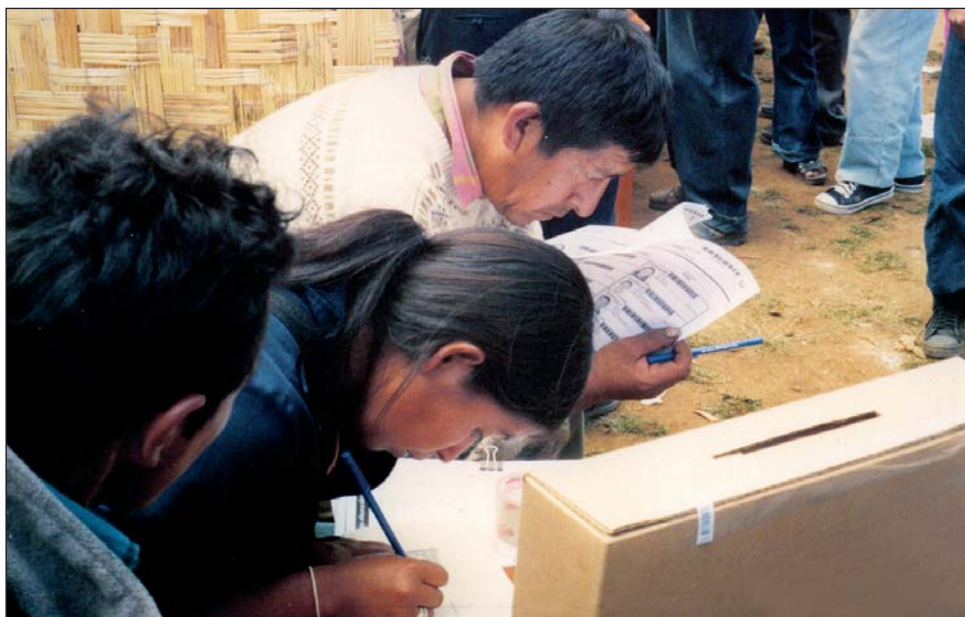


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Executive director: Raquel Gargatte Loarte

Editor-in-chief: Elsa Chanduví Jaña
(echanduv@noticiasaliadas.org)

Editors: Cecilia Remón Amáiz, Leslie Josephs

Graphics editor: William Chico Colugna

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Jr. Carlos Gonzales 252, Lima 32, Peru.
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Comunicaciones Aliadas

Jr. Olavegoya 1868, Lima 11, Peru.
(511) 265 9014 Fax: (511) 265 9186
postmaster@noticiasaliadas.org
www.latinamericapress.org
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CHILE/PERU

Benjamin Witte in Santiago and Leslie Josephs in Lima

Fujimori returns

Chilean court's decision is a landmark decision for region.

Wearing a bullet proof vest under his suit, disgraced ex-President Alberto Fujimori set foot on Peruvian soil Sept. 22 for the first time since he fled the country seven years ago when his government crumbled around him in rampant corruption.

Chile's Supreme Court announced its approval of the former leader's extradition to his native Peru a day earlier, and rights activists are calling it a landmark ruling that is part of a larger trend in South America.

Fujimori, 69, now faces seven charges of corruption and human rights violations, including the murder 25 people by a state-sponsored death squad during his 1990-2000 regime.

Many credit the former leader with bringing economic stability to Peru and stamping out the Shining Path insurgency that terrorized the country for 20 years. Almost 70,000 people were killed during the two-decade clash between armed groups and government security forces (*LP*, Sept. 10, 2003 and Sept. 6, 2006).

But the methods of excessive force employed by Fujimori's government to fight the insurgency has brought him here to face the charges.

Joan Garcés, who was an adviser to Chilean President Salvador Allende (1970-73) and a human rights lawyer who led the fight to extradite former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-90) from Great Britain to face human rights violations, said that Fujimori's case followed his.

British authorities in 1999 refused to extradite the former dictator after more than a year of legal battles, blaming his ailing health, the Fujimori ruling had special meaning coming from Chile, said Garcés.

"I'm gladdened that the ruling in Santiago was taken without political pressure," he said in a telephone interview from Spain. Garcés said that past Chilean administrations pressured the courts not to push for Pinochet's extradition. The dictator died last year.

"This is a grand day for Peru, for Chile, and for all of the Americas," said John Walsh, a senior associate and Andean specialist at the Washington Office on Latin America in a statement after the ruling was announced. He called the ruling "a major blow against impunity, which has bedeviled Latin America for so long. This day has been a long time coming and represents a major advance for justice and the defense of human rights."

Chile's Supreme Court brought the nearly two-year-old Fujimori extradition case to a historic end. The ruling, which is final, overturned an earlier Supreme Court decision

rejecting the extradition request.

A panel of five appeals judges based their Sept. 21 decision on evidence in seven of the 12 extradition petitions Peruvian prosecutors originally presented against Fujimori. Among the seven are two emblematic human rights abuse cases: the Barrios Altos and La Cantuta massacres, which took place in 1991 and 1992 respectively. Twenty-five people, including a small child and a professor, were murdered in the two massacres. The killings are believed to have been carried out by an infamous, government-backed death squad known as the Colina Group. Prosecutors contend that Fujimori had direct knowledge of and may have even ordered the Group's anti-subversion operations.

Amnesty International described the ruling as a step toward justice for thousands of people who were tortured, killed or disappeared during the Fujimori regime.

"We're very happy about the decision. We're happy that they included the two human rights cases — Barrios Altos and La Cantuta," said Helena Marambio, head of Amnesty International-Chile's Fujimori extradition campaign.

Raul Paiba, president of a Santiago-based group called the Committee of Peruvian Refugees in Chile, was equally satisfied. "We're happy because we've advanced in the fight against impunity. Hopefully there'll never be another dictator that does what Fujimori did in his country, giving rise to so many immigrants and refugees who are living all over the world in the worst conditions," he said.

But while people like Paiba and Marambio have argued all along that the case presented against Fujimori contained more than enough evidence to warrant extradition, Friday's ruling nevertheless came as a shock to many observers.

Less than three months earlier, Supreme Court Judge Orlando Álvarez offered a very different interpretation of the case. On July 11, making what Soto described at the time as a "normal" ruling, Álvarez dismissed all 12 of Peru's extradition petitions (*LP, July 25, 2007*).

Another case in point is the Chilean court system's handling of Pinochet. Although his regime was responsible for countless human rights abuses, the military strongman passed away this past December without ever being convicted of a single crime (*LP, Dec. 13, 2006*).

"The Supreme Court in Chile had a very appalling record of not paying attention to the protection of fundamental freedoms and the commission of massive violations of human rights under Pinochet," said José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for Human Rights Watch. "After Chile recovered democracy, before Pinochet went to London, the judiciary and particularly the Supreme Court was consistently reluctant to provide effective remedies for victims of human rights abuses."

But what accounts for the dramatic about-face? Despite Judge Alberto Chaigneau's insistence to the contrary, political considerations may have played a role. The ruling certainly suits Chile's current efforts to lobby for a seat on the UN's Human Rights Council. In fact, on Sunday, Sept. 23, just one day after Fujimori was officially handed over to Peruvian authorities, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet flew to New York City. While the purpose of the trip is ostensibly to participate in the UN's 62nd General Assembly, analysts are describing it also as an important opportunity for Bachelet to secure more UNHCR votes.

But the ruling may also be the product of incremental advances in international law, according to Vivanco. Describing it as both "welcome" and "unprecedented," Vivanco said the Fujimori ruling marks the first time a former head of state has been extradited to his home country to face charges of human rights violations. That's not to say, however, that the decision was reached within a judicial vacuum.

"It think it clearly fits within the pattern or tendency set up by the law courts in England, when they decided that [Augusto Pinochet] was not immune from criminal prosecution for human rights abuses," Vivanco explained. "When you put these two together, then you understand how in law you are able to develop standards, and to build up principal based on judicial decisions that eventually have a domino effect on similar cases." □

PERU

Ramiro Escobar in Ayabaca

Residents reject copper mining

Three northern Peruvian districts turn down copper project.

Despite threats from high-ranking government officials and negative press coverage, three mayors of the northern Piura department held a popular vote on whether residents there were in favor of mining activity in their area.

A month earlier, the vote was declared illegal by Peru's National Electoral Court. But the day of the vote, thousands of people from the rural districts of Ayabaca, Carmen de la Frontera and Pacaipampa lined up early to cast their vote.

Voters were asked the question "Do you agree with that there be mining in the district," and the votes for "No" won easily.

In Ayabaca, 93 percent of the votes were against mining activities, with only 176 votes of more than 8,800 in favor.

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ARGENTINA

Protecting the Toba. Argentina's Supreme Court ordered the national and provincial government of Chaco to provide potable water and food to residents of this region, where 11 people have died of malnutrition between July and September.

The Sept. 20 ruling responds to a complaint filed by the Public Defender's Office that said indigenous communities in this area are being "silently, systematically, inexorably exterminated."

The statement also said that situation is owed to the "failure of the provincial and national states to provide minimal humanitarian and social assistance to these communities."

Supreme Court justices here have made it a priority to follow cases where collective rights are at risk.

"The right to life and physical integrity" is at stake, the court said in its ruling. —PÚLSAR.

BRAZIL

Corruption at the top. In a controversial secret session Sept. 12 Brazil's Senate voted against firing the body's president, Renan Calheiros, who is accused of illicit enrichment. The case was presented a week earlier by the Senate Ethics Committee.

The accusations against Calheiros — of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, a key ally of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's party — include having received some US\$8,000 a month between 2004 and 2005 by construction company Mendez Junior for public works contracts.

The lawmaker is also accused of receiving money from beer-maker Schincariol in exchange for help in having tax debts forgiven and for the use of frontmen to buy three radio stations in the Alagoas state, where he is from.

But others have not had Calheiros' luck. In late August, the Supreme Court found there was enough evidence to open a criminal suit against 40 people accused of being tied to a corruption ring run by members of the governing Workers Party — including former ministers and party leaders. The accusations were tied to monthly payoffs of lawmakers in exchange for backing the government (*LP*, July 13, 2005). —*IPS/LP*.

In Carmen de la Frontera, of 3,053 voters 2,825 voted against mining and only 73 in favor. The results were not much different in Pacaipampa, where out of 6,091 votes, 5,914 voted against mining and 36 voted in favor. The electoral turnover averaged 60 percent.

Residents in these districts were responding to a copper mining project by Minera Majaz, a subsidiary of London-based Monterrico Metals, which is mostly Chinese capital. The company has rights to the Rio Blanco deposit, which holds 1.2 billion metric tons of copper and molybdenum, making it the world's largest untouched copper deposit in the world.

"Everything was orderly and we didn't see any irregularity," said Clara Ruiz, a spokeswoman for the more than 20 national and international observers, and a representative of the Spanish organization Entre Pueblos.

Luis Faura, town councilor of the northern Chilean city Alto del Carmen, said that voters were eager to participate.

"The people's enthusiasm to vote is notable," he said from Ayabaca's stadium, the village's only voting center. The government had earlier prohibited public schools from being used as voting centers.

But the government had other attempts to block the vote, which was announced in June. It was not until August, however, that the government launched its attacks on the towns' mayors.

In the days leading up to the vote, President Alan García called the nongovernmental organizations that supported the vote "communists" and "enemies of investment." Cabinet chief Jorge del Castillo said the mayors were 'spending the people's money for political action."

But in an interview with Lima's important *El Comercio* newspaper on Sept. 9, ombudsman Beatriz Merino said the vote was "constitutional," shifting the scale.

"Despite the attacks, we've shown that we're not ignorant and that we're peaceful people," said Magdiel Carrión, president of the Ayabaca's *campesina* federation.

It was not the first time a sector of Peru's population has spoken out against mining.

In 2002, residents in Tambogrande, a rich agricultural valley also in the Piura department, known for its mangoes, held the world's first communal referendum on mining. More than 98 percent of Tambogrande residents said "no" to Canadian company Manhattan Minerals' plans to drill for gold in the important valley, which would have destroyed their livelihood: mango and lemon crops (*LP*, Nov. 19, 2003).

The conflict between the population and Minera Majaz began in 2003 when the company began exploring for minerals in the area.

According to Peruvian law, in order to extract the metal from the subsoil with the authorization of the landholders, the company had to have obtained the approval of two thirds of community assemblies of the Cajas, Yanta y Segunda communities, where the mine was headquartered, for authorization to use the communal lands. That never happened.

Between 2004 and 2005, there were numerous clashes between police and community members as a result of the irregular presence of the company in the area and two *campesinos* were killed.

In 2006, the Front for Sustainable Development of the Northern Border, a grouping of local officials and organizations near the Rio Blanco mining project, government officials and Minería Majaz started negotiations.

But talks stalled in January of this year, because President García's new administration (*LP*, June 14, 2006) was absent, and then the idea surfaced to hold the vote as a peaceful alternative to central government officials' reluctance to hear the population's voice.

Even though local officials have demonstrated their willingness for dialogue with all of those directly involved in the future project, which will last 32 years, it is still unclear what is going to happen. Mining here will involve the expropriation of land, and the deposit is located in an area home to fragile ecosystems, called cloud forests, which could affect important water resources in the area. □

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

Church on the stand

Catholic Church is accused of complicity in dictatorship-era human rights violations.

The human rights trial against Catholic priest Cristian Von Wernich, the former chaplain of the Buenos Aires police department, on charges of complicity in murder and torture during Argentina's bloody 1976-83 dictatorship, has turned into a trial against the Catholic Church here, and officials ranging from local priests to then-Pope John Paul II are under fire for allegedly acting as accomplices to thousands of acts of torture, people-trafficking and disappearances at the hand of the state.

Among damaging testimony given by bishops of the Neuquen and Quilmes dioceses, theologian Rubén Dri and 1980 Peace Prize Winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the Cath-

olic Church is silent and few voices from the hierarchy have spoken mildly in favor of the former chaplain.

Von Wernich was charged in December 2005 after evidence surfaced of human rights violations, but the trial only began in early July of this year, when the prosecutor found there was enough evidence to try him for direct responsibility in seven assassinations, 42 cases of kidnapping and disappearances and 31 counts of torture.

The priest held a rank of inspector in the capital's police force, and was the officers' confessor, but hundreds of ex-detainees and former police officers say he participated in interrogation and torture sessions with kidnapped victims and even participated in the command that shot seven university students to death.

"I've questioned and I continue to question the Church's role as an institution, above all in the hierarchy, because it wasn't able to meet the challenge, which is to say, it wasn't with the crucified," said Salesian priest Rubén Capitanio, who testified against Von Wernich. "Von Wernich's case is more than symbolic, because he put himself on the side of the crucifiers."

On Sept. 5, a statement from the diocese of the southern Neuquen province denounced the Church's attitude in the 1970s and 1980s during the "dirty war."

"Silence, too much silence, a lack of public participation in the demands of victims' families, turning a deaf ear to calls for justice. That caused us to be seen as close to the dictators of death, when we should have been apostles of life," said the statement.

Even when Argentina had returned to democracy, the Catholic Church stood by Von Wernich. In 1996, when the accusations began to surface, the Church gave him the false name of Christian González and he was sent to lead a parish in Quisco, Chile, a small tourist town 100 kilometers (63 miles) south of Santiago, where he lived until an Argentine judge ordered his arrest in 2003.

In June, when Von Wernich's trial date was announced, Jorge Bergoglio, Buenos Aires' top cardinal, said that the "Church is the subject of persecution." Bishop Andrés Stanovnik of the northern Chaco province timidly defended the priest: "I'm not going to make any value judgments on a brother. One mustn't prejudge because Father Von Wernich has only been accused, not convicted."

Jesuits Bergoglio and Stanovnik are among the accused in various testimonies taken during Von Wernich's trial.

Journalist Mona Moncalvillo, director of the state-run Radio Nacional and sister of one of the seven university students killed in 1976 told judges that Von Wernich demanded a large sum of money to save her brother's life, promising to take him out of the country if they paid him. Moncalvillo said that Bergoglio "was aware of this and other facts, because Jesuits knew very well what was happening in Argentina."

Estela de la Cuadra, whose sister went missing during the dictatorship, and also the aunt of a girl who was born in a detention center and later stolen by police, said that Von Wernich "gave my sister Elena's baby to a military family, and Cardinal Bergoglio knew this because my brothers, living in exile in Europe, interviewed the head of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, who informed Bergoglio about what my family was suffering."

During his testimony, Pérez Esquivel, a Catholic and founder of the Peace and Justice Service, SERPAJ, emphasized the "complicity of the Church hierarchy with the dictatorship."

"We tried to motivate the leadership of the Church so they would help us in the search for the missing, but we never had an answer, just as we never had a humanitarian response from Pope John Paul II," he said.

"We sent him the report with 84 cases of missing children three times; we delivered it by hand, but the pope's only response was: before you tell me this, you should think about the children in communist countries," he added.

Theologian Rubén Dri said that the Buenos Aires cardinal, bishops and nuncio were invited to military dinners, they used to break bread with the assassins, they never denounced the horrible events we all knew about."

On Sept. 10, Luis Stockler, bishop from the dioceses of Quilmes, south of Buenos Aires, spoke out "with indignation, powerlessness before what Cristian Von Wernich represents," encouraged "the witnesses that with courage let us know about the horror" and collected the most acidic criticism of the Catholic leadership to say: "Enough of the institutions that shut their mouths, making themselves accomplices to the crimes and criminals." □

ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Quito

Mining territory in dispute

Revision of mining concessions seems to favor communities over mineral companies.

In a historic decision, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa Sept. 25 suspended the activities of Canadian mining company Ascendant Copper in the northern town of Cotacachi, home to the ecological Intag reserve. Correa said the company lacked the town's

COLOMBIA

Chiquita fined, but no prosecution. A US federal court announced Sept. 18 that Chiquita Brands will have to pay a US\$25 million fine for having paid millions to paramilitary groups in Colombia to protect the company, but Chiquita executives will not be prosecuted.

Federal Judge Royce C. Lamberth accepted the Justice Department's settlement proposal but lamented the fact that none 10 Chiquita executives found to have ties to the payment will be tried or have their identities released.

Chiquita admitted in March to having paid the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary group \$1.7 million between 1997 and 2004 in exchange for protecting their employees and plants (*LP*, April 18, 2007).

Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araújo said in an interview with Radio Caracol: "From a formal point of view, the US judiciary has parameters that deserve our respect [but] that doesn't mean that public opinion hasn't registered a certain degree of puzzlement that in a case so important, no one has ended up in jail."

Nevertheless, Araújo said that the executives could be tried in Colombia. —*LP*.

PERU

Unemployed youth. "Unemployment, informality and inactivity threaten the job future for some 5 million young Peruvians, and limits the potential of the country's economic growth and fight against poverty," the International Labor Organization (ILO) said in a Sept. 13 report.

Close to 300,000 young people in the country are unemployed, equal to 10 percent of the labor force between the ages of 15 and 24. In the capital, the youth unemployment rate is 21 percent, three times the rate for adults. The unemployment rate of women in Lima is 33 percent, five times the rate of unemployed adult women, said the report, "Decent Work and Youth in Peru."

Young people, the report says, "have unstable jobs, dangerous job opportunities, lack social protection because of the informality and are in lower demand for the labor market than adults."

The job instability rate for salaried youths that work in the private sector is 95 percent, while 18 percent of young workers in Lima and 20 percent in the rest of the country work in the informal economy, providing low wages, poor working conditions and no social protection.

According to the ILO, the economic growth Peru has experienced in the last few years has not translated into better jobs. Most jobs young Peruvians hold are in low-production sectors. —LP.

approval, a requirement according to the country's Mining law.

The measures took even the community leaders in Intag by surprise, since they were trying themselves to kick out Ascendant Copper, which was planning a 30-year project to extract copper and molybdenum, worth some US\$73 billion. But community leaders felt this was not enough.

"We had hoped that the government would revoke the concession because there's a community here that doesn't want mining on its lands. The prohibition of activities only gives the company time," said Polibio Pérez, an Intag leader.

Pérez says that communities here are totally unprotected and have suffered from the presence of transnational mining companies that are operating under the 2002 Mining law approved under the government of then-President Gustavo Noboa (2000-2003), that gave companies access to 5.5 million hectares (13.6 million acres), equivalent to 20 percent of the country's territory.

During the International Mining Forum in Quito Sept. 18, Mining and Oil Minister Galo Chiriboga had announced that all mining concessions in Ecuador would be revised.

The announcement sparked a debate highlighting the fight between indigenous and *campesino* communities and big mining companies.

Transnationals have never hesitated to use the Ecuadorian army to put down community protests against their projects, which is what happened in the southern province of Zamora Chinchipe in December 2006, when even indigenous lawmaker Salvador Quishpe was detained and beaten.

The protests here were the result of Canadian mining company Ecuacorrientes' insistence to continue operating despite the fact that President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007) had agreed to the immediate suspension of mining activity in this area.

Soldiers from the Gualaquiza Battalion and the company's employees put down a protest of 2,000 townspeople. Thirteen people were arrested — including Quishpe — and taken to company headquarters.

In the most extreme cases, the mining companies contracted private armed groups to push out communities, such as the case with Intag, where in December of last year, a 56-member, armed squadron from a private security company arrived to the site, among them 14 soldiers still on active duty. The population succeeded in stopping and disarming the squadron, which was handed over to national police.

Mining companies also use legal actions as a method of putting down resistance. In Intag, Ascendant Copper, through front people, opened 13 criminal court cases against community leaders. The emblematic case is that of Carlos Zorrilla, executive director of the organization Ecological Defense and Conservation of Intag.

Zorrilla was accused of stealing a video camera in 2006 by a US citizen indentified as Leslie Brooke Chaplin, who was tied to the mining company. After submitting her testimony, Chaplin left the country for South Korea, but her signature has appeared in posterior statements.

In October 2006, a judge put an arrest warrant out for Zorrilla, and 20 officers from a special police unit were sent after him. They were unable to capture him but they raided his home and stole anything with a reference to the community. In addition, they supposedly found drugs and a revolver, which opened new cases.

Confrontations with the communities puts the name of mines at risk, sometimes lowering their stock values, says Canadian Steve Vaughan, an expert in natural resources and mining law.

To reduce the risk, Vaughan says, Canadian mines have implemented a kind of "divine pyramid of mining."

According to Vaughan, four or five big mining companies operate at the top of the pyramid, followed by medium-sized firms, which have a series of small companies with national alliances which are in charge of conducting the processes before operations begin and of "clearing the path for when the big ones come," meaning that no mining suit can touch the industry giants.

The revision of the mining concessions is likely to create a fierce standoff in the courts between the companies and government in the case that concessions are revoked, while communities will continue defending their land in the case that concessions are maintained.

"In the coming months, the concessions will constitute a territory in dispute, and that dispute can involve even confrontations between those who oppose mining and those community members who have been contracted by the mine," said David Cordero, a lawyer for the Regional Foundation of Human Rights Consultancy, which is defending Zorrilla. □

COLOMBIA

Susan Abad in Bogota

Leading the pack in recycling

Large quantities of paper and cardboard are reused despite scant organization among collectors.

Colombia's Environment, Housing and Territorial Development Ministry says the Andean country is Latin America's top recycler of solid waste, and the world's 18th largest paper and cardboard recycler with 57 metric tons for every 100 metric tons produced. The figure tops the United States' 31 metric tons, Germany's 50 metric tons, and Japan's 53 metric tons of paper and cardboard recycled per 100 produced.

"We're some 15,000 people, among us many who have been displaced by violence, who operate the recycling machinery. If you multiply the [number] of these people by five, the number on average in a family, that would mean 75,000 people are living off this" activity, said Darío Castro, president of the National Recycling Association.

"The great majority are informal," Castro said, adding that only 6,000 of them are legally organized in 106 regional associations, which are grouped in a national association, founded in 1992.

"These workers comb the streets in daytime or nighttime shifts of 14 hours on average, depending on one's luck, to collect sufficient material that earns some 20,000 to 25,000 pesos [US\$12 to \$15]," explained Nora Padilla, president of the Bogota Recycling Association, one of the largest and most organized group, with 2,300 recyclers inscribed in 22 cooperatives.

The material is taken to stock sites mostly owned by intermediaries — of the 800 that exist in Bogota, only eight belong to the national association — which then resell it to industries.

"The material's price is very low and they pay most for cardboard, paper and glass," said Padilla, adding that these materials are in the highest demand.

Even though most recyclers know their work helps the environment, that is not their priority.

"Most pick up garbage to survive," noted Padilla.

"At the moment, there is no law in Colombia that regulates recycling, let alone one that informs citizens of the great importance and benefit of solid refuse," said Sen. Gina Parody, who presented a bill to Congress last May called "Zero Garbage."

"Basically, it has to do with urging public, private entities, households, everyone, to separate their garbage. It also establishes incentives for sanitation prices for those who recycle," she said. "The bill also talks about using biodegradable bags and treating the recyclers as environmental agents."

Claudia Patricia Mora, deputy environment minister, says that the government does have a recycling policy, but that it is simply not enforced. She said a 2002 decree obligates municipalities to enhance solid waste management programs with other projects oriented toward the management of solid waste, including education campaigns, use, collection and transportation of the waste.

"But not everyone follows through. The national government issued laws. There are 33 regional corporations in charge of enforcing these laws but they don't have the tools to do it."

Mora says that the national solid waste program lacks continuity by not working in the entire production chain. She says there needs to be measures to integrate the producers and the recyclers.

In an effort to link all of these steps into one process, the government in May created the National Recycling Board, in which 18 government agencies, production sector representatives, organized recyclers and academics are participating.

In its first session, participants agreed to strengthen sectors such as paper and cardboard, food containers, retread, glass, plastic, metal, organic waste and rubble.

"We're hoping that the Board increases the recovery of paper and cardboard from 44 percent to 50 percent a year, over the next five years, so that an additional 15,000 metric tons will be recycled every year," said Environment, Housing and Territorial Development Minister Juan Lozano. He said this will generate \$3.7 million a year for recyclers.

Lozano added that the recycling of glass should increase from 50 percent to 55 percent, or 10,000 metric tons more a year, equaling \$550,000 in revenue annually.

Colombia produces 28,800 metric tons of waste a day, of which 500,000 kilograms are paper and 125,000 are glass.

Of this total amount of garbage produced, only 13 percent is recycled, and 7 percent of the recyclable material is taken by recyclers and the remaining 6 percent directly by the industry itself.

It is not an easy job. Recyclers who were interviewed did not know the amount of money their work moves, but they agreed that if people were more aware, if they learned to separate their garbage, it would be highly beneficial for Colombia and the world. □



Entire families depend on recycling.

"There is no law in Colombia that regulates recycling, let alone one that informs citizens of the great importance and benefit of solid refuse."

— Sen. Gina Parody

CHILE

Benjamin Witte in Santiago

Deadly descents

Chilean salmon farm divers are at constant risk.

In late August, a diver named Pedro Pablo Alvarado died while fixing underwater netting on a salmon farm off the coast of the southern Chilean island Chiloe. Like many of Chile's estimated 4,000 salmon industry divers, Alvarado worked for a subcontractor rather than directly for the owner of the farm — in this case Norwegian aquaculture giant Marine Harvest. His death has brought renewed attention to what critics of Chile's booming aquaculture industry say is an ongoing problem: precarious working conditions.

The subcontractor, a company called ASSERMA Ltd., reported that Alvarado was in the water approximately 10 minutes when colleagues on the surface detected a problem. A fellow diver then entered the water and, at a depth of approximately 20 meters (66 feet), located Alvarado. The diver dragged Alvarado's motionless body to the surface. The victim was then rushed to a nearby hospital, where doctors pronounced him dead. An autopsy determined the cause of death as Acute Decompression Illness, also known as "the bends."

Alvarado's death is hardly an isolated case in Chile, where over the past 15 years scores of industry divers have died. Part of the problem is simply the nature of the job.

"Diving is precarious, dangerous work, in which it's very common to have situations of that nature, accidents like the one we just had, accidents that result in death," says Javier Ugarte, president of the Region X-based Confederation of Salmon Industry Workers in southern Chile.

But the occupation has been further compromised by just how rapidly Chile's salmon industry has expanded in the past two decades. Last year Chile exported some US\$2.2 billion worth of salmon and trout, a phenomenal output considering that just 15 years ago, the country's farmed fish exports were worth only \$159 million. The industry's appetite for divers and other workers has increased correspondingly.

"Every day we go down further than we're supposed to. Why do we do it? Because if we don't, we'll be out of work."

— Cristián Soto



Poor training and equipment endangers salmon farm divers.

As Cristián Soto, president of the Professional Divers Union, or SIBUP, explained: "Overnight, diving in Chile went from being informal — something that was done by shellfish divers — to professional. That means the labor force didn't have sufficient training. So many shellfish divers moved into aquaculture, and their preparation was mediocre."

The high mortality rate has prompted some serious safety changes. Until recently, says Soto, divers often worked with just a simple mask and regulator. That's no longer the case. Companies now require divers to have safety tanks and use modern, safer masks with more advanced breathing apparatuses.

"This isn't the first time a diver has died," says Ugarte. "But one thing needs to be made very clear. We're witness that the company, in this case Marine Harvest, has gone to great lengths to improve the security situation on its salmon farms and in processing plants."

Yet the industry continues to cost divers their lives. In just the past year-and-a-half 15

divers have perished, according to Soto. "Even with the new system they keep dying. Why? Poor preparation. There's been little concern about training divers to use the equipment. Also, rules aren't respected about how long divers can be down, and at what depths," he says.

Generally, divers are not supposed to descend beyond 20 meters (66 feet), although in 2003, the salmon industry lobbied successfully to extend the range to 36 meters (119 feet) for qualified "intermediate" divers. Nevertheless, insists the SIBUP president, salmon farm divers are regularly expected to work at 40, 50, even 60 meters below the surface.

Soto finds it hard to believe Pedro Pablo Alvarado was — as ASSERMA Ltd insists — operating at just 20 meters. That's because at the time of the accident, the deceased diver was working on a "predator net," protective netting used to keep sea lions and other creatures out of the salmon cages. Those nets, says Soto, hang well below the 20- to 36-meter range. When dirty, the cumbersome netting tends to sink further still.

"For those of us who work on installing and maintaining the nets, this is something that happens to us every day. Every day we go down further than we're supposed to. Why do we do it? Because if we don't, we'll be out of work," says Soto.

"Another problem is how continually divers must drop and ascend. It's like a Yo-Yo. That's what they call it. It can cause pressure problems. And in Chiloe, where so many of the salmon farms are concentrated, there aren't any hyperbolic chambers to treat Decompression Illness," says economist Francisco Pinto of the environmental organization Fundación Terram.

Divers, he adds, are not the only salmon industry workers to encounter safety issues. In a report published earlier this year, Pinto noted that the accident rate in Chile's salmon industry — 10.4 percent according to the Chilean Security Association — is well above the national average of almost 8 percent. Other studies put the industry's accident as high as 30 percent. What, then, should be done to better protect workers? For Soto, the focus needs to be on prevention and professionalism. Workers need sufficient training. But companies must also respect rules that are in place.

"We the workers, the ones who produce these riches, we need to defend our rights," he says. "We defend ourselves out of fear. I didn't wake up one day and say, 'I'm going to form a union because I want to earn more money.'" No, these unions come together because people are thinking about their wives and kids, who are afraid because their dads work in places where they could die." □

COSTA RICA

Bryan Kay in San José

Pedaling to success

Schoolchildren in remote areas benefit from alternative transportation initiative.

Children in a remote northern region of Costa Rica at risk of abandoning education because their parents cannot afford to transport them to school, have been thrown a lifeline by a combined government and private enterprise initiative: a small fleet of bicycles, small boats and horses.

The Transportation to Knowledge Program, run by government social aid agency, known by its Spanish initials as IMAS, aims to help these children confronted with long and exhausting journeys to school.

The first group to benefit was more than 100 primary and secondary school students in the canton of San Carlos - an area heavily reliant on farming for survival.

Some of the youngsters in San Carlos, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of the capital San José, had to walk up to 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) to get to school, a journey that could take more than 90 minutes.

Costa Rica's entire school population totals about 1,000,000, according to the Education Ministry, but as many as 130,000 secondary youngsters alone are failing to attend class because their families can't afford to fork out the sums required to ease their commute, IMAS says.

A US State Department report, published last year, estimated that as much as 30 percent of primary school pupils in Costa Rica never reach high school and 47 percent of high school students drop out before graduating.

Some children are years behind in their studies because they miss so much work due to their inability to get to school, one teacher told us.

In the Talamanca region, one of the poorest and most underdeveloped in the country, children crave the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in more urban and affluent areas, but face similar challenges.

Sociologist Maycol Morales Pita said many schoolchildren in this hot and humid area can face a difficult two-hour walk just to reach the classroom - a mammoth task for even adults accustomed to long hikes.

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

Presidents get report card. Argentina's Néstor Kirchner topped a list of 18 presidential approval ratings in the region with 71 percent, by Mexican pollster Consulta Mitofsky. The surveys were conducted between March and August.

According to the report titled: "Approval of Leaders in Latin America and the World", Central America has the highest average approval ratings with 50 percent average approval, followed by South America with 48 percent. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA Leaders' approval

Name	Country	%
Néstor Kirchner	Argentina	71
Álvaro Uribe	Colombia	66
Felipe Calderón	Mexico	66
Martín Torrijos	Panama	60
Antonio Saca	El Salvador	57
Manuel Zelaya	Honduras	57
Evo Morales	Bolivia	57
Rafael Correa	Ecuador	56
Óscar Arias	Costa Rica	55
Tabaré Vázquez	Uruguay	51
Hugo Chávez	Venezuela	50
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	Brazil	48
Óscar Berger	Guatemala	42
Michelle Bachelet	Chile	39
Leonel Fernández	Dom. Rep.	38
Alan García	Peru	32
Daniel Ortega	Nicaragua	26
Nicanor Duarte	Paraguay	11

Source: Consulta Mitofsky

CUBA

Soldiers sentenced. A military tribunal in mid-September sentenced to life in prison two army sergeants who tried to hijack an airplane May 3. Two people died in the failed attempt. Another two soldiers and a civilian who was aware of the plan were sentenced to 30, 25 and 15 years in prison, respectively.

Sgts. Yoán Torres, 21, Leandro Cerezo, 20, Karel de Miranda, 19, and Cpl. Alain Forbus had fled their Havana base April 29 after killing soldier Yoendris Gutiérrez, who was guarding the base.

Four days later, Torres y Cerezo took over a public transport bus, taking the passengers hostage and entered the national terminal of José Martí airport in an effort to hijack a commercial airliner and go to the United States.

Among the hostages was Col. Víctor Ibo Acuña, who died in a shootout in the airplane when he tried to foil the hijacking.

The dissident National Human Rights and Reconciliation Commission in a statement cheered the court's decision not to apply the death penalty to Sgt. Torres, the only soldier over the age of 21, the minimum age for that sentence.

In April 2003 three people were shot by the government for the hijacking of a ship that ferried passengers around Havana bay, attempting to reach the United States (LP, April 23, 2003). —LP.

Martha Alvarado, a teacher based in San José, said she was aghast to see the number of school-aged kids wandering idly whenever she visited rural areas of the problem.

"I teach in a private school," she said. "The children there don't know how lucky they are. Some of the children in rural areas are lucky to finish four or five years in school."

She claimed the Public Education Ministry is ill-equipped to deal with the issue and said it was left to private donations to apply a sticking plaster to what is effectively a hemorrhage.

Morales says the problem in Talamanca - home to the largest surviving indigenous group in Costa Rica — the Bri Bri — is that there is no parity even locally.

He explained that children living on one side of the Teline River, which cuts through Talamanca, where there are just two schools catering for 200 pupils, the villages are so remote a two-hour walk is the norm.

But on the better-serviced side, the portion connected to roads linking the area with the nearest city, the port of Limon, the situation faced by youngsters is much less extreme.

The dilemma has again raised an oft-heard gripe in Talamanca: that the indigenous population is discriminated against and is not treated as an equal.

Talamanca is a mountainous region, harboring some of the most unspoiled terrain in the country. The dramatic landscape is almost completely covered by thick jungle and roads from the more populous Caribbean coast are largely treacherous, unpaved dirt tracks.

"Look at the roads," said Morales, despairingly. "The children are so young. A two hour walk to school for them is so long. Think of the distance."

He says projects such as the one introduced in San Carlos would benefit his people greatly, while at the same time increase educational attainment and assuage the general feeling of discrimination.

"We have a real problem here with access," he sighed. "Not all the youngsters have the same opportunity to study. One of the main problems is the distance they have to travel to school."

Much of the program is dependent on the will of the corporate community, however.

The three modes of transport donated in San Carlos would have been otherwise inaccessible to the young beneficiaries, whose families survive on severely limited incomes.

The IMAS program, which began at the end of August, is run in collaboration with the private sector — companies both large and small — to encourage corporate social responsibility. Their target is a significant decrease in student desertion in schools situated in poor and remote communities.

The first batch — 77 bicycles, two boats with motors and two horses — were donated by Importadora Monge, an electrical goods chain with branches around the country. Some parents in the communities of Boca San Carlos and Boca Tapada will build a water raft with donated materials to help the children circumnavigate the deep waters of the San Carlos River.

Local mother Lidiana Méndez, whose daughter Mauren, 7, received a horse, explained how the donation came just as she was considered withdrawing the child from school altogether to avoid walking 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) a day.

"The donation arrived just in the moment that I had suggested to my husband to take the child out of the school since she struggled to travel by foot and alone," explained her mother.

For 10-year-old Reina Leiva, who is only just starting primary school, the bicycle means her commute to school has been cut by more than an hour.

"Thanks to the donation I am able to keep on studying," she said. "I ask the people who helped us to do the same with other children who also need their aid." □

PARAGUAY

Gustavo Torres in Asunción

Forest fires rage

Flames burn out of control, causing significant damage.

More than 1 million hectares (2.47 million acres) of forestland, including natural reserves, were devastated by forest fires that raged for four weeks between August and September in Paraguay.

Over 15,000 fires were reported around the country following a June-September drought, causing devastating damages to agriculture, livestock, the environment itself and *campesino* families that forced the government to declare a national emergency on Sept. 13.

But it was no accident. The fires were started by farmers, who were trying to burn their pastures as part of a periodic soil cleaning. But after such a severe drought, the flames were uncontrollable after they extended to vast, vacant forestland.

The effects were felt all the way in the capital, Asunción, which was covered by black smoke for several days, and some residents complained of eye and skin problems. The city's Silvio Pettrossi International Airport had to be repeatedly closed due to poor visibility.

The Agriculture and Livestock Ministry estimated the losses at US\$30 million, without factoring in ecological damage. Some 40,000 Paraguayans were affected and 250 homes were consumed by the flames.

Faustino Salcedo, coordinator of the ministry's Agriculture Development Program, said that the fires caused enormous damages to livestock and agriculture throughout the country, killing hundreds of animals and damaging mainly corn and sugar cane plantations. He said the cattle died because of a lack of water and fresh grass, or trapped in artificial lakes on farms that became bogs.

Authorities estimate 15,000 families were affected by the fires in the central San Pedro department, the hardest hit area. In the Caagazu department 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the capital, livestock farmer Wilder Smith, 40, died while trying to fight the fire that was consuming a forest on his property.

Rain began to fall in mid-September, fortunately, putting out many of the fires, along with help from airborne firefighters.

Edgar Mayeregger, director of the ministry's agrometeorology department, said that even though the rains provided some relief to the drought, they were insufficient for planting.

The Red Rural, or "Rural Network," a grouping of 17 nongovernmental rural development organizations, say there are families and entire communities lacking food already with no chance of resuming their work in the fields.

Secretary-general of the National Coordinating Group of *Campesina* Organizations, Luis Aguayo, said that it will seek government funds to make up for the losses, taking into consideration that small-scale farmers will need six months to provide food for their families.

"They'll have to survive in the meantime," he said.

The Red Rural is launching a campaign to inform Paraguayans about the consequences of fires and how to prevent them. The group is also seeking transparency in the international aid the government are receiving by following up on the use and destination of the monies given to victims.

The fires were very worrying to environmental organizations.

Danilo Salas, of the Moisés Bertoni Foundation, said that more than 400,000 hectares (988,000 acres) of forestland has been lost forever in the fires.

Cristina Morales, species coordinator of the Guyrá Paraguay Foundation, a bird-protection organization, told the capital's Radio Viva that the efforts to put out the fires showed a lack of coordination.

"All of this is happening because we're working without any planning, because we should have had a fire management program before, or an educational campaign for the people," she said. "We wouldn't have had all of these problems. Now the most important thing is peoples' health, but national parks are also suffering the consequences because the farmers are the priority, and the protected areas are forgotten."

Morales warned that there are 112 bird species at risk of extinction because of the forest fires.

Carlos López, head of the Environment Secretariat, said that a national reforestation program is already underway in an effort to recover the vast forest wealth that was lost in the fires. The Paraguayan Federation of Loggers of the Interior has worried that the devastated lands will be used for farming and livestock, ruling out a true recovery of forestlands. The foundation said it would donate plants and help grow them.

Prosecutor Lilian Ruiz said that 15 people have been charged with allegedly producing the fires, which include farm workers, fisherman and ranchers, mostly from San Pedro.

Crimes against the environment in Paraguay carry prison sentences of up to five years. Ruiz said they were not charged of having the intention of causing the disaster, but because "they did not take precautions." □

LATIN AMERICA/CARIBBEAN

Latinamerica Press

Endangered species lists grows

New list includes species on the path to extinction.

The planet's biodiversity is rapidly deteriorating and the situation appears as though it will only become more severe, the World Conservation Union warned as it presented Sept. 12 its Red List of Threatened Species 2007.

The Red List — which lists the status of 41,415 plant and animal species — found that 16,306 are threatened with extinction, 188 more than in 2006. There are 10,930 species in South America, 2,053 in Mexico and Central America and 1,657 in the Caribbean, including French Guiana, Guyana and Suriname.

The World Conservation Union, an international network that promotes environmen-

inbrief

- President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva announced Sept. 21 that his government would allot US\$270 million until 2010 for the creation of new reserves, as well as water and electricity services to isolated Amazonian indigenous communities of **Brazil**.

- Fifty cases of murdered women have been reported so far this year in **Chile**. The most recent case was reported Sept. 22, when a mother of two was killed allegedly by her husband. She had reported that her husband had beaten her before.

- Hurricane Félix slammed into the Atlantic coast of **Nicaragua** in early September, leaving 102 dead, 86 missing and more than 32,000 families homeless. The storm also caused major damage to the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, the largest in Central America.

- The mining city of La Oroya in central **Peru** was included for the second consecutive year on the list of the world's 10 most contaminated cities in the world, according to the New York-based Blacksmith Institute. US-based company Doe Run operates a smelter in the city that releases 900 metric tons of sulfur dioxide into the air every day, and 99 percent of the children here have blood lead levels that exceed the internationally accepted rate.

- The National Colonization Institute of **Uruguay** designated over 8,000 hectares (19,800 acres) starting Sept. 24 to small-scale farmers so they can increase production and income.

“People either directly or indirectly, are the main reason for most species’ decline.”

— World Conservation Union

tal conservation and biodiversity classifies species, according to their risk of extinction: extinct or extinct in the wild; critically endangered, endangered and vulnerable: species threatened with global extinction; near threatened: species close to the threatened thresholds or that would be threatened without ongoing specific conservation measures; Least Concern: species evaluated with a low risk of extinction; data deficient: no evaluation because of insufficient data.

Although the exact number of species that exist on the planet is unknown, most estimates are of 15 million, of which only 1.8 million are known. Latin America, because of its vast biodiversity accounts for a large part of those species.

This year, the total number of extinct species 795 and another 65 are only found in captivity or in cultivation.

According to the organization, “People either directly or indirectly, are the main reason for most species’ decline. Habitat destruction and degradation continues to be the main cause of species’ decline, along with the all too familiar threats of introduced invasive species, unsustainable harvesting, over-hunting, pollution and disease. Climate change is increasingly recognized as a serious threat, which can magnify these dangers.”

For the first time, corals have been included on the list. The organization included 10 coral species from Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands, with two of them in the critically endangered category. Also added were 74 seaweeds from the Galapagos Islands. “Ten species are listed as critically endangered, with six of those highlighted as possibly extinct.”

The cold water species are threatened by climate change and the rise in sea temperature that characterizes El Niño. The seaweeds are also indirectly affected by overfishing, which removes predators from the food chain, resulting in an increase of sea urchins and other herbivores that overgraze these algae,” said the organization.

The assessment in Mexico and North America resulted in 723 reptiles species added to the list, increasing the total to 738 reptiles in the region, of which 90 are on the brink of extinction.

Two fresh water turtle species from Mexico, the cuatro cienegas Slider and the ornate slider are listed on the endangered and vulnerable lists, respectively as both risk losing their habitats.

In Latin America, Mexico and Brazil have the highest number of threatened species with 840 and 725, respectively. Cuba tops the Caribbean’s list with 277 species.

The World Conservation Union urged efforts to protect biodiversity because not doing so would put in risk that 2010 goal to significantly reduce its lost. The mark was established in 2002, 10 years after the Biological Biodiversity Convention was adopted.

“This year’s Red List shows that the invaluable efforts made so far to protect species are not enough,” said Julia Marton-Lefèvre, director-general of the organization. “The rate of biodiversity loss is increasing and we need to act now to significantly reduce it and stave off this global extinction crisis. This can be done, but only with a concerted effort by all levels of society.”

Grethel Aguilar, who head’s the organization’s Mexico unit says that the “document is a generalized reflexion for decision-makers, for individuals and the different organizations on the role in society and the loss of biodiversity, and the urgent need to change the unsustainable development model for one with a plan of economies and societies that show more solidarity, not just with other people but with the environment.”

On Sept. 13, the organization presented the “Environmental Torch,” a prize awarded to organizations who help form environmentally-friendly policies, to a Central American organization.

The Honduran nongovernmental Committee for the Defense and Development of Flora and Fauna for the Gulf of Fonseca, for its work protecting natural resources and sustainable development for fisherman in this body of water, which is shared by El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

“This area holds a great variety of ecosystems and coastal wetlands; in addition to economic and social development for numerous communities that have settled around it,” the organization said.

Costa Rica’s Marine Tortoise Restoration Program was also honored for its work along with the Salvadoran Development and Environmental Research organization. □

Small hands in mining

Young girls overworked and underpaid in dangerous industry, study finds.

Girls comprise one of the most vulnerable sectors of Latin America's labor force. They lack benefits, job security and are often forced into doing dangerous tasks.

The lucrative mining industry is no exception. High mineral prices and booming production have been a major factor in the region's strong economic growth, but the perilous jobs children, especially girls, undertake behind the scenes small hands behind the scenes often go unnoticed.

A recent study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that because boys are more likely to take on hazardous jobs, the perilous jobs girls take on are often overlooked, especially small-scale mining.

"The issue of girl child labor in mining is largely unknown, it is often not fully recognized by the law, and missed by the intervention services and the media," reads the report, "Girls in mining:

Research findings from Ghana, Niger, Peru and the United Republic of Tanzania," which was written by the organization's Bureau for Gender Equality and the International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor.

New evidence shows a "that the involvement of girl child labor in mining is much more frequent and far-reaching than was previously recognized," said the report. "The assumption that girls are only involved in prostitution and domestic work is incorrect; girls are involved in tasks related to the extraction, transportation and processing stages of mining as well as in other mining-related jobs such as selling food and supplies to the miners."

The study warns that girls are increasingly involved in the hazardous interior of mines, while still fulfilling traditional domestic duties, working longer hours than their male counterparts, adding that as a result they have a smaller chance for education or getting out of the industry.

"All activities related to small-scale mining are characterized by danger, especially those in and around the excavation zone," said the report. "Girls in mining are exposed to long working days, contact with fine dust and toxic substances without any protective equipment, high risks of accidents and intense physical exertion. This environment can lead to serious illness and injury with lifelong consequences, or even death."

But the ILO said there are significant draws to mining "for poor citizens in mineral rich societies."

In spite of its association with extreme poverty, indecent working and living conditions, labor exploitation and rights abuse, the industry continues to attract a steady flow of economic migrants year upon year, seeking a way out of poverty," said the report.

The organization notes that all four countries in the study have ratified the 1999 ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (Convention 182), in which they agreed to eradicate work for children that is likely to harm health, safety and morals.

The body ran three initiatives in the southern Andean departments of Puno, Ayacucho and Arequipa in mineral-rich Peru from 2000-2004 and has noted that a change is possible.

"The initiatives showed that for the progressive elimination of child labor from mining, it is firstly important to improve the mining industry through changes in technology, income generation, social protection, improvements in basic services, organizational strengthening and sensitization at the national and regional level," it said. □

"The issue of girl child labor in mining is largely unknown, it is often not fully recognized by the law, and missed by the intervention services and the media."

— ILO