

- 1 PERU
President on shaky ground
- 2 MEXICO
Saving the axolotl
- 4 URUGUAY
Indigenous lineage
- 5 BOLIVIA
The biopiracy threat
- 6 CHILE
The forgotten refugees
- 7 ARGENTINA
Cultural patrimony or tourist site?
- 8 GUATEMALA
Domestic employees fight for their rights
- 9 HAITI
Workers protest privatization layoffs
- 11 ARGENTINA
Cristina dreams of Evita
- 12 LATIN AMERICA/
CARIBBEAN
Unpaid work

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Mexico: Conservationists are trying to save the axolotl, a unique amphibian. [Page 2](#)

RICHARD JACOBSEN

PERU
Cecilia Remón in Lima

President on shaky ground

Alan García completes one year in office as a natural disaster gives way to a logistical disaster.

President Alan García marked one year in office July 28 with ambitious goals for the remaining four years of his term and only scant self-criticism.

Just over two weeks later, however, a 7.9-magnitude quake rocked Peru's south-central coast, killing more than 500 people and injuring 2,000. At least 85,000 people were made homeless from the tremor and aid was slow arriving to the hardest hit areas.

The quake and the lack of aid reaching victims made it clear that the country is lacking in an adequate disaster contingency plans. García smiled for television cameras as homeless residents in Pisco, Ica and Chincha slept near the ruins that became their homes, and in the rural surrounding areas, watching as aid trucks and flights went flying by.

In his state-of-the-nation speech marking his first year in office, García highlighted the country's strong economic growth — eight consecutive years' worth — a sharp contrast from his 1985-90 term which was remembered for 7,000-percent inflation.

But even though the Peru's economy has grown an average of 5 percent annually since 2001, almost half of the population continues to live in poverty, 10 percent is unemployed and 60 percent work in the informal sector and are lacking any kind of social security.

García won a runoff election in June of last year promising "responsible change" (*LP*, *June 14, 2006*), but Peru hasn't seen much of either thing.

In the weeks leading up to García's 1-year anniversary in office the country was gripped by sometimes violent protests throughout the country in demand for more attention from the state (*LP*, *July 25, 2007*).

According to a report from the Ombudsman's Office, between August 2006 and July 2007 there have been 75 social conflicts registered. Currently 28 are still active complaints and 46 have been shelved.

The report also states that 61 percent of the cases took place in rural areas, and 81 percent of them in areas where the population lives below the poverty line. Forty-five percent of the cases are related to labor demands in natural resource extraction, such as mining, and 28 percent pertain to demands aimed at national and local government. The remaining 14 percent is split evenly between *campesino* community and union issues.

In an effort to calm the situation, García announced a "Social Pact" to try to appease the protesters such as an increase in the minimum wage, which is currently US\$158, the

second-lowest in Latin America after Bolivia's \$56 per month.

"There is a basic issue in redistribution," García said. "If exports and sales grow, we have to think about the workers' situation. Our objective is to achieve a social pact ... for productivity, employment and the salaries that will sustain this economic growth."

But this proposal, a seemingly rushed effort by García to quiet the protest, is a long way off from producing results.

The National Confederations of Workers of Peru, the country's largest labor union, has refused to participate in the plan, stating that there is no need to establish new spaces for agreements.

"You can't be creating social dialogue spaces that already exist," Juan José Gorriti, one of the union's leaders, told the press. He was referring to the National Labor Council, a branch of the Labor Ministry that seeks to bring together workers, employers and government authorities, and the National Agreement, a forum created in 2002 and made up of government, political parties and civil society organizations, stating that they "have to do with the state's policies."

The situation became even more confusing when García said that the so-called Social Pact was not a new version of dialogue bodies overseen by the state, but rather something new that would focus on growth goals until 2011, when his term ends.

Leader of the opposition Peruvian Nationalist Party, Ollanta Humala — whom García defeated in last year's runoff (*LP, Jan. 25 and May 17, 2006*) — said that the measure was just a meager attempt to "quiet the social protests."

"In the case that the people don't participate, in the case that the agreement comes from up above to convince those below that the country can be developed, [the Social Pact] is not going to have a future," Humala said.

The former presidential candidate says García's administration "governs for a minority."

In an interview with the Lima daily *La República*, Humala said that García "has not kept his word since the campaign."

"The country is waiting for a change to the economic model, for the partition of power, and nothing has been done. That's why there are these social protests. García governs for the minority that holds the economic power."

But García still has lofty goals planned for the next four years, however, in an apparent effort to prove Humala's criticism wrong. He said that he wants to reduce illiteracy from 12 to 4 percent and reduce poverty to 30 percent (current figures are more than 44 percent), but he failed to explain just how.

Over the past year, García forgot many of his campaign promises. One of them is that he would not endorse the free trade pact with the United States that his predecessor, Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) signed in 2006, and the previous Congress approved a few months later.

García also criticized the mining companies for the windfall profits they earned thanks to high metal prices, and promised that his government would tax those extra earnings to benefit the government.

Neither promise has materialized. Instead of taxing the mining companies, he agreed with them on a "voluntary" contribution. For the free trade agreement, García's government has gone to great lengths to ensure that the agreement is signed by the Democratically-controlled US Congress.

For politicians such as former congressman Javier Diez Canseco, president of the Socialist Party, "what is happening today in Peru is a struggle for political and economic change. The people want more equality, more rights, more participation, better wages and salaries, better public services, and they want money that is generated with national wealth, with Peruvian labor, not to match the miserable salaries and minuscule participation of the country."

This was evident in quake-ravaged Ica. The department is responsible for 42 percent of the national asparagus production. Between 2000 and 2004, the average salary of an industry executive rose 51 percent, while a laborer in the asparagus industry had just a 1-percent increase in his or her salary (see <http://noticiasaliadas.org/tlc/tlcworkeng.pdf>). □

MEXICO

Lorraine Orlandi in Mexico City

Saving the axolotl

Tourism and contamination threaten once pristine environment of unique amphibian.

In the ancient canals of Xochimilco on Mexico City's edge, the wild axolotl is losing a struggle to survive against the tide of urbanization. Mexican scientists, international conservationists and local boatmen are hoping a new project can save this unique amphibian from dying out in its last remaining natural habitat, and in the process restore a unique ecosystem in one of the world's largest metropolises, home to 20 million people.

The Mexican axolotl — endemic to the high volcanic basin settled six centuries ago by the Aztecs — is an aquatic salamander, resembling an overgrown tadpole with ruffled gills.

Region at a glance

- 2 NICARAGUA
Recovering rivers
- 3 LATIN AMERICA
No school, no work
- 4 LATIN AMERICA
Afro-descendent women on the lowest rung of society
- 5 CENTRAL AMERICA
Massive deportation
- 9 EL SALVADOR
Denying indigenous roots

NICARAGUA

Recovering rivers. The Nicaraguan government launched a national campaign to reforest 60,000 hectares (148,000 acres) per year until 2012 as part of an effort to recover 18 rivers lost as a result of uncontrolled logging.

More than 210 tree species will be planted, according to local type and climate, says the National Forest Institute, which is overseeing the campaign.

The priorities of the "green crusade" are the headwaters of the 18 rivers that disappeared, in the western departments of León, Chinandega, Matagalpa, Estelí and Jinotega

Forests play a crucial role in recharging rivers and lakes, capturing rainwater and filtering it to underground water layers and aquifers, which feed the surface bodies of water.

"Planting a tree simply for the sake of planting a tree is not beneficial if it is not accompanied by another purpose, such as recuperating the sources of water that the Nicaraguan population needs so much," said Mario García, a technician with the institute. —*IPS*.

THANK YOU

Comunicaciones Aliadas (formerly Noticias Aliadas) thanks all of you who have expressed your solidarity with us and our country after the Aug. 15 earthquake in southern Peru.

The following bank accounts in Peru's BBVA Banco Continental are designated for donations to quake victims:

011-0444-4444444444 (soles)
011-0444-4444444446 (USD)
011-0444-4444444447 (euros)

LATIN AMERICA

No school, no work. Some 22 million youths in Latin America and the Caribbean neither study nor work — 21 percent of the 106 million 15-24-year-olds in the region — according to a recent study by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Jean Maninat, the regional representative for the region, said the figures show that “a fundamental sector of the population” is not going to contribute to their countries’ progress and “will stay on the outskirts of social and economic development.”

The ILO said it plans to train youths in a business initiative, aimed at contributing to the creation of better jobs and places of employment.

He said that better inclusion of women, rural and indigenous groups is important for Latin America and the Caribbean so that the region “takes full advantage of the work and creativity of the youths in building human development.” —LP.

The axolotl never fully metamorphoses from the larval stage to live on land like other amphibians; it reaches maturity and remains aquatic. Celebrated by Latin American writers and Mexican muralists, it takes its Nahuatl name from the Aztec God Xolotl, who often appeared in legend as a dog or monster.

The axolotl, or *ajolote* in Spanish, also is studied by medical researchers for its unusual genetic characteristics, including the ability to regenerate complete limbs and heart and brain cells, and is a popular aquarium pet around the world.

While it is widely bred in captivity, urban development has reduced its once extensive natural habitat to Xochimilco — the 180 kilometers (112 miles) of channels that remain from the water-based network of agriculture and commerce that flourished in pre-Hispanic times — and nearby Lake Chalco.

The axolotl's numbers are dropping in the polluted waters of Xochimilco, now a colorful tourist attraction about 20 kilometers (13 miles) from the city center. The population density has shrunk six-fold in the past five years, according to recent field studies by a team at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM).

Luis Zambrano, a biologist at UNAM and leader of the team working to restore Xochimilco, says if the trend continues the axolotl will be extinct in less than 50 years. His axolotl research group, GIA-X, has made the axolotl the flagship species in a campaign to clean up an ecosystem that also houses hundreds of other animal and plant species — some used in medicine since pre-Columbian times — and which is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Through an education campaign aimed at residents, public service workers, Mexican and foreign tourists, experts at Mexico City's Autonomous Metropolitan University have worked to raise public awareness about threats to the axolotl. Scientists like UNAM's Zambrano, meanwhile, are investigating the axolotl's condition in the wild and exploring methods to protect it.

On weekends, Xochimilco is like a raucous floating block party, complete with waterborne beer, taco vendors and mariachi bands. Visitors are ferried down canals in brightly decorated boats called *trajineras* by boatmen using long poles. Few pay much attention to the natural surroundings or their historical value, however, and littering tourists and careless workers contribute to environmental problems.

The conservation project has focused partly on educating the estimated 1,500 canal boatmen, called *remeros*, and training them to teach each other and tourists about protecting the Xochimilco ecosystem.

Raúl Daniel Soto, 41, grew up in Xochimilco and followed in the family tradition to become a *remero*. In a good week, a hard-working boatman can earn about \$100, he says.

Soto, now leading the conservation drive among boatmen, remembers when the water looked pristine and the axolotl, a local delicacy, seemed abundant.

“Most of us learned to swim in these waters,” he said. “My grandparents, my great-grandparents, my parents worked to leave this place to us in good condition. But if things continue as they are, the time will come when I won't have a way to make a living here.”

Almost 80 *remeros* have finished the training in a series of workshops that began in 2003, and a core group is taking over the workshops to train fellow boatmen. It seems like a modest gain, but it was no small feat given the closed nature of the *remero* society, say Soto and the UAM biologists who spent afternoons playing soccer with boatmen to win their trust.

In 1325, the Aztecs founded the city of Tenochtitlan — now Mexico City — on an island in a huge lake in the Valley of Mexico. Xochimilco, with its system of canals running among raised farming beds, or *chinampas*, became a key agricultural supplier for the empire. Today the *chinampas* have dwindled due to environmental degradation and economic competition. Those that remain produce mainly ornamental flowers and vegetables for sale.

The natural springs that fed Xochimilco's channels were diverted to meet drinking water needs as the city grew. At the same time, the canal waters and sediment were contaminated with poorly treated sewage and industrial wastewater. Modern pesticides used on *chinampas* added to the pollution.

Carp and tilapia, introduced to promote a local fishing industry, prey on axolotl eggs and larvae and have altered the environment and hurt other native species. Contamination from sewage and industrial waste makes the fish unsuitable for eating, and the conservation project includes efforts to eradicate them. Zambrano is awaiting city funds to pay fishermen to remove unwanted species. Until these problems are resolved, reintroducing captive axolotl into the wild to restore the population is not viable, he says.

Zambrano admits that the axolotl, which he calls, “small, ugly, drab,” seems an unlikely poster child for conservation. “People see it and go, ‘yuk,’” he says. But he and other proponents believe it can win over average Mexicans with its cultural significance and intriguing biological traits. The axolotl is quintessentially Mexican, a source of national pride whose natural environment itself may hold discoveries for the future, they say. □

Indigenous lineage

Study reveals one-third of Uruguayans have Charrúa blood.

For almost two centuries since Uruguay gained its independence from Spain, many of the country's residents have believed that they have no indigenous blood and have boasted about having the most "European" ancestries on the American continent.

But a new study shows that more than a third of the some 3.5 million Uruguayans do have at least some blood from the Charrúa indigenous people.

"We have been studying our genetic roots for a long time: first through our morphological features, later with blood lines, and now molecularly, and there's no doubt that there is a strong indigenous presence in our population's DNA," said anthropologist Mónica Sans, director of the Biological Anthropology Department of the state University of the Republic, which conducted the study. "In the 19th century the Charrúas were massacred, but the extermination doesn't mean that they didn't leave descendants behind."

"The results found by different studies go completely against what was thought to be the Uruguayan identity. We always thought, since that was how our official history went, that we were a people transplanted from Europe, and that may be true on a cultural level, but at a blood level we're clearly not," Sans added.

Uruguayans had boasted of their official story until now. The *Libro del Centenario*, or Centenary Book, which marked the 100 years since the country's first call for independence on August 25, 1825, stated that Uruguay was "the only South American country that doesn't have Indians, and as a result [doesn't have] the problems that Indians cause."

On April 11, 1831 the few Charrúas who survived the war of independence — they were among the ranks of the liberation army — were killed in a trap that then-President Fructuoso Rivera set up for them on the banks of the Salsipuedes stream, 320 kilometers (200 miles) north of Montevideo.

Rivera, who used the indigenous group in his military campaigns, signed the extermination order by saying "we feel obligated to act in such a way for the structuring of a society that must be organized by order and respect for private property."

He justified his order saying that the Charrúas held "the most beautiful and coveted portion of land in the Republic."

Sans said the studies are still in their preliminary stages — it lacks data on a department level — but she explains that mitochondrial DNA, which is transmitted only by the mother — has shown "enormous surprises," because previous studies spoke of indigenous ancestries of between 10 and 20 percent depending on the region. But she says that now in some departments such as Tacuarembó, in northern Uruguay, the rate is as high as 62 percent.

"We estimate that indigenous ancestry on a national level could be around 40 percent," said Enrique Auyanet, a member of the Association of Descendants of the Charrúa Nation (ADENCH). He added that other studies such as that of Cynthia Pagano, director of the police force's biological laboratory, estimate that the rate could be 31 percent. "To that 31 percent, you have to add everything that is lost, because the male doesn't transmit it."

Sans agrees. "That 31 percent only includes what is transmitted by the mother. How many could there be who don't have Charrúa blood from the maternal side, but do have it on the paternal side? It's correct to estimate indigenous ancestry to be no less than 40 percent," she said.

Most anthropologists share Sans' hypothesis about why Uruguayans could have such a high level of indigenous blood in their DNA. They say that during the Spanish Conquest, the men arrived without women and settled in the countryside. They had children with indigenous women, children who remained in the countryside, and they are today the country's base population, as it has been observed in the Tacuarembó DNA study.

But the weight of the official history that was told since the times of the Salsipuedes genocide is so powerful that in the most recent census in 2006, only 3.5 percent of those surveyed — just over 115,000 Uruguayans — said they have an indigenous ancestor.

"The official history has made us hide our identities and I think that what is appearing now is a positive perception about who we are," said Auyanet. "It's been difficult to perceive ourselves as having an Indian origin, since there are no more [indigenous] communities, there are no physical features, nor skin colorings that are clearly distinct, and within the family it was never spoken of clearly, or because the elders really ignore who their ancestors were, or in some way it made them of ashamed to recognize their Charrúa origin."

For Sans, this recognition of identity has a lot to do with the forced exile of thousands of Uruguayans during the 1973-85 military dictatorship.

"Beyond genetic data, which are just from those years, there was a change in mentality. We always thought of ourselves as the Europeans of America, but when we had to go to Europe, we were discriminated against and included as some sort of lesser race ... we were no longer Europeans as we had thought. It was a positive shock," Sans said.

Some today, who call themselves Charrúas and admit that there is not cultural continuity, have reclaimed the recovery of the scant legacy left by their ancestors: living in harmony with nature, the way they ride horses and dominate animals without punishing them, cooking and some 60 terms clearly identified by linguists. □

LATIN AMERICA

Afro-descendent women on the lowest rung of society. Latin America and the Caribbean are home to some 75 million black women, but they hold not even 50 of the high-ranking positions in government.

"The inequality is before our eyes: we hold few or no decision-making slots. Our situation is one of the worst," said Nicaraguan Dorotea Wilson, coordinator of the Network of Afro-Latin American, Afro-Caribbean and Diaspora Women, a group present in 33 countries.

More than 90 percent of Latin America and the Caribbean's Afro-descendent population is poor, has access to only low-paying jobs and have a low level of education.

In Brazil, 71 percent of black women work in the informal labor sector, as do 65 percent of black men and 61 percent of white women.

Eighty percent of Afro-Colombians live in extreme poverty, and in Cuba, despite its socialist system. Afro-descendents live in some of the worst housing and have some of the lowest-paying jobs. —IPS.

BOLIVIA
Martin Garat in La Paz

The biopiracy threat

Valuable resources lack protection.

Bolivia's flora and fauna is some of the most diverse in the world. The landlocked Andean country is home to a wide variety of climate zones and the plants and herbs that grow in the highlands, valleys and jungle comprise a genetic wealth that is little exploited by Bolivian industry, and often falls into the hands of biopiracy.

"Foreign scientists visit our indigenous communities in an effort to gain their ancestral learnings on plants and herbs. They take seeds and samples with them to test their uses and effects. They later sell medicines and other products made from stolen species, or they simply sell them in their natural state," said Róger Carvajal, a doctor with a Ph.D in biological sciences, and a former official in the country's Development Planning Ministry.

One of the most frequent cases of biopiracy is that of quinoa, an Andean cereal that has become fashionable in European cooking because of its high nutritional value.

In 1994, quinoa was patented in the United States by two researchers in the University of Colorado, who later admitted that they had only discovered a method to produce hybrids of the quinoa-based cereal. After a long court battle, the patent was revoked four years later.

According to Carvajal, a major problem is that these "biothefts" are difficult to detect. "It's a broad practice, above all when it's time to talk about specific products. It's better to speak of species, and companies that sell products without sharing the profits with the indigenous communities that have cared for these plants for thousands of years."

Foreign companies eye Bolivian wood, medicinal plants and fruits.

These genetic resources are extremely difficult to protect on the vast Bolivian territory and customs agents are scarce along the borders, and it is difficult to find small seeds hidden in luggage.

So, some indigenous communities are taking precautions.

"The indigenous peoples have denounced the presence of foreigners who take plants with them. Some communities have even come to control the entries and exits on their lands," Carvajal said.

Another problem is that it is not always possible to determine the exact origin of a stolen species. The species found in the Bolivian Amazon are similar to those found in the jungles of Brazil, Colombia and Peru.

"South American countries need to form a common law that protects the whole region. If there's control only in some countries, the same plants can be stolen from where there is less protection," Carvajal said.

In Manaus, the capital of Brazil's Amazonas state, visitors to the region face regular revisions. Foreign scientists are frequently detained for trying to smuggle seeds or plants from the region in their luggage. In Bolivia the situation is different: there has not been one case of an arrest for biopiracy.

"Either there haven't been many cases in our country, or the robberies that have taken place haven't been identified," said Iván Zambrana, who works for the biodiversity department in the Rural Development, Agriculture and Environment Ministry.

In 1993, Bolivia ratified an international biodiversity convention that established norms for the legal access to biodiversity found in the country. But "no one has the responsibility of assuring that these norms are enforced. There are plans to train customs agents, but not much is known now about the flow of our genetic resources. The environment never received the attention it deserves," Zambrana said.

Both Zambrana and Carvajal agree that a study of the country's flora must be done in order to know what species exist and what their properties are. The study's results, they say, should include an official registry of the country's biodiversity. A Biodiversity Institute has already begun to be prepared, but it will be another two years before the results are published.

Experts suggest forming agreements with foreign companies that obligate them to redistribute the profits Bolivian products generate for them with the country, like an accord already in place between Bolivia and the Swiss cooperative Migros, the leader in small-scale food sales in the country. When it sells the four kinds of Bolivian potatoes that it is authorized to grow, it must give 5 percent of the gross income to Bolivia, under the agreement.

"Two of the four species have responded well to the climatic conditions in Switzerland. The cultivation methods are still being perfected, so the potatoes have not yet been put out on the market," said Marcelo Collao, an official with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, known in Latin America with the acronym COSUDE) in Bolivia.

COSUDE, which has worked for 20 years supporting potato seeds in Bolivia, forged the agreement, and Migros became interested in selling Bolivian potatoes on the Swiss market.

The Bolivian producers "are only going to benefit from the sales of seeds," according to the agreement, Collao explains, adding that 5 percent of the sales in Switzerland will go back to the Bolivian government, "since the potatoes are part of our national patrimony."

The potatoes will be on sale in less than two years. COSUDE recently began evaluating the project. If the results are positive, fair biotrade could become a viable alternative to biopiracy in Bolivia. □

CENTRAL AMERICA

Massive deportation. Some 86,000 Central American emigrants returned to their home countries during the first half of 2007, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Some 40,000 of them were deported from the United States, while others were deported from Mexico or Guatemala or returned on their own accord.

According to Mirna Rodríguez, who heads the IOM in Honduras — the country most affected by the deportations — as of July 10, 15,800 Hondurans returned to their home country by air, mainly from the United States, and another 23,690 from Guatemala and Mexico by land.

Rodríguez said "that it is already the norm for two flights to arrive each day with 100 to 200 [deported] passengers on board, while some six buses with 50 passengers each arrive in Honduras from the Guatemalan border, coming mainly from there and Mexico."

According to El Salvador's National Migration Office, the United States deported 10,954 Salvadorans between January and June, double the number from that period in 2006. Some 10,400 illegal Guatemalan immigrants were deported from the United States during that period and another 23,102 from Mexico.

—CENTRAL AMERICA REPORT/LP

CHILE

Benjamin Witte in Santiago

The forgotten refugees

Exiles flee their home countries, but find they are unwelcome here.

Blanca Pineda never wanted to leave Colombia, although, when forced to flee, she chose Chile. A published author, Pineda was attracted by Chile's literary tradition, by poets like Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral.

But in the nearly two years since her arrival, the Colombian exile's original, idealized vision of the country has gradually morphed into a far darker impression; one that's characterized by fear and mistrust, and by the feeling that she and her family are simply not welcome here.

"One carries around a profound sadness," she confesses. "It's from being uprooted, from seeing how your homeland is being torn apart, how all traces of your family disappear, everything. One carries around so much. In the end, it just messes you up."

Pineda is a refugee, one of a growing number that in recent years have made their way to Chile. Currently there are some 1,600 recognized refugees here, up from just 250 at the start of the decade. Approximately 80 percent of refugees come from Colombia, although Chile has also attracted refugees from war-torn countries as far away as Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka.

The numbers represent a significant shift for a country that in the not too distant past — during the 1973-90 Augusto Pinochet dictatorship — was a net exporter of political exiles.

"For Chile, this really is novel. There were refugees before, in 1939 for example, when a ship brought a group of Spanish refugees. But those were isolated things... It's not like now," said Marta González of the Vicaría de Pastoral Social, a Santiago-based Church organization that works directly with refugees.

The trend has not escaped the attention of President Michelle Bachelet, herself a political exile during the Pinochet regime.

"Colombia is one of the countries that has produced a large number of refugees and displaced people as a result of the armed conflict," she said at a June 2006 World Refugee Day event, promising that her government would not turn a blind eye to the situation. "Some of them have sought refuge in Chile, and that's something to which neither the government nor society as a whole can remain indifferent or isolated from," she said.

But even with the president's pledge of support, Pineda and other refugees complain that Chile is prepared neither bureaucratically nor socially to handle the growing influx.

Right now there are two bodies that deal with all incoming refugees: the Interior Ministry's Immigration Department and the Vicaría de Pastoral Social, which functions as a go-between for the Chilean government and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). According to González, who heads the Vicaría's UNHCR-funded refugee program, the organization has enough resources only to handle 80 applicants per year. "More and more are arriving. The number of people applying for refuge has gone up almost exponentially every year," she says.

It's the same story in the Immigration Department, which can now take up to two years to process applications. The wait leaves applicants in a state of legal purgatory. Without government-issued identification numbers, they are cut off from public health and other basic services. Waiting applicants also have trouble obtaining paid work. Although the Department does issue temporary work visas, many employers simply refuse to accept the documents.

"Even though they have a work visa and a certificate from the Interior Ministry that explains they're legally allowed to be here, business owners don't recognize the two documents... And so there's no work for these people," says González.

Chile lacks precise refugee legislation that would deal specifically with procedural and other issues relevant to refugee applicants. Instead, such matters are dictated by an article within Chile's General Immigration Law, which according to Cristina Frodden of Amnesty International is both outdated and insufficient.

"It's a law that was passed during the dictatorship, basically to kick foreigners out, not to bring them in and protect them," says Frodden. "[Refugees] arrive here and they don't have a place to stay. They have problems with the paperwork they're given. The documents don't help them find work. [The documents] don't allow them to be covered by the public healthcare system... They have a lot of problems. They need a law that will regulate all of that, that really protects the refugees."

But for many of the refugees, bureaucratic headaches and insufficient legislation are only part of what makes living here difficult. What's also missing, says Blanca Pineda, is basic compassion.

One night, approximately a year ago, Pineda and her husband were attacked outside their apartment in Macúl, one of Santiago's numerous satellite districts. The family has



Colombian Blanca Pineda sought refuge in Chile.

SEAN HANEY

"[The General Immigration Law] was passed during the dictatorship, basically to kick foreigners out, not to bring them in and protect them."

— Cristina Frodden

“The only ones who have benefited are the tourism business owners who buy or take over our lands and build hotels that offend the sight.”

— Teresa Casasola

since moved to the outer edge of an even more peripheral suburb. “We don’t know if they were local representatives of [Colombian] groups. We don’t know if they were common criminals. We also don’t know if it was just an act of xenophobia,” she says.

Pineda finds not knowing the reason for her isolation particularly difficult. Xenophobia almost certainly plays a role, but so does her ingrained fear, her now-habitual distrust of those around her.

“More than anything else, I want to make a call for solidarity,” she says. “The majority of Colombians are here to protect our lives. Of course we need work and social opportunities. Colombians are really good workers. We’re very competitive. We have big dreams. Being Colombian doesn’t mean you’re involved in drugs, or narcotics trafficking. We just want an opportunity to survive in this country.” □

ARGENTINA

Pablo Waisberg in Buenos Aires

Cultural patrimony or tourist site?

Developers acquire important ancestral lands to turn a profit.

Teresa Casasola says she’s been duped. The councilwoman has lived in Tilcara, one of the most important towns in the Humahuaca Valley in Argentina’s northern Jujuy province. She is also a descendent of the Coya indigenous people.

She says the 2003 decision by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to declare the Humahuaca Valley a Cultural and Natural Heritage Site is not an honor at all, but more in line with the Spanish Conquest in the Americas.



Tourism takes off in Tilcara but threatens local population.

For Casasola and social organization leaders in Jujuy the title has led to a fever for the areas lands, mostly by tourism developers whose ideas are putting the local population at risk.

The Humahuaca Valley, a 170-kilometer (106-mile) stretch of multi-colored valleys, is a very dry area near the Atacama Desert and home to many communities that conserve thousand-year-old traditions and customs.

“This decision is fantastic to us and we’re very happy with the support we received from countries like Mexico, Chile and Spain,” said Argentina’s then-Secretary Assistant of Culture Magdalena Faillace, from Paris, where UNESCO announced the designation four years ago. Faillace said it would help Argentina’s bid for an Inter-American Development Bank loan to increase cultural tourism in Jujuy.

But residents of the Humahuaca Valley, who were born there and have ancestral

roots in the area, had nothing to do with the decision. Some of them warned against the dangers that the area would become a free-for-all for tourism business developers, and their sacred lands, where they hold ceremonies honoring *Pacha Mama*, "Mother Earth," year after year, would go straight to the real estate market.

"They said it was going to be beneficial for the population but the only ones who have benefited are the tourism business owners who buy or take over our lands and build hotels that offend the sight. Besides, tourists go to the big hotels," said Casasola, who is a town councilwoman for the opposition Radical Civic Union, the party of Tilcara Mayor Félix Pérez.

But they face tough opposition on the issue. Even though Pérez recognizes that there has been a land conflict because since the area was declared a Cultural Heritage Site there began to appear titles claiming public lands, "the tourism investments generated new jobs." He said that the construction and management of hotels accounts for 70 percent of the jobs in Tilcara and has also led to a drop in unemployment.

According to Pérez, in 1995 there were 115 beds in hotels and some 30 houses for rent. In 2007, that number jumped to 1,500 beds in 80 hotels.

Cultural festivities are one of the main tourist draws in the area, but Pérez says that many hotel owners refuse to work with the local residents in the organization of these ceremonies, such as donating food for some of the musicians that participate in the events.

In response to what they feel as an invasion, the Tilcara residents last year began a takeover of some of the public lands. There are currently five settlements where 122 families live.

One of the settlements is located next to the Salvador Mazza Medical Clinic, named after a doctor who fought Chagas Disease. The building is abandoned and the Tilcara residents want to recover it and create a new health center there.

"Before the foreigners get to it, it would be better used by the Tilcareños," argued social leader Carlos "the Dog" Santillán from Jujuy.

Guillermo Núñez, a member of Corriente del Pueblo, a social organization, said that his group is working to "return the lands to the Jujuy residents.

"Many people in the area, who have lived on one patch of land for years, who don't see the rest of the land as saleable good, end up selling the land where their families have lived for a little bit of money and afterwards become the employee of the buyer," Núñez explained. "With time, these people end up migrating to the cities or fighting anew for their land." □

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

Domestic employees fight for their rights

Facing slavery-like conditions, the most vulnerable labor sector starts to fight back.

At the age of 15, Xiomara left her village in the northern department of Huehuetenango, and traveled to Guatemala City to work as a domestic employee for a middle-class household. Her dream was to become a secretary so that she could earn enough money to support her elderly mother, who earned a meager living washing and ironing clothes for her neighbors.

Xiomara, who asked that her name be changed, fearing reprisals from past employers, had left school after her third year of primary school as she needed to help her mother look after her three younger brothers. Her alcoholic father was rarely at home and as a child, Xiomara experienced great hardship.

At first, Xiomara's employers treated her well and promised to give her Saturdays off. But this promise never materialized and she was given more and more tasks. When she complained and asked why she did not have a day off, she was told to shut up or leave.

With nowhere else to go, she did not leave her employers and as the years went by, the abuse became far worse. Her employers' sons grew up, and they began to taunt her because of her Mayan origins. One day, one of the teenage boys beat her so severely that he broke her leg.

When she told her employers, they simply fired her without giving her any compensation after 10 years of service.

Xiomara tried in vain to look for another type of job and finally she was accepted in another household. Her new employers liked having parties and on one occasion a guest raped her in a state of drunkenness.

At the time, she was too afraid and ashamed to tell anyone what had happened. When her employers finally discovered that she was pregnant, she was told that she

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

Inefficient fight against corruption. A recent World Bank study on worldwide governance indicators revealed that Latin American and Caribbean countries fight corruption less than any other region.

According to the study, "A Decade of Measuring the Quality of Governance" that evaluated governance between 1996 and 2006 with six indicators, the effectiveness in the fight against corruption in most of the 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries did not reach more than 50 percent.

The study evaluated voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of serious violence, governmental effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA Corruption Control 2006

Country	Percentile range*
Chile	89.8
Uruguay	75.2
Costa Rica	67.0
El Salvador	53.9
Colombia	51.9
Panama	49.5
Brazil	47.1
Mexico	46.6
Peru	45.1
Argentina	40.8
Dominican Rep.	34.0
Bolivia	31.1
Guatemala	26.7
Ecuador	24.8
Nicaragua	23.8
Honduras	22.3
Paraguay	13.6
Venezuela	12.6

* 0-100, with 100 being the least corruption. Source: World Bank

EL SALVADOR

Denying indigenous roots. "We must grow up with the idea that having indigenous roots or being indigenous is something to be proud of," said Maya priest Gustavo Pineda, a member of the Council of Maya Priests of Western El Salvador, during a ceremony marking the International Day of the World's Indigenous People on Aug. 9.

"Since the [Spanish] Conquest, there has been a complete denial of all indigenous cultural expression," he added. "There is no law that recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples and Decree 107 of the International Labor Organization that refers to respect for ancestral peoples has still not been put into effect."

For his part, Amado de Jesús Ramos, coordinator of the Pasos del Jaguar Indigenous Association complains that El Salvador lacks a census of indigenous communities.

"For years, as a result of so much persecution, our grandmothers and grandfathers have lived in the shadows, while some young people are ashamed of their roots," he said.

Pineda and Ramos participated in the First Nauat Culture Festival where ancient rituals were held such as honoring the four cardinal points, the four natural elements and the four colors of corn. —ALC.

would be allowed to stay until she had her baby and then she would have to leave.

Xiomara, now 30, earns a living selling food on the streets. She says that although her financial situation is unstable, she would never work as a domestic employee again.

Xiomara's case is by no means unique. According to a recent study carried out by the Support Center for Domestic Employees, known as CENTRACAP, its Spanish acronym, 62 percent of the female workforce in Guatemala is employed in the domestic service sector. Around 80 percent of these women are indigenous.

Most of them have little or no education, and many are internal migrants, who, like Xiomara, come to the capital in search of a better life but often end up working in conditions close to slavery.

Around 35 percent of domestic employees are underage and from in rural areas, girls as young as seven are employed as servants.

These young girls are the most vulnerable. Many rural families living in extreme poverty who cannot afford to support their daughters, place these girls in middle or upper class households to work as domestic employees. Parents grant employers the right to punish their daughters if their work is unsatisfactory. As a result, many girls, like Xiomara, endure physical and sexual abuse.

A domestic employee earns about 400 quetzales (US\$52) a month in Guatemala City and as little as 200 quetzales (\$26) in rural areas, far below the minimum wage, currently 1,300 quetzales (\$170). In the capital, domestic employees are granted a day off, Sunday, but in rural areas they only get a half day.

"We are fighting for these women to be treated with dignity and respect. Why should domestic service be any different from any other job? Most domestic employees start work at 4 a.m. and are not allowed to go to bed until 11 p.m. They have no lunch break and many eat on the run while they're doing their chores. Domestic employees don't get sick leave. If they fall ill, they're simply fired," said CENTRACAP director Mildred Díaz.

In 1989, Chilean born Eugenia Aranguiz together with two friends decided to help these women and set up CENTRACAP. At first, Aranguiz and her friends held workshops for domestic employees in the street or anywhere they could find until 1989 when they gathered enough funds to rent a building for their activities. CENTRACAP is currently staffed by four women, all volunteers and former domestic employees.

Today, CENTRACAP holds workshops for about 70 domestic workers every year. Women learn what their rights are under Guatemalan law and how to draw up an employment contract if their employers' fail to give them one. Women can also take vocational courses in cookery, dressmaking, health and beauty.

In March 2006, CENTRACAP won an appeal through the Constitutional Court, declaring two articles of the Guatemalan Labor Code unconstitutional. These two articles stated that there was no minimum wage or fixed working hours for domestic employees.

This was an important victory but much work remains to be done. Despite the ruling a law for the Protection of Domestic Employees stating their rights and establishing sanctions for employers who violate them has yet to be approved by Congress.

"We've approached different members of Congress but they have taken little or no interest in this issue", says Díaz. With general elections looming in September, CENTRACAP fears the issue will simply be forgotten. □

HAITI

Inter Press Service

Workers protest privatization layoffs

State telephone company goes private, threatening thousands of employees.

In late June, President René Préval announced plans to sell off Haiti's aging public telephone company, Téléco, would be privatized.

The move toward privatization began abruptly, and according to Téléco, 2,800 employees have been terminated thus far. For decades foreign lenders and multinational corporations have pressured the Haitian state toward privatization; layoffs are seen as the first step.

Cellular phones have spread rapidly across the country and it is common to hear complaints about Téléco's poor landline service.

One cellular company, Digicel, has grown at a fast pace since 2006, allowing many poor Haitians to own a phone for the first time. By offering incoming calls for free and pre-programmed phones for US\$15 to \$25, Digicel initially outpaced Voilà and Haïtel, which were charging up to \$150 for basic phones.

Digicel is also widely popular because of its investment in civic institutions such as

sporting events and street signs, and its partnerships with foundations such as Fonkoze, a microfinancer for the poor.

The problem is that after getting the cheap phones, many poor subscribers cannot afford the call rates, despite some of the lowest-priced recharge phone cards selling for about \$1.50.

Haiti's government justified the privatization of Téléco by comparing its employment levels with those of the private cell phone companies, adamant that the difference in employee figures reveals gross mismanagement of Téléco.

Préval explained that, "Haïtel SA, has 500 employees for 350,000 subscribers, Comcel, 630 employees for 650,000 subscribers, Digicel 700 employees for 1.4 million subscribers, Téléco has 3,293 employees for only 150,000 subscribers."

In response to the layoffs, Téléco workers launched protests around the company's Port-au-Prince headquarters.

While calls made from cells are more expensive than most Téléco calls, it is extremely difficult to procure a Téléco line. Over 90 percent of phone subscribers use private companies, a vast difference from a decade ago.

Téléco profits from a small fee on every communications transaction with Haiti, whether it originates inside of Haiti or from outside of the country. This includes regular landlines and all cell phone and calling card communications, so Téléco does have the potential to be financially healthy but it requires many employees to work its various departments, with offices throughout the country.

Préval has committed to paying a year's salary to Téléco employees who are being laid off, as well as those from across much of the civil sector who were illegally fired by the previous interim government (2004-2006).

But labor organizers at Téléco speak of a long-term, quiet campaign to undermine state enterprises. They say managers appointed by officials backing privatization purposely mismanaged the company in order to justify its break-up, as well as corruption and the use of its infrastructure by competitors as undermining forces.

During his first term in 1996-2001, Préval sold off the Minoterie flour mill and Haiti's public cement company.

Many small contractors and their clients face now cement costs out of reach for those aspiring to live in one-room homes. Cement donations from Venezuela have provided some respite for Haiti's public works.

Brian Concannon, of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, recalls that in order to stave off pressure from international financial institutions, Préval, during his first term, dragged his feet and only "let go two of the smallest and least strategic state enterprises." But by the end of his term donors had begun to disengage from providing aid to the state.

With the inauguration in early 2001 of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who refused untrammelled privatization, donors reacted further by cutting off nearly all support to the aid-dependent but privatization-weary state, placing a further pinch on the civil enterprises.

Since the ouster of Aristide in a US-backed 2004 coup d'état (*LP, March 10, 2004*), the advocates of privatization have become emboldened.

A donor-sponsored interim government helped formulate a privatization strategy and fired at least 2,000 workers from Téléco and thousands more from other state jobs, most from poor backgrounds who sympathized with the overthrown constitutional government.

In 2006, Préval was popularly elected and took office March 29 (*LP, July 12, 2006*).

Labor organizers explain that conditions have improved under Préval and they take part in talks with the government, but tension has grown with the government's move toward privatization.

The labor organizers said that while they support talks with the government, they oppose privatization that costs jobs and believe the government should instead focus on alternatives to fix the aging state telephone enterprise, as there remains an unmet need for landline services. They point out that neoliberal privatization policies have led to disaster across Latin America.

Téléco's director, Michel Prémumé, who recently appeared in a debate on Haiti's National Television, argued that privatization is urgently needed and stressed it could be done in an intelligent manner. "The dividends of the [privatized] flour mill are about 500 million gourdes [\$13 million]," he observed.

But negligible dialogue is said to have taken place between the employees of Téléco and the director general. The president of the Télécommunications trade union — who has been fired — Jean Mabou, has accused the director general of illegally and arbitrarily dismissing people. According to many employees there were numerous instances of employees being fired in order to settle political scores.

Prémumé says the number of workers at Téléco will be reduced to 1,200 for the whole of the country, but local press reports put the number at 800.

Préval has appointed a commission to study the privatization of more state enterprises. The National Port Authority and the Office of Insurance Work and Disease are both likely targets. □

inbrief

- **Brazil** lost 14,039 square kilometers (5,420 square miles) of Amazon rainforest between August 2005 and July 2006, 4,754 square kilometers (1,836 square miles) less than what was lost between 2004 and 2005. Tree felling there is owed mainly to the expanding agricultural and mining sectors.

- Retired Gen. Raúl Eduardo Iturriaga Neumann was captured Aug. 2 by authorities in **Chile**. He was declared himself in contempt of court on June 12 and escaped after being sentenced to five years in prison for his role in the kidnapping of leftist dissident Luis San Martín in 1975. Iturriaga is also accused of being behind the high-profile murder of Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife Sofía Cuthbert in Buenos Aires in 1974.

- Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho was awarded the International Women's Media Foundation's Challenge Fund for Journalism Grant. Cacho, the author of the book *The Demons of Eden*, an exposé about a pedophilia ring in Cancun, **Mexico**, received a \$75,000-grant for her work.

- Former president of **Peru** Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) was defeated in his bid for Japan's Senate. Fujimori, who has dual nationality, is currently in **Chile** awaiting a final ruling by the country's Supreme Court on whether he will be extradited to Peru to face corruption and human rights charges dating back to his regime.

- Some 500 people commit suicide in **Uruguay** each year, according to the Interior Ministry, more than double the number of homicides registered.

"Néstor
Kirchner's
dream is to
carry his wife
Cristina to the
presidency."

— Jorge Lanata

ARGENTINA

Paolo Moiola in Buenos Aires

Cristina dreams of Evita

How much will being first lady help Cristina Fernández?

When Cristina Fernández de Kirchner praises women, the television cameras close in tight on Estela Carlotto, the president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a rights group of relatives of victims of the 1976-83 dictatorship.

"We're prepared to support the pain," she says. "We're prepared for the most difficult situations. And we're prepared to work in the public and private arenas."

Fernández announced her candidacy on July 19 in the La Plata theater, just a few short months before the October presidential elections. Her husband, President Néstor Kirchner, watched from the balcony.

"Just like Romeo and Juliet but reversed with him in the balcony and her below, declaring her love and admiration," wrote *Página 12*, an influential Argentine daily.

Born in La Plata in 1953, Fernández studied law at the local university there, where she met Kirchner. The two married and had two children. When she finished her studies, Fernández started to work in the political sphere as a human rights activist. She joined a Peronist youth group.

After the 1976 military coup, the couple moved to Río Gallegos, capital of the Santa Cruz province in isolated and uninhabited Patagonia.

Kirchner became the Río Gallegos mayor in 1987 and in 1991 he began his first of three consecutive terms as provincial governor, but his career was not without scandal, including the alleged misuse of US\$500 million in public funds sent abroad.

In 1989 Fernández became a provincial deputy of Santa Cruz and a national senator in 1995.

In May 2003, Kirchner won the presidential election with 22.3 percent of the vote (*LP, June 4, 2003*). In his four years as president, Kirchner has governed Argentina through its economic recovery and allied himself with human rights movements (*LP, Dec. 28, 2005*). He defended himself successfully before his staunchest rivals, other Peronists, including the powerful Eduardo Duhalde and his wife, Chiche Duhalde, whom Fernández beat in senatorial elections in 2005.

If recent polls are correct, Fernández will succeed her husband as president of Argentina.

But despite the couple's political power, there have also been many criticisms. For example, the conservative newspaper *La Nación* stated: "It's complicated to explain that the country managed to keep the Republic by the wayside even just for one historic moment, to test the taste of a strange and special monarchy, during which the succession was not established between fathers and sons, but instead between husband and wife."

In reality, the Kirchner couple seems to have planned very carefully all of their steps. For months, Fernández has toured the world — mostly countries in the Americas — in an effort to make herself known. Meanwhile, comparisons to Evita Perón began to surface.

The memory of Evita Perón (1919-1952) is a fixture of Argentine culture. Evita, who came from a poor family and had a difficult childhood, was able to unite society, especially women: During the first presidency of her husband, Juan Domingo Perón (1946-52), Argentine women gained the right to vote.

"I have in this instant, from the hands of the Government of the Nation, the law that consecrates our civil rights. And I receive it, before you, with the certainty of what I am doing, in the name and representation of all Argentine women. Feeling so joyous that my hands are shaking when I touch the laurel that proclaims victory. Here it is my sisters, in the words of a few articles, a long history of struggle, mistakes and hopes," Evita said Sept. 23, 1947 from the balcony of the Casa Rosada presidential palace when she presented the suffrage law to Argentine women.

Still today, 55 years after her death, it's difficult for a woman active in public life to ignore the myth, which is at once fascinating and uncomfortable (*LP, July 2, 2003*).

Fernández knows this and did not reject comparisons to Evita. Instead, she tries to use it to her advantage. "I identify myself with Eva Perón with her furious fist in front of the microphone," Fernández said in an interview with the Spanish daily *El País*. Evita was noted for her public speeches, those broadcast by radio or from the balconies of the presidential palace.

Should Sen. Fernández win the elections, what will her husband do? "Néstor Kirchner's dream", writes Jorge Lanata, an Argentina journalist and critic of the couple, "is to carry his wife Cristina to the presidency. No one, nevertheless, could imagine him retired: in the worst of cases, he will be limited to rule behind the scene and run again in 2011."

But Lanata underestimates two elements: who really runs things in the Kirchner marriage, and what will happen if Fernández's candidacy is a success. □

Unpaid work

Women still underpaid and overworked.

Participants in the Tenth Regional Women's Conference, which was held in Quito, Ecuador Aug. 6-9, signed 36 agreements, including the need to push gender equality in decision-making positions, promote equal pay for equal work and an end to domestic violence.

The conference, which was attended by government representatives from 33 countries in the region, including Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, was organized by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which presented a report titled "The Support of Women in Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean."

The document said that two key elements are necessary for gender equality: political participation and gender equality in decision-making processes at all levels; and the contribution of women to the economy and social protection, especially in terms of unpaid work.

In terms of political participation, the study found that women — half of Latin America and the Caribbean's 570 million inhabitants — are only minimally represented in most decision-making positions.

ECLAC said that in all countries in the region that have adopted a quota system to ensure that women are represented in government there have been positive results. In Argentina, women comprise 35 percent of the legislature, and 38.6 percent in Costa Rica.

But the ECLAC warned that the political climate in many countries must be changed to avoid discrimination in elections, such as unequal access to campaign funding, and an unfair use of time that urges women to center their attention on reproducing.

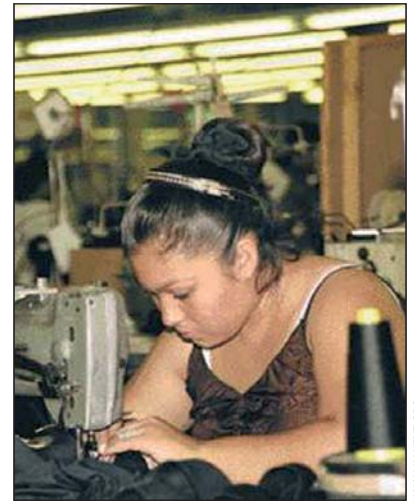
Women in the region earn 70 percent of what their male counterparts earn, ECLAC noted, but added that women's contributions to the economy are "fundamental to mitigate poverty" both if women have paying jobs and if they are not paid by working at home, "support that turns into a 'reproductive' tax that allows for a savings in health care, child rearing and taking care of elderly family members."

ECLAC says approximately half of the women between 20 and 24 are dedicated to working unpaid in the home full time, which means a division of labor is still strongly in place, with women overwhelmingly in charge of domestic work. The body also said that half of women older than 15 do not have their own income, compared to 20 percent of men of the same age.

Women who work outside the home essentially have two jobs, since they are often called upon to work in the home afterward.

"Of an average 12-hour workday, women spend more than five hours a day on unpaid tasks, while for men, an average workday is 10.7 hours and 7.8 are paid," ECLAC said.

ECLAC's executive secretary, José Luis Machinea, said that while it is necessary to "advance in the democratization of political parties and electoral systems, it is also necessary that governments study precisely what the contribution of unpaid domestic work is to the economy of each country, and above all, with an analysis that helps to design public policies oriented toward giving social protection" to those who do this unpaid domestic labor." □



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Women's contribution to the workforce is fundamental in mitigating poverty.

"Of an average 12-hour workday, women spend more than five hours a day on unpaid tasks."

— ECLAC