra@globalexchange.org.

### National Solidarity Aid Caravan to Chiapas

*Bringing medicine, medical supplies, food and moral support to indigenous peoples in Chiapas*

**Nov. 27 - Dec. 7:** Educational events/collect aid in U.S.

**Dec. 8 - 10:** Caravan orientation, McAllen, Texas

**Dec. 11:** Border crossing into Mexico

**Dec. 12 - 16:** Travel through Mexico

**Dec. 17 - 23:** Delivery of aid & educational/solidarity program in Chiapas

**Dec. 24 - Jan. 7:** Optional stay in indigenous community as a human rights observer

**CONTACT:** **IFCO/PASTORS FOR PEACE**, 402 W. 145th St., New York, NY 10031, 212-926-5757, ifco@igc.org

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## MASSIVE RALLY AND NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION TO SHUT DOWN THE SOA

November 15-17, 2002, Ft. Benning, Georgia

*Si Se Puede — We Can Do It...*

Info: School of the Americas Watch, 202-234-3440, [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org)



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