

# Report

SPRING 2010

PUBLISHED BY MARIN INTERFAITH TASK FORCE ON THE AMERICAS

## Why Washington Cares About Countries Like Haiti & Honduras

By Mark Weisbrot, Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR)

When I write about US foreign policy in places such as Haiti or Honduras, I often get responses from people who find it difficult to believe that the US government would care enough about these countries to try and control or topple their governments. These are small, poor countries with little in the way of resources or markets. Why should Washington policymakers care who runs them?

Unfortunately they do care. A lot. They care enough about Haiti to have overthrown the elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide not once, but twice. The first time, in 1991, it was done covertly. We only found out after the fact that the people who led the coup were paid by the US Central Intelligence Agency. And then Emmanuel Constant, the leader of the most notorious death squad there – which killed

thousands of Aristide’s supporters after the coup – told CBS News that he, too, was funded by the CIA.

In 2004, the US involvement in the coup was much more open. Washington led a cut-off of almost all international aid for four years, making the government’s collapse inevitable. As the New York Times reported, while the US state department was telling Aristide that he had to reach an agreement with the political opposition (funded with millions of US taxpayers’ dollars), the International Republican Institute was telling the opposition not to settle.

In Honduras last summer and autumn, the US government did everything it could to prevent the rest of the hemisphere from mounting an effective political opposition to the coup government in Honduras. For example, they blocked the Organization of American States from taking the position that it would not recognize elections that took place under the dictatorship. At the same time, the Obama admin-

istration publicly pretended that it was against the coup.

This was only partly successful, from a public relations point of view. Most of the US public thinks that the Obama administration was against the Honduran coup, although by November of last year there were numerous press reports and even editorial criticisms that

***“The Obama Administration has so profoundly bungled the situation in Honduras that it has destroyed hope among many of its citizens as well as Latin Americans that a ‘new era’ of relations with the United States is in the making. Add to that the multiplication of US military bases in Colombia, the mistakes being made in response to the tragedy in Haiti, and the missed opportunities in Cuba, and one cannot claim with any degree of optimism that Obama is off to a robust start to implement an energized and enlightened new Latin America policy.”***

Source: Adrienne Pine, Ph.D, Council on Hemispheric Affairs, January 26, 2010

Obama had caved to Republican pressure and not done enough. But this was a misreading of what actually happened: the Republican pressure in support of the Honduran coup changed the administration’s public relations strategy, but not its political strategy. Those who followed events closely from the beginning could see that the political strategy was to blunt and delay any efforts to restore the elected president, while pretending that a return to democracy was actually the goal.

Among those who understood this were the governments of Latin America, including such heavyweights as Brazil. This is important because it shows that the State Department was willing to pay a significant political cost in order to help the right in Honduras. It convinced the vast majority of Latin American governments that it was no different from the Bush administration in its goals for the hemisphere, which is not a pleasant outcome from a diplomatic point of view.

Why do they care so much about who runs these poor countries? As any good chess player knows, pawns matter. The loss of a couple of pawns at the beginning of the game can often make a difference between a win or a loss. They are looking at these countries mostly in straight power terms. Governments that are in agreement with maximising US power in the world, they like. Those who have other goals – not necessarily antagonistic to the United States – they don’t like.

Not surprisingly, the Obama administration’s closest allies in the hemisphere are rightwing governments such as those of Colombia or Panama, even though Obama himself is not a rightwing politician. This highlights the continuity of the politics of control. The victory of the right in Chile, the first time that it has won an election in half a century, was a significant victory for the US government. If Lula de Silva’s Workers’ party were to lose the presi-

dential election in Brazil this autumn, that would be another win for the state department. While US officials under both Bush and Obama have maintained a friendly posture to-

INSIDE	
Chile Earthquake	2
Honduras Delegation	3
Haiti Sweatshop Hoax	5
C. Sheehan on Venezuela	6
Bolivia Climate Summit	7
Colombia Mass Graves	7
Argentina Witness Murder	8
Chiapas Reconquest	9
Oaxaca Breaking News	10
News Briefs	11

*US Interference, continued from page 1*

ward Brazil, it is obvious that they deeply resent the changes in Brazilian foreign policy that have allied it with other social democratic governments in the hemisphere, and its independent foreign policy stances with regard to the Middle East, Iran, and elsewhere.

The US actually intervened in Brazilian politics as recently as 2005, organizing a conference to promote a legal change that would make it more difficult for legislators to switch parties. This would have strengthened the opposition to Lula's Workers' party (PT) government, since the PT has party discipline but many opposition politicians do not. This intervention by the US government was only discovered last year through a Freedom of Infor-

mation Act request filed in Washington. There are many other interventions taking place throughout the hemisphere that we do not know about. The United States has been heavily involved in Chilean politics since the 1960s, long before they organized the overthrow of Chilean democracy in 1973.

In October 1970, President Richard Nixon was cursing in the Oval Office about the Social Democratic president of Chile, Salvador Allende. "That son of a bitch!" said Richard Nixon on 15 October. "That son of a bitch Allende - we're going to smash him." A few weeks later he explained why: "The main concern in Chile is that [Allende] can consolidate himself, and the picture projected to the world will be his success ... If we let the potential

leaders in South America think they can move like Chile and have it both ways, we will be in trouble."

That is another reason that pawns matter, and Nixon's nightmare did in fact come true a quarter-century later, as one country after another elected independent left government that Washington did not want. The United States ended up "losing" most of the region. But they are trying to get it back, one country at a time. The smaller, poorer countries that are closer to the United States are the most at risk. Honduras and Haiti will have democratic elections some day, but only when Washington's influence over their politics is further reduced.

Source: *guardian.co.uk, January 29, 2010*

## Chile: How Socialism Protected Citizenry from Earthquake

*By Naomi Klein, journalist and author*

Ed.Note: *Thanks to CEPR for tracking down the origins of Chile's building code*

Ever since deregulation caused a worldwide economic meltdown in September 2009 and everyone became a Keynesian again, it hasn't been easy to be a fanatical fan of the late economist Milton Friedman. So widely discredited is his brand of free-market fundamentalism that his followers have become increasingly desperate to claim ideological victories, however far-fetched.

A particularly distasteful case in point: Just two days after Chile was struck by a devastating earthquake, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens informed his readers that Milton Friedman's "spirit was surely hovering protectively over Chile" because, "thanks largely to him, the country has endured a tragedy that elsewhere would have been an apocalypse.... It's not by chance that

Chileans were living in houses of brick and Haitians in houses of straw when the wolf arrived to try to blow them down."

According to Stephens, the radical free-market policies prescribed to Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by Milton Friedman and his infamous "Chicago Boys" are the reason Chile is a prosperous nation with "some of the world's strictest building codes."

There is one rather large problem with this theory: Chile's modern seismic building code, drafted to resist earthquakes, was adopted in 1972. That year is enormously significant because it was one year before Pinochet seized power in a bloody U.S.-backed coup. That means that if one person deserves credit for the law, it is not Friedman, or Pinochet, but Salvador Allende, Chile's democratically elected socialist President. (In truth many Chileans deserve credit, since the laws were a response to a history of quakes, and the first law was adopted in the 1930s.)

It does seem significant, however, that the law was enacted even in the midst of a crippling economic embargo. "Make the economy scream!" Richard Nixon famously growled after Allende won the 1970 elections. The code was later updated in the nineties, well after Pinochet and the Chicago Boys were finally out of power and democracy was restored. Little wonder: As Paul Krugman points out, Friedman was ambivalent about building codes, seeing them as yet another infringement on capitalist freedom.

As for the argument that Friedmanite policies are the reason Chileans live in

"houses of brick" instead of "straw," it's clear that Stephens knows nothing of pre-coup Chile. The Chile of the 1960s had the best health and education systems on the continent, as well as a vibrant industrial sector and rapidly expanding middle class. Chileans believed in their state, which is why they elected Allende to take the project even further.

After the coup and the death of Allende, Pinochet and his Chicago Boys did their best to dismantle Chile's public sphere, auctioning off state enterprises and slashing financial and trade regulations. Enormous wealth was created in this period but at a terrible cost: by the early eighties, Pinochet's Friedman-prescribed policies had caused rapid de-industrialization, a ten-fold increase in unemployment and an explosion of distinctly unstable shantytowns. They also led to a crisis of corruption and debt so severe that, in 1982, Pinochet was forced to fire his key Chicago Boy advisors and nationalize several of the large deregulated financial institutions. (Sound familiar?)

Fortunately, the Chicago Boys did not manage to undo everything Allende accomplished. The national copper company, Codelco, remained in state hands, pumping wealth into public coffers and preventing the Chicago Boys from tanking Chile's economy completely. They also never got around to trashing Allende's tough building code, an ideological oversight for which we should all be grateful.

Source: *alternet.org/story/145897/, posted March 4, 2010; The Nation*

*Task Force on the Americas Report* is published quarterly by the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas.

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## Honduras: Delegation Finds Inspiration in Resistance Movement

By Dale Sorensen, Ivana Rosas and Rachel Lindsay

A group of eight US citizens met on Saturday March 13, 2010 in Tegucigalpa to continue the international monitoring process begun with the visit of a first delegation only weeks after the coup. For several it was a return from a 2009 delegation to evaluate the situation after the swearing in of Porfirio (Pepe) Lobo as president on January 27. The intentions of the delegation were to meet with groups and individuals from different sectors affected by the coup and gather information and interviews about the current political situation in Honduras, with a specific focus on human rights violations and repression. The general hope was to gather information that could be used to educate North Americas about the “real” situation in Honduras. In addition the delegation was to extend a message of solidarity from the people of the United States toward the people of Honduras.

The delegation was sponsored by the Bay Area Latin America Solidarity Coalition which represents a diverse range of organizations. The participants included Dale Sorensen, Brooke Anderson, Carolina Dutton, Ivana Rosas and Sam Vinal from the San Francisco Bay Area; Kerri Griffis, reporter/activist from Oregon; Liz Lebron grad student from St. Louis and sustainable development coordinator for *SosteNica* in Nicaragua, Rachel Lindsay. The group was led by Chati Cajas, a Guatemalan lawyer, and Andres Conteris, non-violence activist returning to Honduras after his recent four-month stint accompanying President Manuel Zelaya in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa.

The delegation began the week as observers of the “Second Meeting for the Re-founding of Honduras” in La Esperanza, during which we were able to meet with many leaders of the resistance movement (FNRP-National Front of Popular Resistance) who are focusing on the necessity for popular constitutional reform. The general atmosphere was upbeat and festive with those in attendance anxious to participate and be heard. It was hard to keep order as different panelists outlined their visions for a new Honduras. We had the feeling that now that the process had been unleashed, there was no stopping their quest to realize the dream of a country with participatory democracy, self-determination,



Miriam Miranda president of OFRANEH holds up the front page of *La Prensa* to show how the main stream media is lying about the MUCA. The headline accuses them of being an armed guerilla movement.

Photo: Brooke Anderson

justice and a more equitable distribution of resources with dignity for all.

Upon entering the space we had the honor of interviewing Carlos H. Reyes who had been a presidential candidate in the November 2009 election but withdrew because of the illegitimacy of an election occurring under a coup regime. Reyes talked about the process of the new *consulta* on June 28, 2010 to see if the people of Honduras support a Constituent Assembly. Members of the FNRP will gather signatures to be presented to the new assembly in order to force them to a constitutional assembly. Presently, they do not plan to take political power but more to organize, educate and fortify the movement. He said that currently the former *golpistas* (coup leaders) are trying to clean their image and have enlisted the help of Ambassador Llorens to push forward a Truth Commission which the resistance rejects. Continuing, he said that all sectors, women, teachers, workers, peasants and the indigent reject the regime headed by Pepe Lobo, elected with only 35% of the vote. On January 27, there were half a million in the street to say good-bye to Mel Zelaya compared to 20,000 who showed up to welcome Lobo as president.

We met with and interviewed members of diverse organizations across the country:

Afro-Hondurans, *campesinos*, political prisoners, progressive journalists, teachers, artists, women in resistance, union members and heads of respected NGO's. We listened to accounts of murders, attacks, threats, and injustices inflicted upon those who resisted the coup and their comrades. In addition we heard about silencing the media, violence against women, members of LGBT groups, and leaders of the resistance.

In the north, outside of Tela in a small community we met with Alfredo Lopez, Garifuna local leader of OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) and director of the local radio station, Radio Faloma Bimetu (Sweet Coconut), 94.3 FM. The Tela Bay area is dotted with some 36 communities along the northern Caribbean shore with four community radio stations forming a network. The largest of these communities, Triunfo de la Cruz consists of 800 families. The overarching goal of the network is to strengthen and enrich the culture and to defend ancestral territory in conflict with businessmen and foreign investors attempting to seize community land for the construction of mega-tourism projects. Today they continue transmitting political, cultural, religious, and youth focussed programming in both Spanish

*continued on page 4*

*Honduras, continued from page 3*

and the Garifuna language.

The Garifuna members of OFRANEH have been attacked in various ways. Outspoken Alfredo was jailed for seven years on trumped-up drug charges. In early January, the radio Faluma Bimetu was burned down by unknown armed individuals who proceeded to loot the station's radio equipment. This is not the first time the radio had been attacked and its equipment stolen, but thanks to national and international solidarity, the radio station has been rebuilt and is back on the air continuing to compete with the mass media.

Father Padre Ismael "Melo" Moreno from Radio Progreso commented on the growing instability of Honduras, where increased conflict is polarizing the population. According to him, the current instability felt by all citizens and created by the constant military presence since the 28th of June prevents civil society from functioning properly. In addition to the systematic and illegitimate control of the current government, the routine loss of NGO leaders, journalists, and members of the resistance movement is detrimental to the entire country and should be considered "anti-democratic blasphemy," he said. In spite of the immense dangers of organizing, the resistance movement, that was born on the day of the coup has met those dangers with equal force and has not lost strength in spite of the repression.

While we were in the country, the conflict over land ownership between poor campesinos and wealthy large landowners in the Aguan Valley reached a point of crisis. The accelerated expansion of African palm plantations on the northern coast of Honduras especially in the departments of Colon and Atlántida (currently) in the region of the Aguan Valley has helped to encourage the take over of large extensions of land by a few rich families. The primary owners of large palm plantations are Miguel Facusse, René Morales and Reinaldo Canales.

In 1992 changes to Honduras' agrarian reform law made it possible for land acquired previously through the law to be resold (the original 1970 law of Agrarian Reform reallocated land from the transnational companies back to Honduran farmers) Beginning in 1998 the three wealthy businessmen through fraudulent sales via middlemen acquired land which had belonged to 28 African palm oil cooperatives of the Aguan region. Since the

land was held collectively by the co-ops, it could not be sold without a majority vote. Through intimidation, coercion and paramilitary assassinations the businessmen acquired the 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres) of land that had belonged to the cooperatives that is in dispute today.

In 2001, the now landless families formed the MUCA (Unified *Campesino* Movement of the Aguan) which documented and filed law suits regarding the illegalities involved in the land sales. Beginning in 2006, the farmers began a series of peaceful protests and began to resettle on their lands. This process led to negotiations with then president Manuel Zelaya and to the point of signing an agreement with him on June 12, 2009. The agreement obligated Miguel Facusse and the others to show documentation to support their land rights and establish investigation into allegations of coercion and fraud in the



Graffiti supporting the FNRP, "National Front of Popular Resistance." Photo: Brooke Anderson

land sales. Because of the June 28 military coup the agreement was never implemented.

After realizing the coup would not be reversed, the MUCA with support from the FNRP resumed the land recuperations in December 2009. We were told by members of the MUCA that occupying the land, "is the only strategy farmers have to be heard." Living in plastic tents among the palm oil plantations, the farmers and their participating families sometimes eat only once a day and are under constant threat from authorities. There have been dozens of confrontations between farmers and private security forces and unidentified armed men who have been implicated in well-documented murders of at least four MUCA members.

On March 15 members of our delegation were witness to negotiations that took place between MUCA members and some of Pepe Lobo's ministers. We were fearful that poor *campesinos* would be outsmarted by the politicians in dark suits and forced to accept a bad offer. Later the government threatened the MUCA with a military takeover and forced land evictions. But Lobo's offer to buy only 3,000 hectares from Miguel Facusse for the MUCA was refused. Soon the situation escalated in order to pressure them to sign an agreement.

On April 1 a private security guard shot and killed MUCA member Miguel Alonso Oliva who was part of a group occupying an African palm plantation in the department of Colón. A demonizing campaign has been underway in the main stream media to characterize the MUCA as a violent armed group receiving help from Cubans, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans and even the FARC! On April 11, President Lobo ordered a militarization of the lower Aguan Valley with 30 military vehicles, troops carrying high-caliber weapons, and two Black Hawk helicopters.

Finally on April 14 an agreement later ratified by the majority of the MUCA cooperatives was signed with the government which agreed to purchase 11,000 hectares for the campesinos. Rafael Alegria of Via Campesina commented, "This agreement isn't a definitive solution to the conflict, but it brings calm to the region." Soon after, it was reported that Miguel Facusse had filed a legal action against Lobo's decision. We still don't know if the military has left the region but you can rest assured that no matter what the campesinos do, with the support of the resistance movement and other farm organizations, they will not give up until justice is achieved.

Members of the BALASC delegation were filled with awe at the incredible organizing and coming together of so many diverse sectors to support each other with the ability to see the commonality in all their struggles. We got the sense that it was one fight for the liberation of a whole country and it was like a freight train, unstoppable. That against all odds and at considerable risk, the movement for real democracy and an end to exploitation will persevere and grow. We owe them our ongoing solidarity and effort to change US policies that adversely affect the Honduran people. ●

## Rebuilding Haiti, the Sweatshop Hoax

By David L. Wilson, co-editor of  
*Weekly News Update on the Americas*

Within days of a January 12 earthquake that devastated much of southern Haiti, the *New York Times* was using the disaster to promote a United Nations plan for drastically expanding the country's garment assembly industry, which employs low-paid workers to stitch apparel for duty-free export, mainly to the US market. This, according to several opinion pieces in the *Times*, is the way to rebuild Haiti.

The outlines of the plan were drawn up a year earlier, in January 2009 by Oxford economist Paul Collier, but the leading proponents of development through sweatshops have been liberal Democrats in the US. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus pushed hard for HOPE and HOPE II, the 2006 Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act and its 2008 extension; these acts make the plan possible by giving preferential treatment to US imports of apparel assembled in Haiti. UN Special Envoy for Haiti Bill Clinton, the former US president, has provided much of the PR for the plan; in the fall of 2009 he organized a special meeting to encourage foreign business investment in Haiti. Liberal US financier and philanthropist George Soros is helping build a new \$45 million industrial park near Port-au-Prince's impoverished Cité Soleil neighborhood as part of the plan's implementation.

Adding to the project's liberal credentials, in August 2009 Bill Clinton made Dr. Paul Farmer his deputy UN special envoy. Harvard professor Farmer is widely respected for his medical work in Haiti; he is a founder of Partners in Health and is on the board of directors of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, a US-based left-liberal advocacy group.

The plan's liberal supporters sometimes admit that assembly plant jobs may not be the very best type of employment. But Haitians need work, they say, and the new sweatshops will create jobs — as many as “several hundred thousand,” according to Prof. Collier's description of the plan. What the liberals don't explain is where they think the jobs will come from.

The garment export industry in the Caribbean Basin has been in a sharp decline for the past five years. The current round of job

losses in the region's apparel *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) started with the growth of competition from industrial powers like China and has intensified with the economic crisis in the US, the main market for the industry's products.

The Dominican Republic, Haiti's closest neighbor, lost 73,000 garment jobs from 2005 through 2007, according to Marion Weber and Jennifer Blair in the July/August 2009 *NACLA Report on the Americas*. The six countries that signed on to the 2005 Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) including Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, saw their combined exports fall from a 13.3% share of the US import market in 2004 to 9.8% in 2008.

The job situation continues to deteriorate. Garment jobs in the Dominican “free trade zones” (FTZs), the special areas where the *maquilas* are clustered, fell 15.05% in 2008. In Honduras, site of Latin America's most recent coup d'état, textile and apparel production for the first six months of 2009 was down by 17.9% compared to the same period the year before. The Honduran *maquiladora* sector lost 15,000 jobs in 2008 and more than 8,000 in 2009, leaving it with some 114,000 employees.

Of course, the US market for imported apparel is expected to grow back if the economic crisis recedes, but it's hard to see how that by itself would produce several hundred thousand new jobs for Haiti.

People in the United States tend to think irrationally about things like job creation. Many of us believe that immigration reduces the number of jobs available for US citizens, while the same people often swallow the idea that building new industrial parks in Port-au-Prince will magically create jobs for Haitians.

The reality is exactly the opposite. If Haitian immigrants were stitching garments in New York or Los Angeles at jobs with standard wage rates, they and their dependents would be able to pay for decent housing and staples like food and clothing. This would stimulate job creation, and the new jobs would make up for the jobs the immigrants had taken, as in fact happened in the past when the United States produced its own apparel in union shops. But if the same Haitians work in assembly plants in Port-au-

Prince or in the FTZ near the Dominican border, they have to accept wages at about one-twentieth the rate they would get in the United States. These workers are barely able to scrape by; their spending can do little to stimulate job creation either in Haiti or in the region as a whole.

But the UN plan isn't really about creating jobs; it's about relocating them. The key, according to Prof. Collier, lies in Haiti's “propitious fundamentals,” its “poverty and relatively unregulated labor market” and “labor costs that are fully competitive with China.” Add Haiti's location near the United States: it's “on the doorstep of its market.” Haiti is the “only low-wage economy in the region,” Collier writes, meaning that the *maquilas* in nearby countries just can't compete with Haitian factories paying a minimum wage of around \$3.05 a day, approximately half the minimum in the Dominican FTZs.

So when the professors and politicians say they will help Haitian workers by giving them jobs, what they really mean is that they plan to take the jobs away from Dominican, Mexican, and Central American workers and pay the Haitians even less for doing the same work. It's no wonder that the American Apparel and Footwear Association, a US manufacturers' organization, hopes to “play a responsible and proactive role in Haiti's overall recovery.” The jobs the Haitians will get are only temporary, in any case. Haitian workers have been through all this before.

Haiti pioneered export-based development plans in the 1970s under Jean-Claude Duvalier (“Baby Doc”). Once assembly plants started operating in Haiti, other parts of the region followed suit under the Reagan administration's 1984 Caribbean Basin Initiative. The brief boom in the Caribbean apparel industry ended when jobs started going to Mexico because of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Mexican workers became still more “competitive” after 1994, thanks to an economic crisis and currency devaluation (a de facto wage cut). The Mexicans in turn lost jobs to lower-paid Chinese workers as the new millennium started. Dominican and Central American manufacturers responded with DR-CAFTA and, predictably, more wage cuts. And yet the job losses have continued.

*Haiti, continued on page 6*

## Venezuela: We are not Anti-American, We are Anti-Imperialism

By Cindy Sheehan, activist

My request to interview President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela was finally granted on March 2nd while we were down in Montevideo, Uruguay with President Chavez for the inauguration of the new left-ish president and freedom fighter, Jose Mujica.

The reasons I went down to Venezuela with my team of two cameramen were twofold.

First of all, I just got tired of all the misinformation that is spread in the US about President Chavez and the people's Bolivarian Revolution. In only one example, the National Endowment for Democracy (another Orwellian named agency that receives federal money to supplant democracy) spends millions of dollars every year in Venezuela trying to destabilize Chavez's democratically elected government.

The other reason we went to Venezuela was to be inspired and energized by the revolution and to inspire and energize others in the states to rise up against the oppressive ruling class here and take power back into our own hands.

Empowerment of the poorest or least educated citizens of Venezuela is the goal of the Bolivarian Revolution. President Chavez said in the interview that "Power has five principles" and the first one is Education and he calls Venezuela a "big school." Indeed since the revolution began 11 years ago, the literacy rate has risen significantly to 99 per cent.

People Power is another principle of power and we witnessed this in a very dramatic fashion in the barrio of San Agustín in Caracas. San Agustín was a shantytown built on the sides of some very steep and tall hills. The only way the citizens could get to and from their homes was to climb up and down some very steep and treacherous stairs. Two years ago, the neighborhood formed a committee and proposed that the government build a tram through the hills; and on January 20th the dreams of the citizens of San Agustín became a reality, and the Metro Cable was christened. Not only did the residents get a new tram, but many of the shacks were torn down and new apartments built. Residents had priority for low or no interest loans to buy the apartments.

Even though I am very afraid of heights, I rode the Metro Cable to the top of the hill,

and we were awarded with amazing views of Caracas and the distant mountains. All the red, gleaming tramcars are given names of places in Venezuela or revolutionary slogans. But our "treat" was still ahead of us, when we made our way down the side of the hill by those steep and treacherous stairs. In combination with the stairs and the heat, by the time we were at the bottom, my legs were shaking like Jello and my heart was thumping. I could not even imagine walking up those stairs! Young children, pregnant women, pregnant women with young children, old people, etc, had to go up and down the stairs to get to and from their homes! With the installation of the tram, the lives of the people of San Agustín were improved immeasurably, and it is all due to the education and sense of empowerment that comes from organizing and ultimate victory.

The Metro Cable serves about 12,000 people per day at a cost of ten cents per round trip ticket – and all of the employees come from the barrio.

Following the trip up the hill and steep climb down, we met with the community organizers after a traditional Venezuelan lunch of beans, rice, fried plantains and a little bit of meat for the meat eaters. Note: the "traditional" Venezuelan lunch is identical to the traditional Venezuelan breakfast and is very yummy.

About 98 per cent of the organizers were women who spoke very articulately and passionately about how their lives have improved since Chavez arose to power from the people's revolution and how they would defend Chavez and the revolution with their very lives.

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*Haiti, continued from page 5*

Anti-sweatshop activists Barbara Briggs and Charlie Kernaghan warned back in the 1990s that this type of "economic development" would create a "race to the bottom" in which workers in different countries would have to compete by accepting lower and lower wages. And that's exactly what happened.

Haitians have learned not to listen to people like Prof. Collier and Special Envoy Clinton. In August 2009 thousands of Haitian sweatshop workers went on strike to

Knowledge is power; and perhaps that's why before the Revolution, only primary school was free, and fees were charged for secondary education. Now in Venezuela, school is free all the way through doctoral studies. We see how the ruling class in our own country is gutting education and is trying to make it as difficult as possible to get a University education. A smart and thinking public is a dangerous public.

There is so much to write about our trip and about the Bolivarian Revolution that this will have to be a series of articles. We learned so much!

My complete interview with President Chavez will be available soon in audio and video and then a full-length documentary entitled *TODOS SOMOS AMERICANOS* (We are all Americans) will hopefully be available and premiered by June 1st.

There is a very touching scene at the end of my interview with President Chavez when President Evo Morales of Bolivia comes in the room. President Morales was also in Montevideo for Mujica's inauguration.

I asked both the presidents if they had any words of inspiration for the people of the US. They both emphasized the need for grassroots unity, but they especially wanted to stress their affection for the people of the US.

With President Morales standing by his side and nodding vigorously, President Chavez said: "We are NOT anti-American, we ARE anti-Imperialism."

*Yo también, mis hermanos.*

Source: *Cindy Sheehan's Soapbox Blog*  
March 6, 2010

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demand a higher minimum wage. They ignored arguments that they needed to keep their wages competitive. It took tear gas and UN troops to get them back into the factories. Grassroots organizations meeting in Port-au-Prince since the earthquake have been working on proposals for rebuilding Haiti through a sustainable development plan rooted in Haitian reality. Maybe it's time to listen to the Haitians for a change.

Source: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/wilson>

## Bolivia: People's Summit on Climate Change

Ed. Note: *The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth at the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba closed on Earth Day, April 22, issuing several resolutions, including: that the UN adopt a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth; that an International Committee be organized to hold a global referendum on climate change on Earth Day 2011; that the industrialized nations provide annual financing equivalent to 6% of their GDP to confront climate change in the developing world; and that an International Tribunal on Environmental and Climate Justice be created, with its seat in Bolivia. The conference called for a new global organization to press for these demands, tentatively dubbed the World Movement for Mother Earth.*

Source, *Bill Weinberg, ww4report.com/print/8552*

Bolivia's President Evo Morales Ayma condemned the capitalist system in the opening session of the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth today

Morales, speaking at the April 20 conference inauguration, started his speech with a slogan, "Planet or death, we shall overcome."

He said that harmony with nature could not exist while one per cent of the world's population consumes more than 50 per cent of the world's riches. "Capitalism is the main enemy of the Earth," only looking for profits, to the detriment of nature, and serves as a bridge for social inequality.

More than 15,000 representatives from five continents were present at the Esteban Ramirez Ecological Stadium in Tuquipaya, near Cochibamba, when Morales read a letter to future generations to alert of the danger the planet faces.

The letter said the Earth is giving signals by means of earthquakes, seaquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts and typhoons, so there is a great need to protect the planet.

In his letter Morales called attention to climate migrants, 50 million people going from one place to another, a number that could increase to up to 200 million in 2050, because of negative environmental impacts.

Bolivia's president called on the peoples of the world to join together to face those who kill people and purchase weapons. If capitalism is not changed or eliminated, measures adopted to defend Mother Earth will be precarious and temporary.

Morales criticized the 15th UN climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, as a place where the voices of entire peoples and social organizations were not heard. "It is necessary that the UN member countries listen to and respect the will of the peoples of the world," he said.

He confirmed the creation of an alternative organization of the peoples of the world in defense of nature.

The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth concluded on April 22 with the celebration of International Day for the Mother Earth, a date previously proposed by Bolivia and approved by the UN General Assembly in 2009.

According to the Bolivarian Information Agency, taking part in the summit were the presidents of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez; Ecuador, Rafael Correa; Paraguay, Fernando Lugo; Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega; and Bolivia, Evo Morales. Also present were two Nobel laureates: Argentinean Adolfo Perez Esquivel and Guatemalan Rigoberta



Evo Morales speaking at Climate Summit

Menchú, among other personalities.

More than 50 scientists, social movement leaders, researchers, academics and artists agreed to speak on 17 panels, including NASA scientist Jim Hansen; Bill McKibben, environmental journalist and leader of 350.org; Indian environmentalist Vandana Shiva; best-selling author Naomi Klein; Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano; Miguel D'Escoto, former president of the UN General Assembly; Lumumba Di-Aping, former lead negotiator for the G77; along with leaders from leading environmental organizations and communities at the front line of climate change.

Source: *Prensa Latina via Links International Journal of Socialist Review, April 20, 2010*

## Colombia: Mass Graves Uncovered

By *Dan Kovalik, human and labor rights lawyer*

The biggest human rights scandal in years is developing in Colombia, though you wouldn't notice it from the total lack of media coverage here. The largest mass grave unearthed in Colombia was discovered by accident last year just outside a Colombian Army base in La Macarena, a rural municipality located in the Department of Meta just south of Bogota. The grave was discovered when children drank from a nearby stream and started to become seriously ill. These illnesses were traced to runoff from what was discovered to be a mass grave — a grave marked only with small flags showing the dates (between 2002 and 2009) on which the bodies were buried.

According to a February 10, 2010 letter issued by Alexandra Valencia Molina, Director of the regional office of Colombia's own Procuraduria General de la Nación (a government agency tasked to investigate government corruption). Approximately 2,000 bodies are buried in this grave. The Colombian Army has admitted responsibility for the grave, claiming to have killed and buried alleged guerillas there. However, the bodies in the grave have yet to be identified. Instead, against all protocol for handling the remains of anyone killed by the military, especially those of guerillas, the bodies contained in the mass grave were buried there secretly without the requisite process of having the Colombian government certify that the deceased were indeed the

*continued on page 8*

*Colombia, continued from page 7*

armed combatants the Army claims.

And, given the current “false positive” scandal which has enveloped the government of President Álvaro Uribe and his Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, who is now running to succeed Uribe as President, the Colombian Army’s claim about the mass grave is especially suspect. This scandal revolves around the Colombian military, most recently under the direction of Juan Manuel Santos, knowingly murdering civilians in cold blood and then dressing them up to look like armed guerillas in order to justify more aid from the United States. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, this practice has been so “systematic and widespread” as to amount to a “crime against humanity.” And sadly, when Ms. Pillay made this statement, she literally did not know the half of it.

To date, not factoring in the mass grave, it has been confirmed by Colombian government sources that 2,000 civilians have fallen victim to the “false positive” scheme since President Uribe took office in 2002. If, as suspected by Colombian human rights groups, such as the “Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Bajo Ariari” and the “Colectivo Orlando Fals Borda,” the mass grave in La Macarena contains 2,000 more civilian victims of this scheme, then this would bring the total of those victimized by the “false positive” scandal to at least 4,000, much worse than originally believed.

That this grave was discovered just outside a Colombian military base overseen by US military advisers (the US having around 600 military advisers in that country) is especially troubling, and raises serious questions about the US’s own conduct in that country. In addition, this calls into even greater question the propriety of President Obama’s agreement with President Álvaro Uribe last summer to grant the US access to seven military bases in that country.

The Colombian government and military are scrambling to contain this most recent scandal, possibly through violence. On March 15, 2010, Jhonny Hurtado, a former union leader and President of the Human Rights Committee of La Cantina, and an individual who was key in revealing the truth about this mass grave, was assassinated as soldiers from Colombia’s 7th Mobile Brigade patrolled the area. Just prior to his murder, Jhonny Hurtado told a delegation of British Members

of Parliament visiting Colombia that he believed the mass grave at La Macarena contained the bodies of innocent people who had been “disappeared.”

The discovery of this mass grave by sheer accident raises the prospect that there are more yet to be found. Certainly, it is the consensus of human rights groups in Colombia that this is only the tip of the iceberg. In any case, the discovery of this grave, on top of the large magnitude of the “false positive” scan-

dal already known, justifies a serious rethinking of US policy toward Colombia, a policy pursuant to which the US has sent over \$7 billion of military aid to Colombia since 2000. This policy, which President Obama is only deepening, has continued the US’s long-standing practice of giving the most military aid to the worst human rights abusers. The time is way overdue for this practice to end.

Source: *Huffington Post*, April 1, 2010

## Argentina: Murder of Trial Witness

By *Marie Trigona*, journalist

Ed. Note: *Article was excerpted*

The recent murder of Silvia Suppo, a key witness in a human rights trial on crimes committed during the Argentina dictatorship, has sparked fears for the safety of witnesses who testify publicly in the cases. Suppo, a torture survivor, was stabbed to death on March 29 at her crafts shop in the province of Santa Fe in an alleged robbery. In 2009, Suppo testified in a human rights trial against a former judge for his role in abuses during the dictatorship. Human rights groups suspect that Suppo was killed to send a message to those still willing to testify as human rights trials progress.

Santa Fe held its first human rights trial, involving a federal judge and five others, in 2009. Víctor Brusa and former police officers Héctor Colombini, Juan Calixto Perizotti, María Eva Aebi, Mario Facino, and Eduardo Ramos were sentenced to 18-23 years in prison for crimes against humanity committed during Argentina’s military dictatorship. Patricia Isasa and Silvia Suppo were key witnesses in the trial.

Silvia Suppo was detained at the age of 17 by a commando group in Santa Fe. She was taken to Police Precinct Number 4, where she was raped repeatedly. When it was discovered that Suppo was pregnant, Juan Calixto Perizotti and his secretary María Eva Aebi transferred her to another clandestine detention center for an abortion. It was there Suppo met Patricia Isasa, a 16-year-old also detained in Santa Fe. “Silvia spoke of sexual violence and rape as a method of torture, a systematic practice and a separate crime against women,” said Patricia Isasa, a fellow torture survivor.

Suppo, 51 years old, provided key testimony in the trial against the judge and police. The military protected their identities by forcing detainees to wear hoods or blindfolds.

While she was at the La Casita clandestine detention center undergoing an abortion, Suppo was able to see her perpetrators’ faces when they removed her blindfold.

Police detained two men in the murder of Suppo; however, human rights witnesses and relatives have pushed for authorities to continue to investigate the case. Isasa and Suppo’s relatives have expressed doubts that the crime was a simple robbery given the profile of the victim and the circumstances of Suppo’s death. The crime occurred in the morning hours at Suppo’s shop and violent robberies are uncommon for the town of Rafaela, where the victim was killed. More than 1,500 people marched to the local court house to demand that authorities continue with the investigation. Suppo was also pursuing the case of Reinaldo Hammeter, her companion at the time of her kidnapping; he was also kidnapped and disappeared on January 25, 1977.

Like many other witnesses in the proceedings for crimes against humanity, Suppo had received threats. Nearly two years ago, when opening proceedings began in the Judge Brusa trial, two men stood at the entrance of her shop to intimidate her. Suppo unrelentingly gave her testimony of the terror she endured and refused to enter a witness protection program. Following Suppo’s murder, Isasa once again has entered a witness protection program.

Isasa stated, “If this is a message against witnesses so as to silence them, then the witnesses, too, have a message: we declared in the past, we declare now and we’ll keep declaring despite these painful and terrible things.” She concluded, “To honor the memory of this strong woman, we will continue on this path.”

Source: *Americas Program Report*, Center for International Policy, [Americas@ciponline.org](mailto:Americas@ciponline.org), April 19, 2010

## CHIAPAS: Reconquest of Recuperated Land

By: *Mary Ann Tenuto, founding member of the Chiapas Support Committee*

Ed. Note: *author shortened article for publication here.*

The farm truck pulled off a dirt road into the ruins of an old and very large former plantation. It parked on the expanse of crumbling tile patio. Twelve of us, plus the driver, climbed out and entered a building painted rust and turquoise for a meeting with members of San Manuel's autonomous council, staff of the Compañero Manuel Grocery Warehouse and two municipal education promoters.

The former plantation, or *finca*, was claimed by indigenous rebels belonging to the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) during their January 1994 Uprising. The rust and turquoise building was just one end of the plantation owner's jungle mansion, now used as a grocery warehouse by the Zapatistas of San Manuel autonomous county. A new farming community called Nueva Arena has been established on the plantation. The Zapatistas refer to the land claimed in 1994 as "recuperated land." Chiapas NGOs estimate that *campesinos* from several organizations recuperated between 250,000 and 300,000 *hectares* of land in 1994. That translates into somewhere between 600,000 and 750,000 acres of recuperated land.

It is precisely this recuperated land that is now in dispute between the government (fronting for corporate interests) and the Zapatistas. This was the dominant theme throughout the time I spent in the state of Chiapas, Mexico from March 16 to March 30, 2010, coordinating a delegation of twelve people.

Delegates received educational briefings from non-governmental organizations working in Chiapas. Our first talk was at the Center for Economic and Political Investigations for Community Action (CIEPAC) The CIEPAC analysts focused on how one part of the current counterinsurgency strategy is aimed at re-claiming the land recuperated in 1994. The government wants the land back in order to implement the Mesoamerica Project, a massive development plan stretch-

ing from southern Mexico to Colombia, which proposes a re-colonization of the land by transnational corporations. "It's all about territory," one analyst told us. She gave February 20th community as an example of one method used to reconquer land.

February 20th is located in The Canyons region of the Lacandón Jungle, in Ricardo Flores Magón autonomous Zapatista municipality. Its inhabitants belong to different organizations. Some belong to the EZLN and they occupy 247 acres of land. Others belong to peasant organizations affiliated with the PRI political party. The PRI members jointly occupy 321 acres. The folks who occupy the 321 acres went to the government's Agrarian Reform agency and said they occupy all 568 acres of land. The government gave them title to the entire 568 acres for a new ejido called Nuevo Oxchuc. Why? Because they agreed to enter the ejido into the land-titling program called PROCEDE, a program for privatizing ejido land titles so that individuals can sell, or otherwise alienate, their land. Prior to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), ejido land could not be alienated (sold, or taken by a bank for default on a loan). According to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, ejido land was communally owned, a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Article 27 was changed in preparation for NAFTA so that ejido land could be privatized. The Zapatistas refuse to enter into PROCEDE and they are defending the 247 acres in February 20th with an occupation by supporters from other communities.

Something similar is happening now in Bolom Ajaw, a community with land adjacent to a virgin waterfall that connects to the Agua Azul Cascade tourist area. Bolom Ajaw is a Zapatista community on recuperated (untitled) land. A former ranch, it was claimed as a result of the 1994 Zapatista Uprising. Approximately 200 Zapatista supporters have occupied Bolom Ajaw since 2001. They have been continuously harassed and attacked for the past four years or so by PRI members from the adjacent Agua Azul ejido. On January 21, 2010, 57 PRI members invaded Bolom Ajaw land, carrying pistols, machetes and radios. They began to construct three cabins.

Several weeks later, on February 6, PRI

members from Agua Azul ambushed a group of Zapatistas in Bolom Ajaw. The Chiapas Attorney General reported one PRI member dead from a bullet wound and 11 injured by bullets. The Zapatista Junta in Morelia reported one Zapatista shot and gravely injured, while the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) reported three Zapatistas injured by bullets. The PRI members are suspected of still belonging to the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Campesino Rights (OPDDIC), a paramilitary group. The Attorney General believes the Zapatistas fired weapons, thus violating the 15-year truce. The Zapatistas are claiming that they were not armed and say that the PRI death and injuries were caused by friendly fire. According to a detailed report now available from Frayba, PRI members were in several parts of Bolom Ajaw and were shooting from different positions. It states that some PRI members were caught in the crossfire and injured by the flying bullets, as were two Zapatistas. The government has responded by heavily militarizing the area around Bolom Ajaw, thus protecting the PRI members who remain on the property. The intent of the PRI members from Agua Azul is to take over Bolom Ajaw's recuperated land (which becomes more valuable every day), privatize it, and then sell it to resort developers.

An elaborate plan to convert the Agua Azul area into a "world-class resort destination" shows the importance of the Bolom Ajaw property. The government plan includes a Boutique Hotel, a European Five-Star Hotel, a Conference Center with golf course, and a Lodge overlooking the waterfall on Bolom Ajaw's property. But of course, one would have to helicopter into the Lodge due to its remoteness! (The Lodge has a helipad.)

Norton Consulting, which advises governments on the market possibilities for resort and real estate development in North and Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Europe, actually has photos of the spectacular Agua Azul Cascades region on its website ([nortonconsulting.net](http://nortonconsulting.net)). Norton advised the Mexican government's National Fund for Fomenting Tourism (Fonatur) and collaborated on these very

*continued on page 10*

*Chiapas, continued from page 9*

elaborate plans with EDSA, an architectural firm in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Simply stated, the Mexican government wants to turn the Agua Azul region into a world-class resort destination as part of the Mesoamerica Project and the Zapatistas of Bolom Ajaw are in the way.

The key to Agua Azul's development as a world-class resort destination is the San Cristóbal-Palenque Toll Road. Absent a super-highway between San Cristóbal, Agua Azul and Palenque, the Boutique Hotel, Five Star Hotel and the Lodge with helipad will all be empty. However, the toll road has become a flashpoint of conflict between pro-government communities (in favor of the toll road) and pro-Zapatista communities (opposed to the toll road) located along its anticipated trajectory. Although no road construction is yet visible, the controversial project has already generated two deaths, numerous injuries, political prisoners, death threats, displacement and torture.

One of the communities taking paramilitary abuse because of its militant stand in

opposition to the toll road is Mitzitón, an *ejido* that borders on both the current highway to Agua Azul and the Pan American Highway between San Cristóbal and Comitán. The highway to Comitán is being widened and that construction, also part of the Mesoamerica Project, is well underway. Mitzitón's *ejido* assembly voted to join the EZLN's Other Campaign and also voted to resist the passage of the toll road through its land. Other Campaign members in Mitzitón have experienced non-stop paramilitary activity, including murder and torture. It would not surprise me if an attempt were made to take their *ejido* land by fraud, with government complicity.

We were in the offices of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) as yet another chapter in the Mitzitón saga unfolded. One of the council members, Manuel Díaz Heredia, had been detained the night before and taken to a state prison by the Mexican equivalent of the FBI on old and false charges. The *ejido* assembly voted to hold two state police and three state government employees as hos-

tages in response. They also voted to put up a roadblock on the Pan American Highway demanding their *compañero's* release. Frayba staff members were in Mitzitón, where negotiations with the government were taking place, as well as at the state prison monitoring Díaz Heredia's situation. Manuel Díaz Heredia was released from prison the following day after a judge ruled there was a complete lack of evidence against him.

Virtually unreported in the mainstream press, human rights abuse and repression go unpunished in this low-intensity war to reconquer recuperated lands and displace indigenous peoples. Some analysts with whom we spoke stated that Chiapas is the starting point for the Mesoamerica Project, which will also affect Central American countries and Colombia. Throughout both hemispheres of the American continent and the entire world, megaprojects involve the four wheels of capitalism: looting, repression, scorn and exploitation.

Source: *the author, cezmat@igc.org*

## Oaxaca: International Caravan Ambushed

*By Kristen Bricker, reporter*

On April 27, paramilitaries affiliated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party of Oaxaca, ambushed an international aid caravan en route to San Juan Aopalat.

At least two people were killed. The paramilitaries allowed police to remove two bodies. They have been identified as Alberta Cariño, director of CACTUS (Center for Community Support Working Together), and Juri Jaakkola, human rights observer from Finland.

The caravan was carrying food, water, medicines and much-needed supplies to San Juan Copala, which has been subject to a paramilitary blockade since January. The caravan was also accompanying teachers who were returning to classes after paramilitaries denied them access to the community nearly five months ago.

The caravan included representatives from the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO); Section 22 of the teachers union; CACTUS; Oaxacan Voices Constructing autonomy and Liberty (VOCAL); two reporters from the Mexican magazine

Contralinea and international observers from Belgium, Italy, Germany and Finland.

San Juan Copala has been under constant siege from pro-government paramilitaries since it declared itself autonomous following the 2006 peaceful uprising that shook the state and nearly drove the governor out of office. One such paramilitary organization, the Union for the Well-being of the Triqui Region (UBISORT), warned that the caravan could be in danger if it attempted to enter San Juan Copala.

Reports from survivors indicate that at approximately 2:50 pm just outside the community of La Sabana, which is controlled by UBISORT, the caravan reached a blockade of rocks piled on the road. As the vehicles began to turn around to head back, they came under fire from gunmen who were hiding in the brush. "They started shooting like madmen," says one survivor. Monica Citiali Santiago Ortiz, 22, was shot in the back. She is being treated in a hospital in Juxtlahuaca. The total number of wounded and dead is unknown. Paramilitaries continue to blockade the area, making rescue impossible.

Survivors who fled into the brush when

the caravan came under attack are beginning to surface as they make their way out of the area and into larger towns. Nonetheless, an unconfirmed number of people are still missing. VOCAL reports that two of its members remain missing after they fled into the brush. CACTUS reports another four missing, including the two Contralinea reporters and Martin Sautin, a Belgian citizen.

VOCAL members later reported that the two reporters, David Celia and Eribe Ramirez were rescued and Celia is recovering from wounds received in the attack.

The Oaxacan government has denied all responsibility for the attack, claiming that it had no knowledge of the caravan.

Members of human rights groups involved in the incident think the attack is aimed at destroying the autonomous processes of communities in Oaxaca, struggling to create their own way of life independent of state and federal governments. They hold Oaxacan PRI governor Ulises Ruiz responsible.

Source: *mywordismyweapon.com/2010/04, April 28, 2010*

## ARGENTINA: Dictator Sentenced

Argentina's last dictator was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison on April 21 for torture and illegal detentions committed during the nation's 1976-1983 military regime.

Reynaldo Bignone 82, shared responsibility in 56 cases involving break-ins, robbery, illegal detentions and torture in one of Argentina's largest torture centers. Bignone was the one who later granted amnesty to human rights violators and ordered the destruction of documents related to torture and disappearances of political opponents.

Also found responsible for these crimes, were five other retired military officers who received sentences ranging from 17 to 25 years in prison.

Source: *Deborah Rey, Associated Press, April 21, 2010*

## HAITI: Clinton Apologizes

Former US president Bill Clinton, now UN special envoy to Haiti, publically apologized in March for championing the export of US subsidized rice that destroyed Haiti's rice agriculture.

Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations on March 10, "It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake. I had to live everyday with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did; nobody else."

Up until the mid-1990s, Haitian farmers produced enough rice to feed the Haitian population. When Clinton encouraged the impoverished country to dramatically cut tariffs on imported rice and introduced inexpensive, subsidized US rice into the country, Haiti's farmers could not compete with the low cost of US rice imports. Consequently, farmers stopped growing rice, left their farms and migrated to cities like Port-au-Prince in the hope of finding jobs to support their families.

World leaders focused on fixing Haiti are now admitting for the first time that loosening trade barriers has only exacerbated hunger in poor countries.

Source: *Jonathan M. Katz, Associated Press, March 20, 2010*

## CUBA: Hunger Striker Dies

Orland Zapata Tamayo died of respiratory failure in a Cuban hospital on February 23 after an 83 day hunger strike. Mainstream media in the US jumped on the case in an effort to discredit the Cuban government. Media claims of Zapata being a political prisoner, a victim of deliberate mistreatment by authorities, or as "proof" of human rights abuses in Cuba.

The Cuban government reported that Zapata was not jailed for political dissidence, but for a series of petty crimes and infractions against public order, including the use of a machete to fracture the skull of another Cuban citizen. His short sentence of three years was extended to 25 years when he assaulted prison guards. While in prison, he demanded a TV, a stove and cell phone in his prison cell. His hunger strike was ostensibly to protest conditions in the prison.

The Cuban government indignantly denies that the Cuban medical authorities "murdered" Zapata; in fact the government statement details heroic efforts extended by medical personnel to keep Zapata alive, including feeding through intravenous and nasal drips, etc.

Source: *Emile Schepers, atwhit@roadrunner.com, March 11, 2010*

## URUGUAY: Former Guerilla Elected President

On March 1, Jose "Pepe" Mujica assumed the presidency of Uruguay. Mujica, a former Tupamaro guerilla who was imprisoned and tortured under the country's dictatorship, stood in front of a cheering multitude with his wife and vice president as he led the crowd in singing folksongs that were outlawed during military rule.

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano said the inauguration of Mujica "is born with the enthusiasm of the people, the fervent hope of the people, and this is something to take care of, to be very careful to not defraud. It is a day of celebration but also compromise."

Mujica lives with his wife outside the city on a farm where he grows vegetables and flowers. A neighbor said of the new president, "He's just an ordinary guy: You see him on his bike, his motorcycle, working among his flowers....He's going to strengthen the focus on the poor, giving them a helping hand." The president will also be donating most of his

salary to a program for homeless people.

Mujica appointed two other former guerillas in his government, as Minister of Defense and Minister of the Interior. His vice president is Danilo Astori, the former finance minister under previous president Tabare, a fact that indicates his economic policies are not likely to change significantly with the new administration.

Uruguayan political science professor Juan Andres Moraes says, "Mujica says his government will be more like Brazilian President Lula's than the administrations of Evo Morales or Chavez. Basically, he sees the differences clearly."

Mujica said he learned years ago to "embrace serpents," making compromises in order to get things done in politics. With all his charisma, populist persona and leftist background, his presidency will likely be characterized by moderation and a continuation of his predecessor's policies. In a recent gathering with businesspeople from Uruguay and Argentina, Mujica described himself as a "wild cat that has turned into a vegetarian."

Source: *Benjamin Dangl, March 4, 2010; Bendangl@gmail.com*

## COLOMBIA: Court Rules against Uribe

On February 26, the Colombian Constitutional Court ruled against holding a referendum that could have cleared the way for President Alvaro Uribe to run for a third consecutive term. By a 7-2 majority, the judges ruled the proposed referendum "in-executable."

The court decision struck down a measure passed last year by a vote of 85-5 by the House of Representatives that would have allowed Colombians to vote in a referendum on whether a president can serve three consecutive terms. The Senate had passed a similar bill. A constitutional amendment in 2005 allowed Uribe to run for a second term in May 2006.

The decision was met with celebration, music and whistles from members of the Citizens Alliance, which had opposed a third term for the president. Demonstrators' signs said, "The constitution lives." And long live the Constitutional Court." Rafael Pardo, presidential candidate from the Liberal Party said, "We Liberals feel proud of our institutions, which come out strengthened by this process."

Source: *Merco Press, February, 27, 2010; en.mercopress.com*

## GUATEMALA: Updates

On Dec. 3, 2009, after two tense months of hearings, a colonel and three ex-military commissioners were sentenced to 53 years and four months for the illegal detention and forced disappearances of eight people from the community of El Jute, Chiquimula in 1981.

This is the highest-ranking Guatemalan military official ever to be convicted of crimes committed during the 30-year internal conflict. Members of the Guatemala Accompaniment Project played a key role by accompanying witnesses throughout the trial.

Source: *NISGUA, December 2009*

On February 25, International Rights Advocates and Conrad and Scheres law firm filed a new lawsuit against Coca Cola Corporation in a case involving a campaign of violence, including rape and murder, and attempted murder against two Guatemalan trade unionists and their families. One trade unionist was forced to flee to the US in 2006; the other unionist was José Alberto Chavez, whose son and nephew were murdered and whose daughter was gang-raped on March 1, 2008.

Source: *bob.perillo@gmail.com, March 2, 2010*

On March 2, BBC reported that Guatemala's chief of National Police, Batazar Gomez and Nelly Bonilla were arrested in connection with a cocaine theft in March 2009 in which five police agents were killed. Also, two most senior officials in Guatemala's fight against drug trafficking were arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit a crime, illegal possession of weapons and obstruction of justice. The arrests came two days after President Alvaro Colom removed Interior Minister Raul Valasquez from office over alleged corruption.

Source: *BBC News, 3/2/2010*

### **Participate in a Solidarity Delegation to Honduras on the one year anniversary of the coup**

La Voz de los de Abajo, June 26-July 4, 2010; Contact Victoria Cervantes (312) 259-5042

Rights Action, June 26-July 4, Contact Annie Bird, [annie@rightsaction.org](mailto:annie@rightsaction.org), (202) 680-3002

Quixote Center, June 24-July 1, Contact Jenny Atlee, [jennya@quixote.org](mailto:jennya@quixote.org)

**See Task Force website: [mitfamericas.org](http://mitfamericas.org) for more details on these delegations**

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