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To our readers

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Happy Holidays!

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ERNESTO BENAVIDES

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

Women demand a fairer share of political power

Women cry out for more power in country's male-dominated political scene.

Juana de Jesús Ramírez Méndez, a 32-year-old mother of four, describes the hurdles she has had to overcome to become president of the Community Development Council for the village of Los Vados, Jocotan, in the southern department of Chiquimula.

Like many other young girls in rural communities, she was encouraged to marry at an early age as her family could not afford to support her. Juana did not get past her third year in primary school and when she decided to return and finish her education, she was met with fierce opposition from her husband.

"I had to tell my husband: 'Look, I'm going to school, whether you like it or not,'" she recalled. Juana managed to finish primary school and is now attending high school.

As a community leader, she had to overcome deeply embedded sexist stereotypes. When the village realized that Juana de Jesús was confident, eloquent and good at sourcing government-funded or international aid-sponsored development projects she was elected president of the village council, but it did not go down well with her predecessor and his supporters.

Juana was accused of usurping the post without having been elected by the community and she even received threats. Undaunted, she contacted the human rights ombudsman's office, which offered support and counseling. Today, however, she is a respected community leader and a role model for other women in the village. Her case is by no means unique, as the prevalence of sexist stereotypes has made Guatemalan politics an exclusively male domain, and women, especially in rural areas, need to fight tooth and nail to be respected as equals.

Compared to other Central American countries, women are hugely under-represented in government positions on a local and a national level in Guatemala, mostly due to the prevalence of sexist attitudes and high illiteracy rates, which continue to bar many women from politics. Indigenous women are the most excluded, as they suffer gender, class and racial discrimination.

However, this year's election was unique, with two women running for top government posts: Rigoberta Menchú, presidential candidate for center-left party Encuentro por Guatemala, (*LP, May 30, 2007*) and feminist intellectual Walda Barrios running as vice-presidential candidate for the former-guerrillas-turned-political party, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, or URNG.

Struggle Against Patriarchy, a vocal feminist group within the URNG party, led by Barrios, forced party leaders to establish a minimum 30 percent-quota to increase the participation of women, indigenous people and young candidates. Twenty-nine percent of the URNG's congressional candidates and 18 percent of municipal candidates were women.

The URNG came up with a system known as *trenzas*, or "plaits," in which each candidate's list must include a man, a woman, an indigenous candidate and a youth leader, in order to make candidates more representative in terms of gender, age and ethnicity.

According to "More Women, Better Politics," a study published this year by the United Nations Population Fund, in Costa Rica and Honduras, where laws were approved setting minimum quotas for female representation in government posts in 1996 and 2000, respectively, female participation has improved, especially in Congress. Since the laws were approved, the percentage of women in top government jobs has increased from just over 17 percent to over 38 percent in Costa Rica and from 5.5 percent to more than 23 percent in Honduras.

However, not all female candidates advocate compulsory quotas. Ana Luisa de Córdoba, a former Congressional candidate to the conservative Values and Visions party, said: "I don't think quotas are the answer. Parties just use women as space-fillers and nothing really changes."

Despite the fact that some parties are making greater efforts to include female candidates, this year's elections yielded disappointing results for women running for office. Menchú's party came in seventh with just over 3 percent of the vote (*LP*, Sept. 19, 2007). Only 14 women were elected to Congress this year, which means there have been no changes since the 2003 elections. The number of women in Congress has varied little since 1985, ranging from 5 to 10 percent.

Women did not fare any better on a local level. Only 8 of 332 mayorships were won by female candidates. Miriam López Ochoa, new mayoress of El Tumbador, in the northern department of San Marcos says that she had a tough time running against 12 male candidates who used sexist stereotypes to discredit her during the campaign. But now she is determined to prove them wrong: "I want to deliver my promises to the people of El Tumbador and show all those sexist men who criticized me that a woman can do things right," she said.

Since the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, Guatemala has been one of the main recipients of international development aid in the region and most of the projects sponsored have a gender or indigenous rights focus. However, many critics point out that 10 years later, these efforts have yielded poor results.

Dolores Marroquín, of the Civil Society's Women's Collective argues that cooperation aid has been largely ineffective in terms of combating gender-based discrimination because the projects funded often fail to address the root cause of the problem.

"Cooperation aid has disarticulated many social struggles, including feminism," she said. "They say that a project has a gender focus purely because it includes women without analyzing the structural causes of a patriarchal society." □

URUGUAY

Pablo Long in Montevideo

Neighboring giant buys successful businesses

A wave of Brazilian investment may jeopardize Uruguayan interests.

An onslaught of Brazilian investment capital in various sectors of Uruguayan economy has alerted President Tabaré Vázquez, who seeks to avoid any imposition of new business adverse to national interests. The trend has worried Uruguayan agricultural producers and businesses that fear that changes will have visible effects in the production chain.

Between mid-2006 to mid-2007, the Brazilian refrigeration company Marfrig bought four exporting plants, giving it control of more than 45 percent of the Uruguayan meat business. Brazilian-Belgian multinational AmBev recently took control of the beer market and the National Rice Windmill Company, Camil Alimentos, now holds 58 percent of this grain's market in Uruguay.

"We are Brazilianizing. There is a wave of investments from refrigeration companies to the financial sector. You could say that every week there is powerful news about very tempting offers to buy the principal Uruguayan agro-industrial companies," said engineer Eduardo Blasina, head of one of the most important financial adviser firms in the agricultural sector.

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CHILE

Wind power park. On Dec. 6, Chile opened its first wind-power park in the northern region of Coquimbo, that will provide 18.15 MW to the Inter-Connected Central System, which supplies 90 percent of the population.

"The issue of energy is strategic," said President Michelle Bachelet at the inauguration ceremony of the Canela wind-power park some 300 kilometers (188 miles) north of Santiago. "We act knowing that we are not going to do without any one source."

The project, bankrolled by the Spanish company Endesa Eco, cost US\$35 million, and includes 11, 70-meter (231-foot) wind turbines whose blades are some 41 meters (135 feet) long.

It was the first of four similar energy projects for the region. Another \$150-million wind-power park will be in Mantos de Hornillo, also in Coquimbo, with 37 turbines that will be able to generate some 76 MW.

Chile is trying to diversify its energy sources. The country currently imports 98 percent of its oil and 75 percent of its gas. —LP

PARAGUAY

UN slams country. The government of President Nicanor Duarte was harshly criticized by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for its failures in stamping out poverty, the lack of land for *campesinos* and indigenous Paraguayans, the indiscriminate use of agro-chemicals and continued discrimination against women.

"Despite economic growth in recent years, the number of people who live in extreme poverty have increased," the committee said during its Nov. 3-25 session, when it evaluated Paraguay's fulfillment of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the number of Paraguayans living in extreme poverty totaled 778,500 in 1997, and more than 1.2 million in 2007 — 21 percent of this country of 6 million people.

The committee also said that the country has been extremely slow in implementing agrarian reform in indigenous and *campesino* communities.

It also warned that the expansion of soy farming "has brought the indiscriminate use of agrottoxins, provoking deaths and illness in children and adults, water contamination, disappearances of ecosystems and impact of traditional community food sources" (*LP*, Nov. 28, 2007). —*IPS*.

This phenomenon comes against as Brazil flexes its muscles as a global exporter, to the extent that according to the 2006 World Investment Report issued by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, that year Brazil placed for the first time in its history more capital abroad than what it received (US\$28 billion versus \$19 billion).

Blasina is not alone. The governmental Office of Agricultural Statistics released a study in August that found that between January 2000 and June 2006, 3.9 million hectares (over 9.6 million acres) of land was transferred to foreign hands — mainly to Brazilian and Argentine companies — amounting to 24 percent of the country's arable territory.

Brazilian state oil company Petrobras has also expanded, acquiring Shell's gas stations and is negotiating for Esso's. Bank Itaú got the Uruguayan arm of Bank Boston. Furthermore, the arrival of Odebrecht — a construction industry giant that seeks to participate in an ambitious governmental project in infrastructure, particularly in roadways and ports.

According to analysts, there are two principal causes for attracting foreign interest in the Uruguayan market: the existence of a generous legislation on matters of foreign investment and free movement of capital, and Uruguay's conversion into a strategic platform for the selective external markets. It has dominated due to its high-quality production, especially in meats, dairy and rice.

Since 1974, the country has had free movement of capital, imposed by the dictatorship (1973-85) in the frame of neoliberal politics, with the idea of constructing a strong financial market and granting foreign companies the same facilities as local ones, which unlike them, leave their revenues and re-invest in Uruguay.

"The Brazilian investments in the agricultural industry seek to take advantage of the access that Uruguay has to demanding markets and, very especially, the tariff advantages that exist due to a free trade agreement with Mexico [for meats] or the solid relationships with markets like Iran, China and the European Union, where for diverse reasons, Camil has not been able to enter," said Ernesto Stirling, of the Association of Rice Farmers.

But according to Blasina, there are more reasons: "Uruguay does not have obstacles for its meats' entry in the United States, which is a good buyer and excellent payer, but Brazil — for sanitary reasons — and Argentina — due to a political decision — has forbidden access. The Brazilian refrigeration companies come for a strategic reason: they will increase their contacts from here for when they'll be able to enter with their meats, in other three or four years."

Analysts see the situation as worrying, due to the concentration of vital areas, such as refrigeration and rice production — Uruguay finds itself among the first 10 world exporters of rice — in foreign hands. "It involves the risk of a new business logic based on the needs of Brazilian companies or Brazilian public policies," explained economist Gabriel Papa.

For the government, Brazilian investment in primary products will not stop — in fact, after the purchase of SAMAN, Camil made an offer to buy Cooper, the last chain of Uruguayan capitals to participate in the rice market — but Agricultural Minister José Mujica thinks that "the state has mechanisms to avoid the eventual formation of a monopoly."

"There are a lot of us producers asking why Uruguay is only selling its successful companies, since this is not a form of smoothing over what has been established within the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). "Or is it that we are facing integration by other means, by the pure and simple economic power?" wondered Guzmán Tellechea of the Rural Association, one of the great producer guilds.

"We wonder if what's happening is good or bad. Attracting foreign capital always seemed good to us, but as long as they are investments made in a healthy frame of competition and not the simple purchase of the best companies without assuming risks or generating jobs, with the only apparent objective of forming a monopoly," said Rodrigo Herrero, head of the Rural Federation, the main producers guild. □

PERU

Ramiro Escobar in Puerto Maldonado

National park targeted by oil company

Executive attempts to cut back protected area for hydrocarbon site.

Some 20,000 vegetable species, at least 600 bird species, 232 species of fish, 174 mammals, 100 reptiles and 1,200 butterfly species. On top of that, an astonishing, immense landscape of lush forests and rivers.

This earthly paradise is the Bahuaja-Sonene National Park, locked between the

southeastern regions of Puno and Madre de Dios. With an area of 1,092,142 hectares (nearly 2.7 million acres), diverse ecosystems and astounding biodiversity, it represents one of the fewest places in the world that has had almost no human contact.

However, the Ministers' Council, headed by President Alan García's Cabinet chief Jorge del Castillo, discussed a proposal in September that would have a disastrous effect: to cut down the national park no less than 209,782 hectares (just over 518,000 acres) in order to create an oil bloc that would allow the exploitation of the oil field that presumably exists there.

The formula to achieve the cutback was to send a bill to Congress permitting the repeal of supreme decrees from July 1996 and September 2000 that delimited the territory of this protected area.

"If they open this door for oil investment, many other problems will emerge," says José Luis Capella, a lawyer with the Peruvian Environmental Law Association. "You can't infringe environmental norms like that."

In fact, Peruvian laws define nine categories of protected areas. In three of them — national parks, national and historical sanctuaries — it is only permitted to make indirect use of the natural resources and landscape.

In other words, only non-manipulative scientific investigations, tourist and recreational activities may be made under tightly regulated conditions. Directly extracting resources or modifying the environment is strictly prohibited.

In 1998, when the territory was labeled a Reserve Zone — transitory category before being declared a protected area, according to Peruvian law — US company Mobil Oil initiated explorations. Protests from environmentalists, as well as some press reports, managed to detain the project.

The current government attempted to reduce Bahuaja-Sonene because it could not repeal the environmental legislation itself, but instead, decrease the protected area.

According to Article 68 of the current Peruvian Constitution, "the state is obligated to promote the conservation of biological diversity and natural protected areas." In the chapter 18 of the free trade agreement with the United States — ratified by the US Senate on Dec. 4 (*LP, Dec. 12, 2007*) — that obligation is reiterated.

If part of the national park is no longer a protected area, any activity will be permitted. And what would be logical, as Capella says, is that along with oil companies, illegal loggers and informal miners also will encroach.

"We are scared that this will convert into a new Huaypetue," points out Ninón Díaz, assistant manager of the protected areas in the Madre de Dios region, referring to a disastrous example of what happens when there is too much slack in environmental regulations.

In Huaypetue, in Madre de Dios, around 15,000 gold extractors — the majority informal — have converted that portion of the Amazon into a desolate wasteland. They have filled the rivers with mercury, uprooted the trees and there are even complaints of forced labor and slavery.

Bahuaja-Sonene could have the same destiny if the decision is taken to opt for oil investment and, in fact, the presence of informal miners has already been spotted in some rivers from the neighboring Tambopata National Reserve.

"Every day there are more," recounts Díaz.

Furthermore, other potential opportunities would be lost, which this area holds in its lush forests and abundant fauna: environmental services, that is, the potential to use nature's resources in a sustainable manner.

As Capella and Díaz explained, Bahuaja-Sonene's immense forests and rivers provide water to other basins and purify the course of other rivers, like the Tambopata. These important rivers supply water to various communities and towns, such as Puerto Maldonado, capital of Madre de Dios.

All this uncorrupted territory is like a large fish breeder that later serves to feed the settler and native communities who live in remote areas — thus its continued purity is essential for the health of the communities it provides for.

The protected area is home to numerous animal species, of which 13 are endemic, and its silent but effective contribution in the struggle against global warming must not be underestimated. This is one of the few places in the planet that endlessly purify the exponential and alarming increases in carbon dioxide we continue to face.

Eddy Torres, from the Zoological Society of Frankfurt, who works in the park, reminds that this forest continues to hold scientific mysteries. In its interior, leafy and still partly undiscovered, plants and animals with great genetic potential may be found.

The biodiversity in Bahuaja-Sonene is so abundant that in 2002 the National Geographic Society declared it one of the seven most emblematic natural sanctuaries on the planet.

The government had to give up after a campaign initiated by non governmental organizations and companies through public action and a website — www.salvemoscandamo.com — to save the Candamo zone, one of the most beautiful parts of the park.

For the moment there are no signs of reviving the abandoned plan. But the growing international boost of oil prices will cause, sooner or later, the government's attack against those who wish to defend this paradise. □

MEXICO

The right to die. The Legislative Assembly of Mexico City approved a law Dec. 4 to allow citizens with terminal illnesses to suspend life-sustaining treatments.

According to the law, the patient must sign a notarized letter of his or her decision not to continue the treatment, but food, water, oxygen and hygiene services will continue.

The law establishes that under no circumstances can medical professionals euthanize their patients.

Dep. Daniel Ordóñez of the opposition Revolutionary Democratic Party said that any person with an incurable disease has the right to "reject an unnecessary medical treatment" and also the right to receive minimal medical care.

Conservatives and religious leaders criticized the law. The Catholic daily *Desde La Fe* called it "a trap," claiming it was packaged as "something merciful and innocent" but that it was just steps away from euthanasia. —*LP/IPS*.



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statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

Disenchanted with democracy.

The 2007 Latinobarómetro report, an annual public opinion survey for the region, found that support for democracy in Latin America dropped four percentage points this year to 54 percent.

The poll, released in November, found that while the region has experienced sustained economic growth in recent years, it has not increased support for democracy — a fifth of those surveyed said they would be satisfied with either a democratic or authoritarian regime, up from 17 percent in last year's study.

"There is disillusionment with respect to the free-market economy," said the report, conducted by the Chile-based Latinobarómetro Corporation, a nongovernmental organization. "A just distribution of income and greater social protection by the state is required."

The poll, which has been conducted annually since 1995, is based on 20,212 interviews in 28 Latin American and Caribbean countries each September and October. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA Support for democracy (%)

Country	2006	2007
Costa Rica	75	83
Uruguay	77	75
Bolivia	62	67
Venezuela	70	67
Ecuador	54	65
Dominican Rep.	71	64
Argentina	74	63
Panama	55	62
Nicaragua	56	61
Mexico	54	48
Colombia	53	47
Peru	55	47
Chile	56	46
Brazil	46	43
El Salvador	51	38
Honduras	51	38
Paraguay	41	33
Guatemala	41	32

Source: Latinobarómetro

ARGENTINA/URUGUAY

Pablo Waisberg in Buenos Aires

Former dictators face justice

Argentine Jorge Rafael Videla and Uruguayan Gregorio Álvarez face trials for crimes against humanity.

Argentina and Uruguay are edging toward justice. For over three decades, collaboration between brutal South American dictatorships led to the murder of political opponents with complete disregard for country borders with a series of trials facing ex-leaders.

But leaders of Plan Condor, an intelligence-sharing initiative, united the military dictatorships in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay from the 1970s and 80s, are now being brought to trial.

Former Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-81) and 16 other oppressors will be submitted to an oral hearing, while in Uruguay former dictator Gregorio Álvarez (1981-85) and ex-military officers Juan Carlos Laceybeau and Jorge Tróccoli are processed by tribunals since Nov. 12 for the disappearance of several Uruguayan citizens detained in Buenos Aires and transferred to Montevideo.

The Argentine federal judge Sergio Torres signaled on Nov. 28 that Videla and other former military officers were part of an "aggravated illicit association", which carries a sentence of five to 20 years in prison. "Operation Condor ended up being a vast criminal organization that acted in the Southern Cone, directed at the illegal kidnapping of persons, resulting in their disappearance, death and/or torture, without reference to the victims' territorial or national limits," said Judge Torres.

The resolution included information from US State Department declassified documents, dated Sept. 28, 1976, which states, "Operation Condor is a code name for the compilation and exchange of so-called leftists, communists or Marxists. It was recently established among the secret services of South America... In addition to Chile, members included Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay."

According to human rights groups, this alliance was instigated by the United States.

The Argentine judge's measure reached the ex-Secretary of the Interior Eduardo Harguindeguy, the ex-Tucuman governor Antonio Bussi and oppressor Cristino Nicolaidis.

More than 70 cases of forced disappearances were investigated, among them, the case of María Claudia Irureta Goyena, kidnapped along with her husband, Marcelo Gelman, son of poet and journalist Juan Gelman. Both were sent to Automotores Orletti, a clandestine detention center in Argentina.

Marcelo Gelman was murdered and Irureta remains missing. Their daughter was given to a Uruguayan policeman for adoption, but was found by her grandfather in 2000. The murders of Uruguayan legislators Zelmar Michelini and Héctor Gutiérrez Ruiz in Buenos Aires, 1976, were also investigated.

Human rights organizations estimate that 32 people were disappeared in Uruguay, and 150 Uruguayans were arrested and killed in Argentina.

Judge Torres stated that it is not possible to establish with certainty during which period Plan Condor operated, but he said "it is evident that it started to develop after the initiation of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile [1973-90] in 1973 and that it extended over time during the 'de facto' governments in Latin America."

Uruguayan judge Luis Charles is investigating Álvarez, Laceybeau and Tróccoli for the crime of "forced disappearance" of some thirty Uruguayan citizens detained in Argentina, who were clandestinely transferred to their country in 1978.

The crime carries a sentence of 25 years in jail and is considered a permanent crime until the victim's body is found.

Álvarez has a high level of responsibility due to his high military position. In 1978 he was named army commander in chief and in 1981 he was designated as the 'de facto' president of Uruguay. Furthermore, in a document dated July 1978 with his signature, he assumed responsibility for human rights violations in combat against "subversion" (LP, Dec. 13, 2006).

Last June, the Association of Family Members of the Disappeared-Detained in Uruguay presented before the Judiciary various documents that recognized the illegal transfer of prisoners from Argentina during the last dictatorship. Carried out by lawyer Oscar López Goldaracena, the presentation includes declassified documents from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), containing a list of 21 people who were transferred between Feb. and Aug. 1978 from Argentina to Uruguay.

The document was emitted in April 1978 by the US Embassy in Buenos Aires, based on information from UNHCR. It states that Uruguayan army officers had Argentine authorities' consent to kidnap Uruguayan citizens who had sought exile in Argentina.

"They were permitted as a favor to the Uruguayan government for the transfer of

Argentine citizen Oscar de Gregorio from Uruguay to Argentina,” confirmed López Goldaracena.

The lawyer said victims include various militants from the Groups of Unifying Action and the Communist Revolutionary Party of Uruguay, as well as citizens who criticized the South American dictatorships though they had no affiliation with political militancy. □

CUBA

Lucila Horta in Havana

Preparing for disasters

Prevention and mobilization efforts by citizens and authorities aim to minimize damages.

Hurricane Noel left huge material damages in its path at the end of October when it ripped through the eastern section of Cuba, but no lives were claimed, owing to preventative actions and disaster management put in practice over recent decades by citizens and authorities.

Losses brought on by Noel have escalated to US\$500 million — principally in the forestry and agricultural sectors — and include the destruction of more than 1,000 houses, 13,000 km (nearly 8,078 miles) of roads and highways, railways, bridges and sewers. More than 80,000 people were evacuated.

Marcio Porto, Cuban representative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, highlighted the Cubans’ experience in managing disasters and proposed that other countries in the region take advantage to learn from their expertise.

Back in 1963 when hurricane Flora lashed Cuba’s eastern region, reaching a death toll of 1,126, modern modes of damage prevention still did not exist. The current reservoirs — now protecting five provinces and permitting the storage of large volumes of water — greatly impedes the damage caused by floods when rains are excessive, while simultaneously preserving the precipitation.

Similarly, the creation of dams and hydraulic structures, along with an ample protection system, has allowed that the different attacks by nature in the last four decades, although damaging, have not produced as many victims.

Cuba has an elevated risk of being impacted by a hurricane, with a probability of 75 percent.

The hurricane season in 2005 was one of the worst: 27 tropical storms and 15 hurricanes hit the Caribbean. In July 2005, hurricane Dennis, for example, caused 16 deaths and losses amounting to approximately US\$1.4 billion in Cuba alone. In October, hurricane Wilma provoked severe floods in Havana and a material cost of more than US\$700 million (*LP, July 12, 2006*).

Confronting disasters is key in the work of the Civil Defense, founded in 1966 as a division of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. This division is responsible for seeing that the organizational measures to reduce potentially destructive disasters are fulfilled.

The National Defense Law outlines the procedure, placing all the municipal and provincial government presidents in charge of enacting protective measures in their respective territories. Everything is coordinated and executed by state, economic and social institutions.

“We have a new guide and methodology to determine risk; the network dedicated to monitoring extreme events as well as warning mechanisms, directions given to citizens, and informative tasks carried out by the media are all very high quality,” explained Gen. Ramón Pardo Guerra, head of the country’s civil defense, last June.

The institution has a transmissions room that makes broadcasts, same as the Meteorologist Institute, giving directions on what to do according to the type of alert or emergency.

This law and its practice get perfected as experience is obtained. There are annual weather preparedness exercises, including the participation of some 4 million people who prepare to face extreme climate situations, epidemics or any other emergency.

On each block there is someone designated to be in charge of evacuation, who knows how many children, elderly, handicapped and able citizens there are in his or her area, in such a way that they can also foresee any individual needs.

“If we have various children on the list we can predict that there will be a need for milk and if there are elderly, means to translate them are secured,” explained Josefina Ortiz, from the Havana Center, who says that she keeps her population registry current and revises it during the severe weather drills.

There are around 3,000 shelters in safe areas, with adequate infrastructure, where people exposed to rising rivers or building collapse are transferred.

During Noel, serious overflows of people made the shelters insufficient in mountainous areas, but many citizens offered their homes as refuge for those affected.

“The network dedicated to monitoring extreme events as well as warning mechanisms, directions given to citizens are all very high quality.”

— Ramón Pardo Guerra

inbrief

- President of the Senate of **Brazil**, Renán Calheiros — an ally of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva — resigned Dec. 11 in order to avoid a political trial over his alleged use of middlepeople to purchase radio stations and a newspaper.

- **Costa Rica** may once again sent police officers to the School of the Americas — now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation — in Fort Benning, in the United States, after Security Minister Fernando Berrocal recommended the return to President Óscar Arias.

- Felipe Pérez Roque, foreign minister of **Cuba**, announced Nov. 10 that the country is open to signing the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The decision came after the United Nations decided to eliminate the post of a special human rights rapporteur for the island.

- Between 2000 and 2007, 3,281 women were killed in **Guatemala**. There were also 6,000 reported sexual assaults and 139,682 reports of domestic violence, according to the Coordinadora 25 de Noviembre, a women's group that takes its name from the International Day for the Elimination of Violence.

- US\$10 billion in cash tied to drug-trafficking enters **Mexico** every year from the United States, Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said Dec. 11. In October, authorities on both sides of the border launched "Plan Mexico" a counter-drug program financed by the United States.

Pardo Guerra pointed out "the people's positive response, their discipline, their solidarity."

Vigilance and control of chemical or other kinds of pollution lie within the responsibilities of civil defense, as well as the safeguarding of companies and their machines, primary sources, medicines and sources of potable water, among other goods. Similarly, there are agro-technological and phytosanitary norms so that damage to harvests are minimal and, once the emergency is finished, what has not been destroyed is recuperated.

During Noel's assault, helicopters, amphibious vehicles and emergency constructions erected by army engineering brigades ensured that everyone had access to assistance and accelerated the recuperation process, building alternative roads and even permitting access to telephone and electronic technicians or workers who halted landslides on coffee plantations in order to save the harvest. □

NICARAGUA

Central America Report/Latinamerica Press

Court gives green light to citizens councils

Controversial direct democracy model triggers power struggle.

President Daniel Ortega officially inaugurated Citizen Power Councils, or CPCs, on Nov. 30 in a ceremony attended by thousands of government supporters. The event followed an intense 10-day power struggle between the executive and judicial branches, and lawmakers.

On Dec. 5, the struggle seemed to have been resolved when the Supreme Court upheld Ortega's veto of a bill repealing the installation of the councils.



Residents of a Managua neighborhood meet in a Citizen Power Council.

The CPCs, created by decree last January (*LP, July 11, 2007*), had been revoked on Nov. 20 by the National Assembly through Law 630, which declared that the Citizen Councils could not be "instruments of political control" used by the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

Legislators from the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) and Liberal Nicaraguan Alliance, from the right, and the leftist Movement for Sandinista Modernization (MRS), integrated by dissidents of the FSLN, formed a block of opposition to achieve the approval of Law 630, with 52 out of 91 votes in favor.

President Ortega immediately rejected the legislative action, announcing his appeal to the CSJ for legal protection against the measure.

A week later Ortega made Presidential Decree 112 official, creating the CPCs that will form part of the National Economic and Social Planning Council, and named his wife, Rosario Murillo, executive secretary.

The appeal for legal protection ended with the judges' decision to declare the CPCs

legal and highlight the citizens' constitutional right to organize and participate directly in public affairs.

Few could have been surprised by the Supreme Court's decision, given the institution's highly politicized nature. Following a notorious pact signed in 1999 by former president Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002) between the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the main opposition, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), the Court's 16 judges are split evenly between the two parties.

According to Decree 112, the CPCs would exist all over the country. They would consist of 272 people at a national level while at the local level officials, mayors and FSLN members will participate.

Under the legislation passed over Ortega's veto, CPCs would not be part of the executive branch but could be party structures of the FSLN, without any government budget or official standing. Opposition parties fear that, as one of the most organized groups in society, FSLN supporters would dominate local participatory democratic bodies such as the CPCs.

The Councils have been controversial from the get-go. Some have suggested that they represent a return, in a new guise, of the Sandinista Defense Councils (CDS) of the 1980s — known then as “the eyes and ears of the revolution.” Others say that creation of the CPCs is an attempt to establish a partisan system loyal to the FSLN and argue that the CPCs will be vulnerable to cronyism.

The supporters of the Councils, in turn, have many positive experiences in their favor, including the organization of health campaigns, the reestablishment of potable water, lawsuits against mayors' offices and meetings with different ministers.

But most criticisms have been directed at the head of the CPCs, Rosario Murillo, the president's wife and Minister for Communication and Citizenship.

According to congresswoman Mónica Baltodano, of the Movement for Sandinista Modernization (MRS), Murillo's ministry is where “all the important political decisions are made.” Baltodano also claims that the First Lady uses her territorial control, gained through the CPCs, to “lord it over all the other ministries.”

Murillo has repeatedly countered these allegations, arguing that the CPCs represent the epitome of “direct democracy” as promoted by Ortega's government.

“The Councils allow power to flow directly from the regions to the President, with the demands of families and communities passing one way through local municipalities and departments; while, flowing the other way, the programs and policies of the National Cabinet can be put into practice on the ground,” explained Murillo on Nov. 2.

In terms of concrete results, the FSLN's political secretary in Managua, Elías Chévez says CPCs in the capital have developed at least six savings and credit cooperatives that help small and medium-sized businesses to grow. The CPCs have also been involved in the “Zero Usury” project, run by the Interior Ministry using US\$2.1 million of public funds.

The program, designed to help small-business owners, has benefited 7,000 women who have received loans with a 4-percent interest rate.

The program is expected to help 15,000 other women in 2008. “There are hundreds of women who have received these [loans],” says Chévez. He adds that the CPCs do not touch the money, but instead suggest possible beneficiaries.

But not all are as cheery as Chévez. In the middle of the recent crisis caused by Hurricane Felix — which caused serious damage with its appearance in September — congressman Víctor Duarte said that *campesinos* from the so-called mining triangle of the Caribbean coast had been coerced into forming a CPC in order to gain government assistance

“The distribution of aid has been a mess, if the government wanted to be truly impartial it should have put religious leaders in charge of handing out supplies as they are apolitical,” said Duarte.

Duarte also believes the CPCs are needlessly replacing other systems of participatory democracy already in place, such as the Communal Development Councils and auxiliary mayors, which have vast experience in administering power locally. □

“[The First Lady uses her territorial control, gained through the CPCs, to] lord it over all the other ministries.”

— Mónica Baltodano

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