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LUIS ANGEL SAavedra

ARGENTINA
Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

Fernández's challenges

Argentina's first elected woman president takes office with broad support and Congress on her side.

Cristina Fernández easily won the Oct. 28 presidential election, becoming the first elected woman president in Argentine history.

Her victory was not surprising (*LP, Oct. 17, 2007*) — she had a strong lead over the other hopefuls for months — and her closest rival was also a female, an element that pre-election polls did not show. Elisa Carrió, a lawmaker like Fernández, and opposition leader of the Civic Coalition, won 22.9 percent of the vote, mainly in the middle- and upper-class sectors of Buenos Aires and other large cities. Carrió captured some of the right-wing vote, the rest of which was split between Roberto Lavagna with 16.9 percent, Alberto Rodríguez Saá with 7.7 percent and Ricardo López Murphy with 1.4 percent.

Carrió trailed Fernández, wife of current President Néstor Kirchner, who won 44.9 percent of the vote. Fernández's more than 10-point lead ruled out the need for a runoff.

Fernández now faces a difficult task: maintain Argentina's strong economic growth — monthly growth averaged 8.7 percent of the gross domestic product over the last 20 months — while putting forth a policy to create a greater balance of wealth. She must also handle rising prices of goods, which some say are a result of increased internal buying power and others attribute to price gouging.

"It's clear that they voted for Cristina so that she continues what Kirchner has done, above all economically," said sociologist Ricardo Rouvier. He says that thanks to a high external demand for Argentine products, there was an increase in the gross domestic product, and a drop in poverty and unemployment rates, issues that "had the country on the verge of a social breakdown when Kirchner took office in 2003" (*LP, June 4, 2003*).

"Of course this has its negative side for the president-elect because she, who was elected to stay on the same track, will not have that classic grace period that peoples give their new leaders at the start of their terms," Rouvier added.

In an effort to soften her first few months, the outgoing government has already begun to review some of its policies in an effort to control inflation, such as the numerous subsidies that have frozen the prices of public services as well as efforts to avoid increased prices of foodstuffs (*LP, Sept. 19, 2007*).

The government announced that before Dec. 10 — when Fernández takes office — the gradual increases in electricity and gas rates will have been announced. These increases will only affect those who consume the most, who will subsequently pay higher fees,

and aim to reduce the price of energy-sector (driven either by gas, electricity or liquid fuels) subsidies, which currently total US\$4 billion.

Fernández will also be free from the political cost stemming from the renegotiation of contracts with privatized companies, which is expected to mean a 30-percent increase in railway fares and a reduction of the royalties that the company managing the national airports pays the government. This same company will be able to pay its debts with the state with shares.

The president-elect will distance herself from unpopular increases from her husband's government: a 19-percent hike on taxi fares, 24 percent increase in private health care providers' fees, 20 percent increase in monthly private school tuition and a 23-percent hike in auto insurance for the country's 7.8 million vehicles. (Argentina's government oversees education and health care, even in the private sector.)

Fernández's new government will have strong popular support and a Congress in her favor — 61 percent in the Senate and 62 percent in the lower house, giving her the needed backing to pass her political and institutional initiatives with ease.

Luckily, she only has only a very weak opposition to face.

Carrió's centrist coalition began to break apart the day after the election when out of its 31 deputies, the nine socialists and the eight lawmakers who belonged to Carrió's old party — the Alternative for a Republic of Equals — decided to form their own blocs.

Carlos Raimundi, a lawmaker with the party, known by its Spanish initials, ARI, said the party had changed. "It was not the ARI of social struggle," he said.

Right-wing parties also have paltry support. While conservative businessman Mauricio Macri was elected mayor of Buenos Aires with almost 70 percent of the vote in June (*LP, July 11, 2007*), López Murphy, part of his Republican Proposal alliance, won just 12.8 percent of the vote in last month's election.

Twenty-four years after the fall of Argentina's 1976-83 dictatorship, a nationwide survey the week of the vote by the Poliarquía pollster found seven of every 10 people had no "interest in politics." On the Oct. 28 election, even though voting is mandatory, only 71.7 of registered voters went to the polls. The last six elections' participation averaged 84 percent. □

ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Sarayaku

The tree of life vs. the tree of death

Technology transforms one Kichwa community.

In 2002, the Sarayaku Kichwa community was thrust into the spotlight when it kicked out Compañía General de Combustibles (CGC), a subsidiary of US-based oil company Texaco (now Chevron) from its territory, fearing environmental, social and economic damage.

Residents of Sarayaku, located in the Amazon province of Pastaza, lived off of what they hunted and fished. They had little contact with the provincial capital, Puyo, and were very protective of their identity and social structure.

The concession granted to CGC to explore for oil in Block 23 between 1964 and 1992 changed the community's life as they were forced to face oil company workers, the military protecting the oil fields and other communities that decided to ally themselves with the oil company (*LP, March 26, June 18 and Nov. 5, 2003; Oct. 18, 2006*).

"We found out what happened to our families in the north [of Ecuador], we found out what Texaco did and we didn't want that," said Mario Santi, a Sarayaku community leader.

He was speaking about the environmental and health damage that oil exploitation had caused in the Orellana and Sucumbios provinces, where many families from Sarayaku moved in the 1970s.

The community faced sieges; the path to the rivers was closed. The oil company also sued some of the community leaders.

Sarayaku teamed up with several national and international organizations that promised to back them in their fight against the oil company. The organizations provided funds for training in the defense of collective rights and community production projects. To soften the effects of the siege, the organizations proposed constructing a small landing strip in the community.

The community built the runway, paving it with gravel, and the community began to have daily contact with Puyo.

The runway was meant to serve international observation missions and the delivery of aid. The arrival of food changed the community significantly as a new addition arrived in the community: food stores.

Trade increased as a greater number of products and community stores created needs that did not exist before. A growing demand made river travel obsolete and airplanes became the ideal mode of transport for quick trade between the provincial capital and the community. Money became a necessity and as a result, paid work.

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ARGENTINA

Identifying the "disappeared".

The non-profit scientific organization Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team launched a mass campaign Nov. 2 to collect blood samples from the families of people who fell victim to forced disappearances during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, in order to identify the remains of some 600 people and create a database.

"In 23 years we have recovered the skeletal remains of about 900 people, 300 of whom were identified and turned over to their families," said Luis Fondbrider, director of the team. "We need to carry out further DNA testing in the rest of the cases."

To complete that task, the organization signed an agreement with the Health Ministry and the Secretariat of Human Rights and began to publicize the initiative this month, in order to get family members to visit one of the 45 hospitals taking part in the agreement and have their blood samples taken.

"A simple blood sample can help identify them," says a TV and radio spot that will go on the air nationwide next week.

The team uses anthropological, medical and odontological methods to identify human remains. DNA testing is a last resort, as in these cases.

Human rights organizations estimate that some 30,000 people disappeared during the dictatorship. —IPS.

BRAZIL

Sentence for nun's killer upheld.

A court in the northeastern Amazon state of Para upheld a 27-year prison sentence for Rayfran das Neves Sales, who was convicted of gunning down environmentalist and nun Dorothy Stang in 2005.

Das Neves Sales was sentenced in May, but according to Brazilian law, since the sentence was longer than 20 years, he was automatically granted an appeal.

Stang was a staunch supporter of local *campesinos* and their fight against the large plantation owners and loggers in this corner of the Amazon. She was shot to death on Feb. 12, 2005 in Anapu, a village in southwestern Para where she was a missionary for 23 years (*LP, March 9, 2005*).

Das Neves Sales said plantation owners Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura and Regivaldo Pereira Galvão paid him some US\$25,000 and gave him the gun to kill Stang.

Bastos de Moura was found guilty on May 15 of authoring the crime and sentenced to 30 years in prison, the maximum sentence for this crime in Brazil. —*IPS/LP*.

"Certain small changes can end up making conceptual changes in the social dynamic," said anthropologist Liset Coba, a professor at the Catholic University of Quito.

She says that these changes are also inevitable and test the community's ability to maintain their basic principles

"Culture is not static," she said. "It changes permanently with external contributions and internal changes that can even end up going against a community's identity. The challenge is to incorporate changes that strengthen [a community's] basic principles."

The changes in Sarayaku included the installation of solar panels to produce electricity and recently, a parabolic antenna for a satellite Internet system.

The electricity allowed a radio system to keep the community in touch with the world outside their community, which helped them monitor harassment by the military and give immediate responses.

Later, small televisions and DVD players made their way into the community and Hollywood films are now a popular diversion here.

DVDs are also used for training in Sarayaku. Community members film their resistance actions and show them to visitors and fellow residents. But films are becoming increasingly popular.

"It's a double-edged sword. The DVDs help us train and the children get to see what we did to resist, but when there is no training, they watch other things," said Santi.

A similar scenario has occurred with the antenna. The project is a part of an agreement with the University of Cuenca to implement a distance learning program and the possibility of university education for Sarayaku youths.

"We're going to have a control over what the young people see, that they go into university classrooms and are not going to see anything else," Santi said.

The stores, television, films and the Internet are changing the face of Sarayaku. The young people are using bandannas with British and US flags like they have seen in the movies; and the number of popular music CDs is increasing, relegating the culture's oral traditions and musical instruments.

"The tree of life is full of our things, our identity, our customs," said Santi. But there is also "the tree of death, which is oil contamination, the loss of our identity, our language."

That is precisely what is awaiting Sarayaku if its residents are unable to unit the influence of the outside world with their own values. □

MEXICO

Laura Carlsen for Americas Policy Program*

NAFTA, inequality and immigration

Fourteen years with trade pact creates conditions opposed to originally intended goals.

In the early 1990s, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was still but a gleam in the eye of Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) and George Bush Sr. (1989-93), the atmosphere in Mexican political and business circles was positively euphoric. It was a time of major structural reforms in Mexico, and NAFTA was to be the crowning glory of Mexico's modernization, its ticket into the First World. Proponents predicted that the agreement would be a win-win deal —consumers would get cheaper food, producers would become more efficient, and immigration would decrease as the developing economy of Mexico converged with the world's economic superpower to the North.

Fourteen years later, we see nearly the opposite. As trade between the two countries has grown, so have the huge gaps in how people live. Following NAFTA the Mexican economy went into the tailspin now known as the "tequila crisis" when its currency devalued as a result of capital flight. Years later, growth has still been much lower than expected, averaging around 2 and only 1 percent per capita.

Growth isn't the only problem behind NAFTA's failure to raise standards of living in Mexico. Job creation turned out to be another big disappointment. With over a million young people entering the job market a year, Mexico has produced less than half that number of jobs per year since NAFTA. In net terms, the situation is worse since small and medium-sized businesses that produced for the national market have gone out of business in droves. The rapid cycle of mergers and acquisitions set in motion by NAFTA's investor clauses — in many cases, transnational corporations absorbing Mexican companies — has created some jobs but more often has driven national companies out of business and led to employee cutbacks, especially in services.

Massive agricultural imports have displaced an estimated 2 million farmers, as subsidized grains from the United States take over their local and regional markets. With few new jobs in manufacturing or other sectors, many of these former farmers now work in fields in California, Carolina, or Iowa.

Since NAFTA, the Mexican economy rests on four pillars: the informal economy, non-renewable resources (oil and gas), remittances from migrants in the United

States, and drug trafficking. To call that a shaky foundation would be an understatement.

The sudden rise in tortilla prices early this year graphically illustrates the big lie of “free trade” (*LP*, March 7, 2007). Corn is not just any food in Mexico. Maize permeates Mexicans’ diet, religion, rituals, and cultures.

But it’s also because corn has always been the cheapest, most available food around for both the rural poor who grow it and the urban poor who buy it at the local tortilla shops. At every meal, tortillas are wrapped around eggs or meat, dipped in soup, used as edible spoons to scoop beans, or salted and nibbled with a green chili if there’s nothing else.

Over the past year, the US government, the European Union, Brazil, and the Group of Eight industrialized nations all announced major plans for agrofuel adoption. Although agrofuels can be made from many ingredients, in the United States corn ethanol is the most common. With US production leading the global pack, the increase in demand for corn as fuel pushed up the international price.

Many groups have criticized the diversion of land and corn from food to fuel production. Corn is a basic foodstuff not only in Mexico but throughout Mesoamerica and many other developing countries. As transnational companies like Cargill and ADM enter into the corn and ethanol business by leasing land and building facilities in other countries, these countries lose their ability to produce corn to feed their people and their agricultural resources — pure water, soil, fertilizers— go to run cars and strengthen the hand of the large traders.

In Mexico, inflation is moving up the food chain, since under NAFTA subsidized corn imports from the United States replaced other types of forage for livestock production. Now dependent on US imports, meat prices are going up too.

Agrofuel production remains a long-term concern for food sovereignty and consumer access to basic foods. But it doesn’t explain the tortilla crisis. As the international price of corn edged up, the price of corn on the Mexican market skyrocketed.

When international prices began to climb, the handful of corn importers and large producers in Mexico saw an opportunity to further tighten their control of the market. Investigations show that Cargill, ADM-Maseca, and other corn flour producers held back reserves to create an artificial scarcity as a justification for driving up prices.

Corn production in Mexico last year was very high — not a scarcity scenario at all. These companies bought Mexican corn at low prices in early 2006, stored it, used the international price rise as a pretext for raising domestic prices, and sold in December at prices more than double what they paid.

Another goal of this strategy was to use control of supplies and prices to drive out traditional corn mills that make up about half the tortilla market.

None of this could have happened this way without NAFTA. Prior to the agreement, the Mexican government continued to play an active role in buying and distributing corn throughout the country, subsidizing urban consumption, and guaranteeing a price floor to producers.

When all controls on corn imports are removed under NAFTA in January of 2008, the Mexican market — consumers and producers — will be at the mercy of some of the planet’s largest and most voracious corporations. □

*Program at the Center for International Policy

LATIN AMERICA

Henry Mance in Bogota

An indigenous perspective on climate change

Indigenous peoples, long the flag-bearers of environmentalism, watch their perspective on climate change continue to be ignored.

Cameras flashed as two Mayan delegates from Guatemala laid flowers on the stage, a ritual intended to bring good fortune to the Third International Seminar on Indigenous Women and Global Climate Change, held in Bogota in September. Yet as soon as their short ceremony had finished, the audience’s interest waned.

Many attendees who had participated in the earlier talks by academics and environmentalists at the seminar, which brought together indigenous delegates from eight Latin American countries, drifted away. “They always just leave us talking,” complained one indigenous delegate.

This is the challenge for those working to incorporate indigenous voices into discussions on climate change: to make ethnic indigenous perspectives impossible to be ignored.

Even though the World Bank recognizes that indigenous peoples are “extremely

CUBA

New resolution against embargo.

With 184 votes in favor, four against (the United States, Israel, Palau and the Marshall Islands) and one abstention (Micronesia), the United Nations General Assembly voted for the 16th consecutive year against the US embargo against Cuba, in place since 1962.

“This is a historic victory,” said Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, calling the vote “the international community’s response” to recent statements by US President George W. Bush on Oct. 24 that he will maintain the embargo “on the dictatorship until it changes.”

A report presented to the General Assembly says that the embargo has cost the country US\$89 billion in economic, trade and financial damage.

The ruling is non-binding but Cuban authorities consider it a “moral victory” for having called international attention to the embargo’s impact on the island nation.

According to Cuban officials, last year 30 countries — including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands and Spain — suffered from the embargo because of US-placed economic reprisals to countries that do business with Cuba. —*LP*

GUATEMALA

Colom wins presidency. Social-democrat Álvaro Colom, of Guatemala's National Unity for Hope party, won a second-round election on Nov. 4 with 52.8 percent of the vote. His opponent, former Gen. Otto Pérez Molina, of the ultra-right-wing Patriot Party, captured 47.2 percent.

Colom topped the first round on Sept. 9 with 28 percent of the vote over Pérez Molina with 23.7 percent. Indigenous leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú was in seventh place with just 3 percent of the vote (*LP*, May 30 and Sept. 19, 2007).

Voter participation was low in the second round — with more than half of the electorate staying home.

Colom begins a four-year term on Jan. 8 and has promised to “create a social-democratic Guatemala,” a country where half of the 13 million inhabitants live in poverty and rampant crime leaves 15 dead a day on average. —*LP*.

vulnerable to the impacts of climate change” and “hold knowledge that may be critical to climate change adaptation”, many indigenous peoples across Latin America continue to feel excluded from the debate.

According to Pia Escobar, the seminar's coordinator, “information and awareness about the issue need to be spread.”

One barrier is terminology. “Climate change is a term of academics and policy makers,” says Darío Mejía of Colombia's National Indigenous and *Campesino* Organization. “Within the indigenous sphere, the problem isn't known as climate change, but as the consequences of predatory and extractivist policies.”

So, while much mainstream discussion of climate change focuses on the details of market-based mechanisms and low-emission technologies, indigenous forums tend to embrace a wider set of issues, including food security and fumigation, as well as invoking spiritual interpretations of the environment, such as that of *pachamama*, or Mother Earth.

For Mejía, the neutrality of the term “climate change” provides a smokescreen, allowing for the continuance of environmentally-destructive policies, such as monocultures for biofuels. On Colombia's Pacific coast, biofuels such as palm oil are being planted without the consent of the indigenous communities who own the land.

Potential financial opportunities, such as the possibility, under the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism, which grants financial rewards for reforestation (or potentially, under Kyoto's successor agreement, for avoiding deforestation) often seem distant and untrustworthy. “Thousands of carbon capture companies have appeared. They want to exploit the forests' timber, and kill the biodiversity where we live,” said Patricia Gualinga, an indigenous Kichwa speaker from Ecuador, at the seminar.

Many indigenous groups also feel neglected by environmental organizations.

“The environmental movement still hasn't incorporated indigenous voices, particularly on the issue of climate change,” says Escobar. This detachment is surprising since the strengthened collaboration of environmentalists and indigenous peoples during the 1980s led to significant legal and political gains for both groups.

Most high-profile research, such as the work of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has practically ignored the issue of ethnicity. A report published earlier this year by the British Tyndall Center explores indigenous peoples' roles as victims, observers and mitigators of climate change.

The report notes that the relationship between indigenous peoples and scientists should not be antagonistic. In the Arctic region, for example, there has been significant cooperation between the two groups. Such cooperation is urgently needed in Latin America to understand the vulnerability of the flora and fauna, on which some Andean populations depend. In the meantime, scientists are missing opportunities to learn from the local climatic observations of indigenous peoples and their techniques for adapting to species variation.

The failure to refer to other ethnic minorities who may be particularly impacted by climate change could have significant effects. Across Latin America, Afro-descendant populations often live in areas as remote as indigenous people. “The issue is still a void for us”, says Escobar. “And if indigenous people are weak in Colombia, just imagine the Afro-Colombians' position.” Moreover, ethnic minorities in Latin American cities may be excluded from climate change discussions due to their linguistic and cultural differences, just as they have been in North America.

Greater efforts are being made to incorporate a gender perspective into climate change activity. According to Escobar, “Women in indigenous communities have a special role as reproducers of the groups' cultures. They also spend much more time on the land, and come to know it much better.” Olga Yana, a Bolivian Aymara, has shown how men and women perceive climatic variations differently, with women noting how the color of trees' leaves can indicate the advent of a harsh winter.

Sensitivity to gender can also guide public policies on climate change. A sustainable forestry initiative in Costa Rica, which pays compensation to landowners who avoid deforestation on their lands, was potentially male-biased as most landowners are men. Therefore, a fee was imposed on users, with revenues channeled to help women become landowners.

However, the importance of a female perspective is resisted by Mejía, who claims that “the gender discourse can't be assimilated into the indigenous movement. Our responsibilities come from our culture, not from our gender. There's total clarity between men and women.”

Addressing the distance between indigenous people and the climate change mainstream will require significant political will. Unfortunately, in many Latin American countries, indigenous movements appear to have lost the momentum that surrounded the constitutional reforms of the late 1980s and 1990s. “It would be easier to incorporate an indigenous perspective into international negotiations rather than into national-level policies,” Escobar said. Whether the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, signed this year by all Latin American governments except Colombia, will invigorate indigenous voices remains to be seen. □

Unprotected workers

Domestic employees continue to fall victim to abuses despite laws protecting them.



Houseworkers turn to union to defend their rights.

“She told me that I did my job poorly; that I had burned pots, broken utensils. She took away all of my wages that she was supposedly holding for me.”

— Rosmery Silaipi

“I used to wake up 6 in the morning to make breakfast. Then I would get the girl ready and take her to school. At noon, I served the family lunch and fed the pets: dogs, cats, parrots. They had a ton. In the afternoon I would wash clothes by hand and iron them. I finally went to sleep at 11 p.m., after putting the family’s baby to sleep,” recalls domestic worker Rosmery Silaipi.

Silaipi said her employer never paid her in cash. At the end of the month she would tell her “I’m saving it for you.” Silaipi only received between 15 and 20 bolivianos (US\$2 to \$3) to walk around the capital, La Paz, a city she hardly knew, on Sundays, her day off.

After working three years with that family, Silaipi decided to return to her native village, in the northeastern department of Beni. But when she announced her resignation, the mother’s attitude changed, who up until that point had treated her very well.

“She told me that I did my job poorly; that I had burned pots, broken utensils and other similar accusations,” said Silaipi. “She took away all of my wages that she was supposedly holding for me. So I went back to my village with the little money I had left over from Sundays.”

Silaipi did not know then about the National Federation of Bolivian Houseworkers, a union of organized domestic employees. Now, she is one of its directors.

Because of the domestic employees’ long work hours and dispersed locations, organizing them is a difficult task.

“There are 140,000 domestic employees in Bolivia, but they’re split up into 140,000 homes, and it’s very difficult to work with them,” Silaipi said. “They work Monday to Saturday, and they usually sleep in the house where they work. They go out of the house on Sundays. Our activities, workshops and assemblies take place only on Sundays.”

The majority of domestic workers come from the rural areas and know little about urban living. It is difficult for some to understand the value of the money they receive. Many lack friends and family to orient them and they rely on their employers’ word, and as a result fall victim to frauds like the one Silaipi suffered.

“There are employers who look for housemaids in small villages. They promise to give them a good salary and the chance to study. But once they start working they give them work schedules above what’s allowed, they don’t let them study and sometimes, they don’t even pay them,” she said.

It is also common for young *campesinas* to migrate to the cities in search of a better life. But the labor market is very small and the competition is fierce. Many of these girls are of indigenous origin and do not speak Spanish well, let alone [have the ability to] read and write.

“For them, working as a domestic employee is the only way to have a fixed income.

“The question is not if the model will collapse, but rather *when* it will collapse.”

— Wim Dierckxsens



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They can earn the minimum wage [\$67 per month] and even a little bit more. This job also signifies a social ascent and insertion into society,” explained Lourdes Montero, director of the Gregoria Apaza Women’s Promotion Center.

Often, when domestic employees get married, they stop working to take care of their own families.

“In general, they become vendors and use their work experience to improve their sales. They know what and how the middle class buys,” Montero says.

Historically, domestic workers have been victims of racial abuse and discrimination in the workplace. They have been considered second-class citizens, lacking even the right to demand their rights. But the situation is slowly changing.

“Now employers treat us with more respect and comply with our labor rights. There are still some bad cases, but the situation has improved. They treat us like human beings,” said Silaipi.

The union now has 5,000 members, which is still small compared to the number of domestic employees in the country.

Members pay dues of 1 boliviano per week, or five per month. Sometimes they sell empanadas and other food to help fund the organization.

Bolivia has a law to protect domestic workers and guarantees them a maximum 8-hour workday if they do not live in the house where they work, and a 10-hour day for those who live in the house. The law also states that they are entitled to compensation if fired.

When the employees are aware of their rights and the union backs them, the law is fulfilled.

“Last week, a domestic worker was fired after 12 years of service. Her employers did not want to pay her the US\$1,500 compensation that she was owed. The worker contacted us and I went to speak with her employers to show them the law. Finally, they paid her every cent,” Silaipi said.

An important goal for the union is to create a health insurance fund for its members. But the cost is high: \$7 a month, equivalent to one tenth of the minimum wage. The union is negotiating with the government so that the state finances part of the fund.

“We get cut and burned while cooking. We catch colds and we get fungal infections for washing plates and clothes by hand. There are some *compañeras* who suffer from malnutrition because their employers don’t give them the same food that they eat. Health insurance is a real necessity. With any luck, we’ll have it by the end of the year,” Silaipi said optimistically. □

LATIN AMERICA

Interview with economist Wim Dierckxsens

“Latin America is the hope”

*In the following interview with the journal **Brasil de Fato**, Costa Rican economist **Wim Dierckxsens**, who recently participated in the First Voices of Our America Conference, in Fortaleza and Rio de Janeiro, Oct. 12-16, affirms that the difficulties for the main capitalist power to maintain its unipolar hegemony are increasing, hinting at the possibility of a serious crisis of the dollar and the military-industrial complex that supports the United States in the planet. He adds that this juncture could drive experiences like that of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) and Socialism of the 21st Century in Venezuela.*

You speak of a crisis of US hegemony and of capitalism itself.

Today we have an international monetary system based on the dollar, which is not backed by gold, so money can be created indefinitely from a pyramid of loans. The financial system has increasingly amplified the granting of money to people who are increasingly incapable of paying it back. The United States is the global leader in this process of continued indebtedness.

Doesn’t this cause a decrease of the dollar’s value in the world?

Yes. But if I cannot multiply dollar internally, the way out has been to make the need for dollars increase in other countries. An example is the Middle East. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein threatened to convert his reserves and the sale of petroleum to euros. Now the enemy is Iran. It’s about the military-industrial complex that needs to defend the dollar, offered to the world in an almost unlimited form.

Now, despite the economic decline, this military dominion can’t compensate or even revive the US economy?

The military dominion itself is in jeopardy. In ultimate analysis, China now finances the US military-industrial complex, as do Third World countries. The question is not if the model will collapse, but rather *when* it will collapse. And the scenario is to avoid that at all costs, to print dollars continuously and make war. It’s not an offensive against just Iran,

but also against China — the principal consumer of Iranian oil — and against Russia, the country who has the most business with Iran's nuclear energy project. It's a world crisis. If the dollar falls, the Europeans will enter a crisis, the Chinese too. This explains in part why the president of France is allied with US interests. In the past century, first came the depression; after, the war. Now the war has to come as a preventative form in order to avoid a depression.

There are also theorists who do not agree with the idea that US imperialism will fall due to internal contradictions, almost in a natural manner...

The US has already shown very clearly that it will defend its global power. In this way, you can't say that another world war is inevitable. But this is up in the air and Americans are not going to resign their privileges peacefully. The issue is that the United States, if it cannot continue with its war strategy due to strong opposing powers, will enter into internal collapse. That is what I argue. Those contradictions will not be resolved in a round table discussion, but rather in a battlefield.

The US intervention in the Middle East, in Asia, won't open new possibilities for Latin America?

If there is war or economic depression, there will be less regular trade. And there will be no other way out than to turn back toward yourself. Latin American countries will have to create new products or make up for what was imported before.

But isn't this happening already?

What's happening now is pure struggle. Venezuela's disconnection [from globalization], the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas project, goes against the current of free trade agreement negotiations and other similar projects of declared annexation. In a scenario of international trade depression, the possibility is greater that these transforming processes accelerate. They are seeds that can sprout easily. Latin America is the hope.

You signaled that Venezuela discusses the Socialism of the 21st Century. However, the country keeps allowing transnational companies to exploit its oil, imports a good part of its food staples and follows a development model inspired by Keynesian ideas.

There is the internal struggle. In Venezuela there is not a Socialism of the 21st century, but a scream. There are forces that want to implant a project controlled by the national capital. In any case, there is a disconnection process in progress. Socialism will not be declared overnight in any country. In Cuba, in Russia, it was with the passing of years, not from the start.

Venezuela imports the most food because it has income from oil. But it will learn that, in order to be less vulnerable to an external block, it has to produce its food internally. There is a strong program in that direction. Likewise, defense capability is necessary. And Venezuela is building up its military power.

Factories that were closed during neoliberalism are being reopened, by means of cooperatives. These and other factors indicate a strengthening of state power rather than more power for the popular masses. (...) The debate is: either more central power, or we manage to decentralize the power so that the people define the priorities of the society.

Is the situation in Bolivia different, as Evo Morales arrived to the presidency through the strengthening of popular organizations?

Yes, it is the opposite of Venezuela. The interesting thing about Bolivia is that it proposes the "developmentalist", "neo-Keynesian" thesis. The Bolivians say: "we don't want nationals to be exploiters of the people's natural resources; we want a change in civilization compatible with our form of being." It's very radical. Bolivia has given to Socialism of the 21st Century the ingredient from those indigenous communities that have begun to think of new socialist paradigms in a different way.

In Costa Rica, the Free Trade Agreement with the United States was approved by popular referendum [LP, Oct. 17, 2007]. Was it a defeat, in spite of the small margin?

Very soon we will perceive the opposite. If "no" had won, all of those social forces that organized in campaign against the FTA would have been dismantled. (...) The Patriotic Committees that organized in neighborhoods still exist now, because the FTA still hasn't entered into operation. The three laws that must change the constitution and eliminate monopolies of telecommunications and insurances still have to be approved. If one of these laws doesn't pass, there will be no FTA. The government already has a minimum advantage in Congress to approve it; in other words, the struggle is on its way. □

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

The world's most unequal region. Latin America is the region with the world's most unequal distribution of wealth, according to the Inter-American Development Bank's (IADB) Economic and Social Progress Report 2008.

This year's report, "Outsiders? The Changing Patterns of Exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean", published Nov. 1, says that even though the region is more prosperous and modern than it was 25 years ago, exclusion continues to affect most sectors of the population.

"Social exclusion is an inefficient and dysfunctional dynamic social, political, and economic process whereby individuals and groups are denied access to opportunities and quality services to live productive lives outside poverty," says the report. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN Level of Inequality

Country	Gini coefficient
Bolivia	60.1
Haiti	59.2
Colombia	58.6
Brazil	58.0
Paraguay	57.8
Chile	57.1
Panama	56.4
Guatemala	55.1
Peru	54.6
Honduras	53.8
Argentina	52.8
El Salvador	52.4
Dominican Rep.	51.7
Costa Rica	49.9
Mexico	49.5
Uruguay	44.9
Venezuela	44.1
Ecuador	43.7
Nicaragua	43.1
Trinidad & Tobago	40.3
Jamaica	37.9

*Measures income distribution levels in which 0 equals perfect equality and 100 perfect inequality.

Source: United Nations Development Program's 2006 Human Development Report.

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

Corn prices raise the specter of hunger

Food and fuel prices may cause wider crisis.

According to the Popol Vuh, the Quiché Maya book of creation, it took the great god K'ucumatz three tries to get humans right. The first two failures attempted to make people from mud then wood, before successfully creating humans from corn and water.

Today, corn is a dietary staple for Guatemala's predominantly indigenous population. Saturnino Figueroa, a Mayan Mam leader from San Juan Ixcoy, a small town in the northern department of Huehuetenango, explains the importance of corn for the Mayan people: "To us, corn is sacred. It's part of our culture and identity. If Guatemalans didn't have corn, we would have a far higher mortality rate. Corn has allowed indigenous people to survive years of extermination against the Mayans."

However, a growing appetite for corn-based biofuel in the US has pushed up the price of corn on the international market, raising the specter of a serious food crisis in Guatemala. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that ethanol production in the United States has increased four-fold since 2000, and that in 2006, 20 percent of the world's yellow corn production was used to meet US demands for biofuel, which has pushed up prices on the world market. China also consumes 3 to 5 million tons of ethanol a year and has recently set up four new processing plants.

Local corn prices began to soar early this year. Between January and March, the price of white corn in Guatemala shot up from US\$180 to \$320 per ton, a 78-percent increase in only three months. The upward trend reflects a similar shift on the international market from January 2006, when the price of white corn was \$134. By February of this year, the price had reached \$224, rising 67 percent in just over a year. During the same period, the price of yellow corn also reported a dramatic increase, up 50.5 percent from \$125 to \$188.

The price of corn is now well above the normal price for this time of year. Coupled with rising oil prices, the impact on the prices of basic goods has resulted in increasing inflation since October 2006.

Rising corn prices have placed a heavy strain on the rural population during Guatemala's annual hunger season, a time when poor households have limited access to food, which began in April. This year, as households ran out of food reserves from the harvest that ended in January, families had to depend on the market to purchase their food. Household cereal reserves from the harvest in early this year have been depleted, and there is a lack of wild fruits and herbs, causing households to depend almost exclusively on markets to purchase their food.

The rainy season, which normally begins in May, started poorly as a result of the *El Niño* phenomenon, causing losses and decreased crop yields in the August harvest and affecting food availability for subsistence households.

There is also a low demand for unskilled labor, which is the main source of income for poor Guatemalans, further limiting food access. The purchase of food has been more difficult than normal during this hunger season given the current high food prices.

The main impact of these high prices has been felt by non-subsistence households with a high dependence on international market prices.

Guatemala has an extremely inequitable distribution of land. Currently, about 58 percent of Guatemalan farmers live in extreme poverty and own less than 5 percent of the country's 5.4 million hectares (13.3 million acres) of arable land. Subsistence producers account for 35 percent of the Guatemalan rural workforce and own just over a quarter of the country's arable land. Surplus producers, which account for just over 4 percent of the rural workforce, own 18 percent and large-scale commercial farmers (almost 3 percent of producers), own the remaining 52 percent.

The most vulnerable areas are the highlands and in the east, where problems of chronic malnutrition exist. By early September, a food crisis had broken out in 53 communities in the municipality of La Unión, in the eastern department of Zacapa.

Lorenza Ramírez said that all she can feed her three children each day is a banana and Marta Guillén said that all her family has to eat is one corn tortilla each. More than 20 children in La Unión have been hospitalized and are suffering from serious malnutrition.

"I'm ashamed to admit this but the truth is that we're facing a food crisis here. All of these communities need food but we don't have enough resources", said mayor of La Unión, Daniel Humberto Sosa.

According to the Committee for Campesino Unity, 49 municipalities in the departments of Quiché, Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, and Chiquimula, are suffering a similar predicament.

In response to the crisis, the Ministry of Agriculture is considering an increase in corn imports. However, the committee's leader Rafael González says this is not the answer. "The crisis hasn't been solved by imports. On the contrary, it has been used by national and international corporations to increase their power and their monopoly over the local market". □

MEXICO

Floods could be avoided. Flooding caused by torrential rains in the southeastern Tabasco state has left more than a million people homeless and 80 percent of the area flooded after the Carriзал and Grijalva rivers burst their banks.

The streets of the state capital, Villahermosa, turned into canals as water, as deep as 3 meters (10 feet), flooded the city.

For environmentalists and some experts it was a tragedy that could have been avoided. "The authorities did not do an adequate job despite having previous experience and studies out that warn about the dangers of a large flood," said Jorge Escandón, head of Greenpeace Mexico's climate change unit.

Critics say that in Tabasco, which borders the Gulf of Mexico, houses, roads and commercial centers are being constructed in the paths of river drainage. According to the National Water Commission, it will take three months for the flood waters to drain out of the area.

In the neighboring state of Chiapas, a small rural community was wiped off the map by a landslide caused by the downpour on Nov. 4. —IPS.

Not so equal society

Afro-descendant population finds itself among the poorest and excluded in the country's society.

A new study released last July has found that Uruguayan society — considered one of the most tolerant in the region — has pushed its Afro-descendant population into one of the lowest sectors of society by discrimination, creating high rates of unemployment and poverty, as well as premature mortality, low skill jobs, and less schooling for this sector.

According to the study “Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile of the Uruguayan Population According to Racial Heritage,” by Wanda Cabella and Marisa Buchelli, researchers at the Social Sciences Department at the Universidad de la Republica in Montevideo, the white population has experienced an unemployment rate of 10 percent compared to black population at 14.1 percent this year.

The 2006 national census, performed by the National Statistics Institute, found that Uruguay has 3.3 million inhabitants, of which 8.5 percent (279,429 people) are Afro-descendants and 3.5 percent (115,158) have some indigenous heritage (*LP*, Aug. 22, 2007). Only 138,015 of the 279,429 African descendants are economically active.

Another study, released past June and performed by the municipal government of Montevideo on the perceptions of social exclusion, measured the degree of racism in the population: 68.3 percent defined themselves as very or quite discriminative toward blacks, homosexuals, elderly, and disabled persons, in that order.

“It has been proved that tolerance is one of the Uruguayan myths that is now being dispelled,” said sociologist Gustavo Leal, who headed the survey.

Cabella and Buchelli reveal that most Afro-descendants work in unskilled jobs — only 9 percent hold positions such as directors, professionals or technicians, whereas 37 percent are in the service sector (housekeepers and garbage collectors), 7 percent are administrative assistants, 16 percent salespeople, 25 percent laborers, 5 percent farm workers, and 1.4 percent in the military.

Besides low skill jobs and thus low salaries, African descendants experience a higher level of informality: 48 percent are unregistered workers who have neither retirement benefits nor social security, meaning that upon retirement — age 65 for men and age 60 for women — many do not have access to a pension plan or even medical care apart from what is offered in public hospitals.

In 1988 the black population formed the organization *Mundo Afro* or “Afro World” that rescued their ancestors’ culture and has managed to become a respected and even inescapable presence in Uruguayan society.

“We have been seen as folkloric and carnival characters, street sweepers, servants, farmhands, soldiers, the disposable sector,” claims Jorge Romero Rodríguez, political head of *Mundo Afro*. “The state and society have denied even our numeric importance and cultural heritage, exalting Hispanic culture instead.”

According to *Mundo Afro*, no more than 20 Afro-Uruguayans are licensed nurses, only one is a doctor, two are accountants, and four are lawyers. In the Uruguayan government, there is only one black congressman, Edgardo Ortuño, of the ruling Broad Front party. He is the only lawmaker of African descent since the republic was founded 182 years ago.

Nearly 60 percent of Uruguay’s Afro-descended population lives entirely in marginalized urban neighborhoods and is among the poorest fifth of the Uruguayan population. Only 26.7 percent of Uruguay’s white population is part of this poorest fifth of the country’s population. Five percent of Afro-Uruguayans live in the most extreme poverty compared with 1.8 percent of the country’s white population.

Buchelli and Cabella say that their study did not compare life expectancy, “but some indicators suggest that it is higher among blacks.” In particular, they say, rates of widowhood from age 50 are systematically greater among Afro-descended men and women than among the white population.

The disparity between the black and white populations in secondary and higher education is marked: between ages 15 and 19, black adolescents have an average of 11 months less schooling than their white Uruguayan counterparts. The gap jumps to 1.6 years between the ages of 20 to 29, and reaches its peak — 2 years — above the age of 30.

Researchers claim that, due to widespread discrimination in the job market, having a higher level of education is not as beneficial for a discriminated group as it is for a non-discriminated group, thus decreasing incentive for African descendants to continue education.

“It’s sad, we are arriving at the end of a self-complacent vision, of something that we thought was true when it wasn’t, at the end of an integrated society that supposedly didn’t discriminate, that was egalitarian,” reflects lawmaker Ortuño. “These are values that a progressive government such as ours should rescue; this is a warning about the attention that must be given to the social priorities in our political agenda.”

The undeclared forms of discrimination have not stopped African descendants from leaving their mark in Uruguayan music. The African inspired *candombe* rhythm as well

inbrief

- The Congress of **Bolivia** ratified the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on Oct. 31 and voted to give it legal status. The United Nations General Assembly had approved the declaration on Sept. 13. The new law will protect rights of Bolivia’s indigenous population — 62 percent of the country — such as self-determination, autonomy and land titles.

- The United States will forgive US\$12.6 million in debt from **Costa Rica** and allow the country to use the funds for nature conservation projects until 2024. The funds will be managed by a bi-national commission and ecological organizations Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy.

- More than 2,500 people, mainly women, have passed the age of 100 in **Cuba**, where the average life expectancy is 77 years. The eldest person on the island is a 122-year-old woman. Many of these centenarians belong to the 120 Years Club, which was created in 2003 to improve the quality of life for senior citizens.

- Journalist Lydia Cacho, who exposed a pedophilia ring involving businessmen and politicians in Cancun, **Mexico**, was bestowed the 2007 Courage in Journalism Award on Oct. 23 by the Washington-based International Women’s Media Foundation.

- The US House of Representatives approved 285-132 a free trade agreement with **Peru** on Nov. 8. The Democratically-controlled House had held up the agreement’s approval citing concerns over labor rights and other issues. The US Senate is expected to vote on the pact before the end of the year.

"Their very nature and function impedes them from maintaining hierarchical and organized networks that a transnational crime ring requires."

— Gema Santamaría

as a small drum known as a *tamboril* pervade all sectors of society, from sport fans to folklore groups. The *tamboril* was a symbol of identity for Uruguayan communities in exile, was used in protests during the dictatorship, and is currently the national instrument. □

CENTRAL AMERICA
Latinamerica Press

Maras not transnational

Study dispels myth that Central American gangs work internationally.

Central American youth gangs known as Maras are a phenomenon in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The gangs, whose name comes from the Spanish word "marabunda" for "a colony of army ants" — a term which is also used for an agitated group of people — do have some presence in the United States and to a lesser extent in Mexico.

There are many different gang groups, called "clicas" but the two infamous gangs are "Mara Salvatrucha" and "Mara 18".

"Heavy hand" or "mano dura" laws have dominated the region's policies toward the gangs and the results have been adverse: increased murder rate, collapse of the prison system and prison murders between rival bands (*LP, Feb. 25, 2004, Sept. 7, 2005 and Oct. 6, 2006*).

There are an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 active youth gang members in Central America, figures that tend to increase as the United States strengthens its deportation policy.

In recent years, the Central American youth gangs have captured the attention of the media, governments, academics and civil society. But their image of pure and uncontrollable violence is fueled by prejudices and disinformation.

"There are currently very few studies that give us a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and even though Central America has conducted some relevant studies, the maras' changing dynamic, new government responses" and the situation post-Sept. 11, 2001, force to update the understanding about them, reads the Web site of the Transnational Analysis Network on the Maras. The project includes policymakers, activists, academics, aiming to open a dialogue on how to handle public policies about this phenomenon.

"The perception about the growth and seriousness of this problem is fed by unfounded reports that the group's violence is transnational, and includes supposed ties between the maras and organized crime and drug-trafficking," said a March study by the Inter-American Studies and Programs Center at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico, or ITAM, one of the network's members, titled "Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States."

Gema Santamaría of ITAM told in an interview with Comunidad Segura, or "Secure Community," a Brazil-based forum on security in Latin America and the Caribbean, that the study shows that even though the gangs are "a complex and growing problem, the transnational and criminal nature of the maras is rather limited."

According to the study, government efforts to combat the problem with a focus in national security "are less fruitful than those that treat the phenomenon as a social problem, from a human rights or public health focus based on the legal and economic failures of the state."

The study was based on almost two year's of surveys and field work conducted by the network of researchers, Santamaría explained. "The argument that the maras maintain criminal ties or networks on a transnational level has been reviewed on a critical level, based principally on interviews with active and former gang members in Guatemalan and Salvadoran prisons," she said.

In Guatemala, for example, 58.5 percent of the gang members interviewed denied having any tie to gangs in other countries, said Santamaría. The remaining 41.5 percent said that they had informal contacts, but only 18.5 percent mentioned a formal relationship — including the giving and receiving of orders — from gang members abroad.

In El Salvador, the study found that 28.2 percent of the interviewed gang members in the prisons had any kind of link to gang members in other countries. Of this group, two-thirds said that the relationship was information exchange or to receive orders.

Santamaría says that there are two major obstacles to maintaining links to gang members abroad. "First, their very nature and function impedes them from maintaining hierarchical and organized networks that a transnational crime ring requires. In the last case, when they do organize for a certain crime, the gang members tend to commit 'disorganized' crime. Second, the 'heavy hand' policies, on one hand and the ever more strict US immigration policies, are making it increasingly difficult for the gang members to sustain ties beyond their own country, even in their own neighborhood."

The study found that there are four central areas that must be developed to prevent

gang violence: 1) create employment opportunities for former gang members and encourage their reinsertion into society in a significant way; 2) research the factors that help at-risk youth not to join the gangs; 3) opportunities for youths such as sports, professional training in information technology, electronics among others that give them self-esteem and represent an alternative to being in a gang; and 4) investigate and eliminate the participation of police in human rights violations against youths or activists. □

LATIN AMERICA
Latinamerica Press

“Latin Climate”

Experts warn that harm done to the environment may reach the point of no return.

A development model based on unlimited economic growth is unsustainable, said participants in “Latin Climate” or *Clima Latino*, an international meeting on global climate change organized by the Andean Community of Nations.

Government officials, scientists, indigenous peoples, university professors and students, and members of civil society groups, among others, approved 21 proposals for sustainable management of the carbon market improvements to glacier studies, research on the viability of biofuels, and the need to organize agricultural systems based on territorial ordering.

“The current development model based on unlimited economic growth is inviable and incompatible with the sustainability of the planet,” participants said at the meeting Oct. 15-18 in Ecuador. Participants called on society and governments to define a new model that promotes concordance between economic development and nature.

The secretary general of the Andean Community, Freddy Ehlers, claimed that the meeting “marked civil society’s absolute recognition that climate change is a proven fact and that human activity is the cause.”

Just a week later, on Oct. 25, the United Nations Environment Program released its Fourth Global Environment Outlook report, or GEO-4, in which some 390 experts evaluated the current state of the atmosphere, land, water, and biodiversity; discussed climate change since 1987, and outlined its recommendations to prevent further damage.

The report says our environmental, development, and energy crises are really just one, a view already established by the World Commission for Environment and Development. The experts highlighted the risk “that environmental damage could pass unknown points of no return.”

The GEO-4 and *Clima Latino* participants both stress the threats to biodiversity and the vulnerability resulting from the climate change. They also warn about the increased deforestation rate of the Amazon and the melting of Andean and Patagonian glaciers.

“The Andean glaciers are undergoing a process of accelerated reduction, creating serious consequences due to the lack of water for human use, agriculture and energy,” states one of the event’s proposals. “Those lands must be declared in a state of emergency and the measures recommended by the scientific community must be applied immediately.”

According to the United Nations Environment Program, average world temperatures have increased close to 0.72° C (1.3° F) since 1906. Program officials calculated that the temperature increase over the current century will be between 1.84° C (3.3° F) and 4° C (7.2° F), posing a serious threat to numerous land and water ecosystems.

Clima Latino participants and the GEO-4 both demand that governments and the international community create policies and strategies to prioritize the environment and encourage a more integral approach to development. □

“The current development model based on unlimited economic growth is inviable and incompatible with the sustainability of the planet.”

— *Clima Latino* meeting

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