



JAMES RODRIGUEZ

A *campesino* in a confrontation with the police in El Estor.

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

Desperate for land rights

Campesinos become hostage takers as government fails to address agrarian demands.

Four Belgian tourists were at the end of their one week vacation in southeastern Guatemala when their trip took a dramatic turn and they unwittingly became caught up in a bitter dispute between the government and the landless workers' movement in the northeastern department of Izabal.

On March 14, Eric Stostriss, 62, his wife Jenny, 59, their friends Gabriel Van Huyssen, 64, and his wife Mary Paul, 62, and their guide were preparing to cross Lake Izabal in order to visit San Felipe Castle in Rio Dulce, when a group of about thirty Mayan Qeqchí *campesinos* asked if they could share their boat. But then the group took them hostage.

They were demanding the immediate release of their leader, Ramiro Choc, who was arrested on Feb. 14 and accused of trespassing and illegal logging. In a previous incident on Feb. 21, a group of over 100 *campesinos* occupied Livingston police station, a town about 50 kilometers away from Izabal and took 29 police agents hostage.

Hostages freed

The *campesinos* vowed not to release their captives until Choc walked free but in the end, the agents were released 33 hours after the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office secured a deal between the

government and the hostage takers, a group called *Encuentro Campesino*, on condition that Choc was released and the government would address their demand for land. But the negotiations fell apart in less than two days. The Qeqchí community, on one hand, accused the government of lacking the necessary political will to address their demands and President Álvaro Colom, on the other, said that the government "would not negotiate with terrorists."

On Feb.27, 120 police agents and soldiers marched into Livingston and re-opened the local police station which had remained closed since the hostages were taken. Law and order has been restored in the community but tensions had remained high.

So what prompted a group of landless *campesinos* to become hostage takers? The conflict began in June 2007 when the *campesinos* led by Choc occupied an area of Livingston known as Barrio Buena Vista La Esperanza, claiming that as an indigenous population they have ancestral rights over the land. When the *campesinos* were forcibly evicted they threatened to boycott last September's general elections in the towns of Livingston and El Estor [a town some 30 kilometers away from Livingston] if the government failed to heed their demands.

The Qeqchí community and the mayor of Livingston, Miguel Rax Asij, claim that Barrio Buena Vista La Esperanza belongs to the municipality. Silvia Lemus Solórzano, who belongs to the powerful Pivara land-owning family, claims she owns the title deeds to the land.

Mayor Rax Asij, of the National Unity of Hope Party (UNE) which brought President Colom to power in September, claims

that Lemus Solórzano obtained the land through dishonest means: "She worked for the Property Registry under the [Alfonso] Portillo [2000-2004] administration and that's how she managed to get her hands on those title deeds. She didn't even know what the boundaries of her property were until she paid a surveyor to set down boundaries and that's how the problems began."

Accusations traded

However, Lemus Solórzano denies ever having worked for the Property Registry and a spokesperson from the Human Resources Department at the Property Registry in Guatemala City said that according to official records, Lemus Solórzano never worked there.

Lemus Solórzano accuses Mayor Rax Asij of manipulating *campesino* demands in order to secure the Qeqchí vote in last year's local elections: "The mayor is Qeqchí. He brought all those people from El Estor and offered them land in exchange for votes."

However, Aníbal Maquín, a former public official from the government-run Land Fund explained that "Some people within

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the landless *campesino* movement do come from El Estor but the whole reason they are there [in Livingston] is because they are desperately poor. They've lived in Livingston for about eight years and they've already settled here."

With regards to the eviction, Lemus Solórzano's lawyer Abraham Santizo said: "They wanted to buy the land but they had no money. Those people simply refused to leave. Doña Silvia [Lemus Solórzano] offered them a couple of acres but they were demanding the entire *finca* so we had to get the police involved."

The conflict in Izabal has made it clear that if the new Colom administration fails to address the issue of land distribution, agrarian disputes will persist throughout his period in office as they did during the 2004-2008 government of Óscar Berger.

ARGENTINA

Illegal parents judged. On March 12, state prosecutor Félix Croux asked for a 25-year sentence for Osvaldo Rivas and María Gómez Pinto for having illegally adopted María Eugenia Sampallo Barragán, who was born in captivity in 1978.

Sampallo is the daughter of Leonardo Sampallo and Mirta Mabel Barragán, who were both kidnapped in 1977 by the military dictatorship (1976-1983). Her father worked in a shipyard while her mother, six months pregnant, worked in a factory. Both were militants in the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party.

In 2001, after distrusting her parents' accounts of her birth, the youth went to the state's National Commission for the Right to Identity, dedicated to finding children who disappeared during the dictatorship, where she was recommended to have a DNA test.

The results revealed her birth parents' names, after which she reported Rivas and Gómez as well as former army captain, Enrique Berthier, who gave her up for adoption. This is the first case of a disappeared person's child reporting his or her adoptive parents.

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo estimate that some 500 children of detained disappeared persons were stolen by officials in the dictatorship and given up for adoption, abandoned, sold or given to orphanages. Only 88 have recovered their identity. —LP.

ANDEAN COUNTRIES

Ramiro Escobar in Lima

Andean Community and EU toward an association agreement

Negotiations different than the FTA with the United States, but also imply risks.

"It's not like the free trade agreement with the United States," says Alan Fairlie, economist at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima, referring to the association agreement that the Andean Community (CAN) has been negotiating with the European Union (EU) since September 2007.

The agreement is much more complex than the already consummated US-Peru Trade Promotion Agreement, better known as the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Beyond trade, the association agreement also includes two other areas that the EU will intend to improve: political dialogue and cooperation.

Francisco Acosta — the political, economic and commercial counselor in Peru for the European Commission, body responsible for administering and applying EU policies — reinforces this position, stating that in the likely case of an association agreement between the EU and CAN, it is important to create "a strategic link between the two regions."

The insistence on political dialogue and cooperation as part of the agreement seems convincing, but Alejandra Alayza, coordinator of the Peruvian Network for Globalization with Equality (RedGE), argues that "what's important is to know how much weight these two pillars are going to have in the final result."

One of the problems that could arise comes from the recent past. After the approval of the FTA between Peru and the United States (LP, Dec. 12, 2007) — which Colombia is already on the path to achieving — a precedent for EU investors is created, giving them grounds to reclaim similar conditions. This is

Izabal is a particularly conflictive area. Back in November 2006, a land dispute between the Qeqchí communities of El Estor and the Guatemalan Nickel Company (CGN) led to a violent eviction.

For this to change, the Colom administration will have to challenge the land-owning elite that has ruled Guatemala for centuries. In a letter dated Feb. 28 and addressed to the government, the Supreme Court and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, the *campesino* communities of Livingston and El Estor make this clear: "We call on the president to keep the promise he made when he came to office on Jan. 14 this year. He said that the time had come for the poor of Guatemala to see justice done." □

a principle accepted in international trade and is almost unavoidable.

This became obvious in the first round of negotiations in Bogota on Sept. 17 to 21, 2007, after the Andean Community was asked by the EU for a quick reduction of imports, as in the FTA with the United States.

Common criteria in question

Something similar happened in the realm of intellectual property. In the FTA with the United States, Peru accepted conditions that went against decision 486 of the Andean Community, that regulates intellectual property issues for the four Andean countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru). The Peruvian government has requested a modification of the CAN decision so that each country can establish its own criteria.

However, Acosta claims "it's clear to us that we are going to negotiate with a bloc," suggesting that on intellectual property and other matters, they will not promote agreements that weaken CAN integration, something that the EU considers fundamental. But if the Andean governments don't play this game well, it could result in a dangerous slackening of CAN norms.

In terms of agriculture, the EU accepted the existence of "sensitive products" (the banana, for example), but the issue of subsidies given to European farmers is not up for discussion. Acosta stated that this case can only be debated in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In addition to these bumps in the road, made clear by current negotiations, something else further complicates the itinerary: the political rhythm of the four Andean countries is significantly distinct. While Bolivia and Ecuador march to similar beats, Colombia and Peru are going at a completely different speed.

According to Alayza, this opens the need for special and differential treatment, which

COLOMBIA

Murderer receives reward. On March 14, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos announced that a US\$2.7 million reward would be given to former guerrilla member Pablo Montoya, aka "Rojas," for killing a high-ranking leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Montoya was head of security for Manuel Jesús Muñoz, known as "Iván Ríos," one of the seven members of the FARC secretariat. According to official sources, on March 6 Montoya gave the state Muñoz's right hand as proof.

"This guerrilla member brought with him 'Iván Ríos' right hand — literally — as well as his national identification card, passport and personal computer," said Santos in a press conference.

The government decision sparked strong criticism. For Attorney General Mario Iguarán, the problem surrounding the monetary reward is not administrative, but ethical, since it involves rewarding a homicide.

Ríos was the second FARC leader to die in less than a week. March 1, Raúl Reyes was killed at the hands of Colombian military in an attack on a guerrilla camp in Ecuadorian territory (LP, March 19, 2008). —LP.

would acknowledge the different stances held by the Andean Community members. Bolivia, for example, proposes leaving certain free trade issues that could affect its governance on standby. Peru, on the other hand, has proposed to have its own FTA with the European Union.

Acosta says that the special and differential treatment could be accepted, but only after an association agreement is approved, "because if not, the negotiation will be set back." In other words, they could accept different liberalization speeds, but only after reaching an overall agreement.

Migration a sensitive issue

Another issue that has weighed down negotiations, which won't be an easy fix, is the migration of CAN citizens to the EU, an issue the CAN has insisted on discussing. Acosta says that "they are not going to evade any issues," but explains that what can't be done is "to make decisions that go against the EU community regulations in this area."

How can all the pieces be put in order to finally reach a relatively fair association agreement between the European Union and Andean Community? One fact to consider is the notable asymmetry between both regions. For the EU, the Andean Community means just

0.8 percent of its total trade. But for the CAN, the European Union represents 15.5 percent of its trade.

Andean countries' exportations to Europe are mostly primary products (86.4 percent), while the majority (83 percent) of EU exports to CAN countries are manufactured products. In this panorama, political dialogue and cooperation are especially significant.

Based on what's agreed, political dialogue between the two regions implies examining and taking decisions on democracy and human rights, social and economic development, culture, environment, foreign relations and even immigration.

The EU proposes approving clauses on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, combating terrorism and the International Criminal Court as part of the association agreement. In terms of cooperation, the CAN asks for technology, and the EU draws on being the leading donor in Andean countries.

Can these two pillars — political dialogue and cooperation — play tandem roles with the more turbulent issue of trade? Fairlie argues that for this to happen, Andean negotiators will have to act responsibly. "It is important that they fight so that the association agreement is truly comprehensive," he said. □

PARAGUAY

Interview with presidential candidate Fernando Lugo

"Land reform is fundamental and imminent"

For the first time in the 61 years of uninterrupted rule by the Colorado Party a presidential candidate has a strong chance of becoming elected. Fernando Lugo, a charismatic former bishop from the San Pedro department, one of the most impoverished, rural areas of Paraguay (LP, April 4, 2007). A national survey by pollster Ant Sneed in early March showed Lugo with 34.8 percent of the vote. Ruling party candidate Blanca Ovelar had close to 30 percent, followed by former military officer coup-leader Lino Oviedo with 23 percent ahead of the April 20 election.

LATINAMERICA PRESS correspondent **Gustavo Torres** spoke with Lugo about his plans to reach the presidential palace.

What can Paraguay expect from a Lugo presidency?



Fernando Lugo

Paraguay has to recover its dignity as a people and as a country; improve its image on a national and international level. Our country is known for corruption, for illegal activities, for contraband, for drug-trafficking.

We have to work so that it is known for its honesty, its transparency, its heroism, its value for hard-work as it's been in history.

We don't want our country to be isolated among other nations. Our wish is to continue strengthening relationships of cooperation and mutual growth with social equality with neighboring countries.

Paraguay has a promising future if the citizenry organizes and is ready for a real change.

And how do you propose to achieve this?

By making the functions and applications for government positions transparent. Here, the optimal condition to be a public employee is to be a member of the government party. We want to employ people fit for the job. Today people are revaluing transparent and honest management. Our country has suffered recently from a large-scale migration, especially to Buenos Aires, Spain, the United States. We believe that we can improve with

the creation of jobs and giving legal security on a national and international level.

What is the Paraguayan government like now?

It is an obstacle for the country's prosper-

BRAZIL

Women say “no” to Monsanto. On March 7 — the day before International Women’s Day — dozens of Brazilian women occupied a research site of the US-based agricultural biotechnology giant Monsanto in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, destroying a greenhouse and experimental plots of genetically-modified corn.

Participants, members of the international farmers’ organization International Peasant Movement, stated in a note that the act was to protest the Brazilian government’s decision in February to legalize Monsanto’s genetically-modified Guardian corn, which came just weeks after the French government prohibited the corn due to environment and human health risks.

International Peasant Movement also held peaceful protests in several Brazilian cities against the Swiss corporation Syngenta Seeds for its ongoing impunity for the murder of Valmir Mota de Oliveira. Mota de Oliveira was a member of the Movement of the Landless Rural Workers (MST) — the largest of the seven Brazilian movements in International Peasant Movement — who was assassinated last October in the state of Parana during the MST’s third occupation of the company’s illegal experimental site for genetically-modified soybeans.

According to Greenpeace International, there were 39 cases of crop contamination by genetically-modified organisms in 23 countries in 2007, and more than 200 in 57 countries over the last 10 years.

—AMERICAS PROGRAM,
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL
POLICY.

ity. There is a hegemonic structure of one party dating back to the 1960s, a legal structure dependent on political power and a fraudulent electoral structure.

It is an inefficient and absent state. Those who administer the government are negligent and inept in their positions. An example is that they have let 1.2 million yellow fever vaccines expire in the middle of a potential epidemic that is threatening the population today, and now they are desperately asking the rest of the world [for help]. This means that the state is not organized and is unpredictable.

There is an imperfect democracy, a fragile democracy that has not yet emerged from persecution or irrationality. We want to make a pluralist democracy, respectful of all sectors and ways of thinking.

In a country known for its large plantations, what plans do you have for the rural sector?

Land reform is fundamental and imminent. There are 300,000 landless *campesinos* and there are many unproductive plantations (LP, Feb. 7, 2007).

This is a great contradiction just as [writer Augusto] Roa Bastos has said: Paraguay is a place where there are many *campesinos* without land and a lot of land without *campesinos*.”

This is the first land reform program that does not deal only with giving out land, because many of it was already given out. In the last 20 years, 11 million hectares [27 million acres] were given out. But the mistake of these policies is to donate the land without advising the beneficiaries. That is not a reform, nor is it efficient or planned out.

Land reform is to accompany them, make sure they have loans, technical assistance, that they know how to farm, how to sell their harvests, that they have all of the basic ser-

vices, among other things.

The great majority of the Asuncion population comes from the interior because there are no universities in our towns, there’s no work, no health centers or hospitals, and later they come to the capital or its surrounding areas.

What policy would you apply to improve the population’s quality of life?

Economic growth but with social equality. Paraguay has all of the conditions so that we can all live healthfully. We can live in a dignified way, but sadly, a small group lives off of ostentatious fortunes and the great majority lives as paupers. The pie is divided unequally and unjustly. When I speak of inequality I refer to the difference in the lives of those who have just have enough to buy food and those who frequently go to Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Miami to buy sumptuous items. It’s good that Paraguay grows economically but it’s not good that only a few take everything.

Where do you intend to get the resources to carry out your proposal for change?

The first and most important of our resources is hydroelectric power. Each year from the Itaipú [plant] we only receive US\$260 million, because the energy we sell Brazil is very cheap, only priced to cost.

If we sell at the market price our energy, at the very least, would give us \$3.5 billion a year, and with that, we can cover half of the national budget.

That \$260 million that we receive is taken on the way by a small group that lives off the boom. The large resources of our country are not divided well. From the first day, Aug. 16, we have to initiate a big campaign to take the decision about the exploitation of energy. If we do so, we can create 120,000 jobs. □

VENEZUELA

Andrés Cañizález and Elsa Piña in Caracas

Lights, camera, revolution

State financial support and technology stimulate Venezuelan filmmaking.

The year 2008 started at full speed. Between January and March, five Venezuelan feature films have been released and while the public’s response has been diverse, this year could be a landmark in the exhibition of local films in Venezuelan movie theaters.

According to the National Autonomous Center of Cinematography (CNAC, for its initials in Spanish), 30 national productions could be premiered in 2008 — double what was shown in 2007, which had doubled from the seven movies released in 2006.

It’s all a “revolution,” a word generously

used in the slogans President Hugo Chávez’s ruling party. The state has assigned more funds for the production of local films and the government-sponsored Villa del Cine, the production center created in 2006, is recognized by the phrase, “lights, camera, revolution.”

In terms of film, the Venezuelan government undoubtedly has a decisive role which has vacillated according to the condition of public finances. According to producer Pedro Mezquita, ticket sales alone do not provide sufficient income to Venezuelan film, which is why a subsidy policy is necessary.

Mezquita claims that only two Venezuelan films have been resounding box office successes: “Macu, the Policeman’s Woman” (Solveig Hoogesteijn, 1987), with more than one million viewers and, more recently, “Secuestro Express,” a common phrase here

PARAGUAY

Racist journalism. An article published on Sept. 13, 2007 by newspaper *La Nación* was considered “the most racist” by Survival, international organization defending indigenous rights.

In the article, Osvaldo Domínguez Dibb — owner of the newspaper and linked to ex-dictator Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) — called indigenous persons “a dangerous cancer, spreading bad smells, destruction and contamination,” and called their customs “filthy” and “Neolithic.”

“The Indians need to become civilized, to become Paraguayans, to forget this stupid idea of trying to preserve their backward, withered culture, and in so doing live like people who pay their taxes. Either that, or return to the depths of the jungle and carry on living with the animals,” the article claims.

The racism “prize,” given on March 21 — International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination — forms part of Survival’s campaign “Stamp it Out,” with the objective of questioning racist descriptions made toward indigenous peoples in media across the world.

“This article exposes the racism that still exists in the media,” Survival said. “This is not about what’s politically correct; it has concrete consequences on indigenous communities’ lifestyle, land and ultimately their lives.” —LP.

used for short kidnappings, in which victims are shuttled to various ATMs to empty their accounts, (Jonathan Jakubowicz, 2005) with over 900,000 viewers.

Venezuelan films are usually shown in theatres between two and four weeks, attracting from 150,000 to 300,000 spectators, which fails to generate sufficient income to cover costs.

Multimillion-dollar production

Last year, the most expensive Venezuelan production was premiered. “Miranda Regresa” or “Miranda Returns,” on the life of Venezuelan forefather Francisco de Miranda, directed by Luis Alberto Lamata, had a budget of US\$2 million.

According to Lamata, “Venezuelan cinema is diversifying. Before, it was a genre in itself. Now different tendencies and themes are evident. I think there is room for everything.”

This movie, with a historical focus, was made in the Villa del Cine, in Guarenas, in the outskirts of Caracas. The Villa has two studios, each functional for both television and film. Furthermore, a post-production room has 15 units for audio and video editing. The Villa is also equipped with high-definition digital cameras and a modern transfer system of video to traditional 35 mm film.

What’s showing on screens this year is a result of the unprecedented high investment to support production in 2007. Villa del Cine gave 28 million bolivares fuertes (some \$13 million) for film production, the CNAC gave another \$2.3 million and \$3.7 million was given by the Fund for Film Promotion — created by the film law reform approved two years ago and free of dependence on state income due to the percentage it receives from US films shown in Venezuela.

Critic Juan Antonio González claims that the recovery experienced by the Venezuelan film industry is also due to new technology that causes a notable reduction in costs, making it easier for many aspiring youths to make the jump to the big screen on a low budget.

“Many of the films in our country are being made on video. Digital technology has democratized film because now with a digital camera you can make a movie and later you only have the cost of its transfer to 35 mm.”

Danny Glover and L’Ouverture

Last year’s \$17.7 million dollar salary to US actor Danny Glover to direct a movie on the life of Haitian independence leader, François Dominique Toussaint L’Ouverture,



“Miranda Returns” was controversial because of its multi-millionaire budget.

“We have the mission to support movies that take on the recuperation of national identity and integration.”

— Lorena Almarza

caused controversy.

Glover, linked since 2004 to an advice council of Telesur, a regional television project driven by the government, has visited Venezuela several times.

His pay is equivalent to state investment to create the Villa del Cine studios and similar to the amounts used in the country to finance twenty feature film productions.

Thaelman Urgelles, president of the Venezuelan Chamber of Feature Film Producers (CAVEPROL), warned that “we think it is good to expand our relationships with other film industries, but the amount of money [paid to Glover] is excessive.” He believes the government’s decision discourages “those national filmmakers who get no more than \$450,000 for a film, only after competitions and the obligation to look for their own funds.”

Lamata, on the other hand, defends the government decision. He said this money was approved by the National Assembly as an extraordinary expense, and that it will at no time affect national production.

“If that’s how things were, of course I would be angry,” he said.

According to Lamata, the final decision to finance Glover “must be seen in light of Venezuela’s diplomatic relations. It is not a film matter.”

Filmmaker Solveig Hoogesteijn, who also directs the Trasncho Cultural Center, said that for her, the news on Glover’s pay was a shock. She believes the decision was poorly received among local producers. “It caused us such displeasure that they gave him the resources so easily,” while Venezuelan filmmakers have to go through the normal selection process.

Lorena Almarza, Villa del Cine director, said “we have the mission to support movies that take on the recuperation of national identity and integration. Here the project would cost a third of what it would cost to make in Hollywood.”

The government’s reaction was immediate. Culture Minister Francisco Sesto disregarded those who criticize the decision to contract Glover, such as the National Association of Cinematographic Authors and the Venezuelan Chamber of Feature Film Producers.

The two groups include more than 300 people, but Sesto sent them off without ceremony.

“Both groups will no longer be recognized by the ministry or any of its corresponding bodies. It is a political break: I do not recognize them, but disregard them,” he announced. □

How far can urban agriculture go?

Alternative program helps fight hunger in the capital.

“Usually when you think of agriculture, you think of a farm, of production per hectare and of profitability. But not in this case,” says Claudia Marcela Sánchez, the coordinator of Bogota mayoralty program that has trained over 40,000 of city’s residents in urban agriculture.

“You can’t compare it with traditional agriculture, which has the aim of generating income,” she says. “This program has goals of building social fabric, and of appreciating agricultural practices.”



Ciudad Bolivar residents preparing compost.

Teams of agronomists have taught vulnerable citizens how to cultivate vegetables and herbs in limited spaces, from small allotments to fizzy drink bottles and wall crannies.

Such agricultural practices are already familiar to millions of Bogota’s residents who have arrived here — pushed by violence and pulled by economic opportunity — from the countryside. Bogota has grown at a faster rate than almost any other Latin American city since the 1950s, due partly to the levels of violence in the countryside. One such person is Víctor Manuel Serrano: “I arrived 18 years ago. I knew how to farm in the countryside, without the need for all this equipment. It’s good exercise!”

And participants do see clear economic benefits.

Showing results

“I don’t spend money on lettuce and other vegetables now, because I cultivate them on my terrace,” says Ariznalda Camallo, a resident of Mochuelo, on the southern fringes of Bogota, “Food is so expensive at the moment, so it saves me 80,000 Colombian pesos [US\$40] a month.” The Urban Agriculture program estimates average monthly wage in Ciudad Bolivar, the largest and poorest district in the capital, at 200,000 Colombian pe-

sos, or \$110, less than half the minimum monthly wage of about \$250.

Camallo, a local community leader, now wants others to benefit from the training scheme. “I’m working to make my neighbors aware,” she says. “We need to realize: if we don’t work, we won’t have anything to eat.”

The training program is run by the Urban Agriculture Unit, which was established in 2004 by the center-left mayor, Luis Garzón (2004-07). “There were isolated hydroponic programs since the 1980s, but never a general program for the whole city,” says Sánchez.

Garzón’s Bogota without Hunger campaign, which also focused on community dining rooms where vulnerable people received lunch for 300 Colombian pesos (\$0.15), drew heavily from Brazil’s Zero Hunger program, but the agriculture component drew more widely.

“Initially, the lack of trust in the state was terrible,” recalls Germán Bueno, who coordinated the Urban Agriculture program in Ciudad Bolivar, Bogota’s poorest district. “The technical team arrived with megaphones to call people together, and no one believed them. Ciudad Bolivar is a locality where the whole world wants to do social work, to be the savior, but often the results aren’t seen. But when people saw the greenhouses and the allotments, the people began to arrive.”

And, while critics have called Bogota without Hunger for being dependency-inducing, Bueno is quick to disagree. The idea, he argues, is that the

community takes over the gardens when government support runs out. In fact it’s government administrators who say, “let’s just buy them some food and give it to them,” says Bueno. “And that would be pure *asistencialismo*.”

An important alternative

“But you can’t say to people who are suffering from hunger that they come to the allotment and in three months they’ll have something to eat,” says Bueno. “You have to give them food immediately and that’s a function which the dining rooms fulfill.”

Since 2004, armed with a budget of approximately 5 billion Colombian pesos (\$2.62 million), the program has apparently managed to ward off the doubts of key politicians. When Mayor Garzón left office at the end of 2007, his successor Samuel Moreno, also from the Democratic Pole coalition, pledged to continue urban agriculture, as well as community dining rooms.

However, bringing the benefits to more people may prove difficult. “We’ve used up many of the options for informing people about the project — through local mayoralties, for example,” says Sánchez, who is passing over her role to Bueno.

So, the emphasis may now switch to deepening the project’s impact, for example by pro-

“We need to realize: if we don’t work, we won’t have anything to eat.”

— Ariznalda Camallo

moting more local species — such as Andean grain quinoa — and by encouraging composting, so less waste goes to landfill. There are even hopes that the two flagship parts of Bogota without Hunger can become mutually supporting, with the dining room buying produce from the allotments. “Everyone now grows lettuce, so the price is very

low,” says one of the program’s agronomists, “But the dining rooms are interested in buying jams and other products, so we’re going to work to commercialize them.”

These ambitions are no longer part of an agenda of agronomic experts: “These are ideas that come from the work in the localities,” says Bueno. □



Relmu Ñanko, Mapuche werken or spokesperson.

ARGENTINA

Hernán Scandizzo in Rio Negro and Neuquen

Indigenous resistance to oil company encroachment

Hydrocarbon exploitation invades Mapuche territory.

The Neuquen province in Argentina’s Patagonia, which has been the principal oil and gas producer since the 90s, is experiencing a fall in production since only proven reserves are being exploited, without any investment in new explorations.

However, the Mapuche indigenous population opposes the definitive transformation of their lands into oil fields. Their resistance to oil activity began in the mid-90s in Neuquen as a reaction to the pollution in the Kaxipayiñ and Paynemil communities which are located on the country’s largest gas deposit, Loma de La Lata. For a decade, they have suffered po-

lice repression, threats and trials. Today they face the arrival of anthropologists and bullies who accompany the new transformations.

“We only make demands according to our rights,” said Martín Velázquez Maliqueo, an authority, or *lonko*, in the Mapuche Logko Puran community, located 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the Neuquen city Cutral Co.

In June, Velázquez was absolved along with three other traditional authorities after being charged with “disturbance to property” in a trial started in 2001 by US company Pioneer Natural Resources, today Apache Corporation, for blocking roads and supposedly impeding the normal function of the site. Currently, this community has blocked a road built by its members and which leads to the deposit, so the company’s wells and gas compressor plant are paralyzed.

“Oil revenues controlled political administration [in Neuquen], in the country, and when someone tries to complain or oppose hydrocarbon exploitation, the historical demands of the first peoples are criminalized,” he said.

Extending the oil front

The heightened price of oil has sparked companies’ interest in secondary areas, expanding the extractive front.

In 2007, Argentine company Pluspetrol took over a concession in Zapala, in the center of Neuquen, to exploit an area containing 14 of the 17 indigenous communities in the region. The Mapuche immediately opposed the concession on their lands and formed the Central Zone Council of the Neuquen Mapuche Confederation in order to unite their efforts.

“The oil companies have used and keep using all ways possible to try and enter our lands, in the beginning without causing conflict,” said Relmu Ñanko, spokesperson for the Central Zone Council.

But according to Ñanko, if the company fails to persuade the community, violence ensues.

“The most concrete case is what’s going on in the Huencu-tru Trawel Leufu community,” she said. “The company Petrolera Piedra del Águila has invested resources in the unemployed people [who say they could get jobs if the company is allowed to work] and with the oil union, which has unleashed its bullies in the community’s territory so that the conflict appears in the public’s eyes as just a confrontation of poor against poor, and the government and company wash their hands.”

Since November of last year, there have been various acts of violence, including setting the car and house of some community members on fire. Though there have been formal dialogues with the provincial government, tension persists.

Verónica Huilipán, a spokesperson for the Confederation, stressed the state’s responsibility for the situations generated by the entry of oil companies.

“It is a conflict that has dragged on for more than a decade and that the state has created since it has awarded resources within communities’ territories without the consent of the Mapuche people,” she said.

The Confederation fights to implement previous and informed consultation, as stated in the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which Argentina has signed. The provincial constitution also recognizes indigenous peoples’ rights in the administration of natural resources.

Rio Negro, next objective

In February, the Rio Negro government started a bid on seven new areas, including the Cuenca de Ñirihuau, which runs from the southern border of Nahuel Huapi Lake, close to Bariloche, to the south into the Chubut province. The attempts to exploit the basin in the past century had little success, evident from the series of poorly-closed wells in the Valle del Ñirihuau that now drain crude oil to the Las Minas stream.

The bid for the Rio Negro area provoked interest from the YPF Sociedad Anónima and Pluspetrol, linked to Spanish oil company Repsol YPF. But it aroused fears, too. The area limits the Nahuel Huapi National Park and is

inside the buffer zone of a biosphere reserve. Consequently, the park's administration and the Bariloche town councilor, Alfredo Martín, have requested reports from the provincial government.

Indigenous Advising Council (CAI), a Mapuche organization, emphasized that it knows the impacts that this activity will produce and said that it is not willing to permit it.

"In the struggle that we have maintained for the lands, we see that [the authorities] have no problem violating legislation in accordance with their interests. Though we are going to resort to legislation, we don't believe that this alone will be sufficient for the defense," warned Chacho Limpe, CAI spokesman. □

HONDURAS

Inforpress Centroamericana

New forest law

Forest exploitation must be supervised by communities.

After a five-month wait, the Forest Law was finally signed on Feb. 26 by President Manuel Zelaya in efforts to overhaul corrupt institutions and increase community control over forest management.

Since the Forest Law was one of Zelaya's campaign promises, few imagined he wouldn't sign it when Congress approved the norm on Sept. 13 last year after eight months of debate.

The one-month term allotted for the president to ratify the law came and went without any signs that he intended to fulfill his promise and many began to fear that Zelaya had succumbed to pressures from the logging industry, especially since Zelaya was a leader of the Honduras Loggers Association in the 1980s.

The rumors, however, were quelled on Feb. 14 when the president surprisingly announced

that he would sign the law, due to come into effect in stages over the next three months.

"The fact that it took him so long to sign it shows that the president suffered strong pressure from the [logging] industry. But in the end, though the new law isn't perfect, it does suggest an improvement from the last one," said leader of environmental group Mopawi, Oswaldo Munguía, who works in the eastern Mosquitia region.

Positive aspects

Though some environmental groups have celebrated what they consider a triumph of basic goals, other groups have shown skepticism. Several organizations claim that the logging industry's interests in the sector are too strong to allow the new legislation to be put into practice and that ecologist groups don't enjoy the freedom necessary to act without fear of retaliation.

Among the law's improvements, environmentalists hope, is the substitution of the previous government agency, Honduran Corporation for Forest Development (COHDEFOR), for the newly created Conservation and Development Institute, which won't have the image of corruption linked to COHDEFOR, considered an extension of the logging industry.

According to a 2005 study by British non-governmental organization Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), bribes paid for illegal exploitation licenses have become the norm in COHDEFOR. The EIA reported that 50 percent of pine trees and up to 80 percent of mahogany trees in the country are felled without valid authorization.

This in turn contributed to the fact that Honduras lost 35 percent of its forests between 1990 and 2005, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (*LP, May 3, 2006*).

The new norm also requires that logging projects be subject to community over-

VENEZUELA

Venezuela defeats ExxonMobil. The British judiciary favored Venezuela on March 18 in a trial that US oil giant ExxonMobil started against state-run Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) after a government decree emitted last year established that all contracts with foreign companies must gradually become mixed, in which the Venezuelan oil company should have a minimum 60 percent of stock.

ExxonMobil refused to reduce its share and in January opened a trial in London, where the court blocked US\$12 billion in PDVSA stock and assets in order to prevent Venezuela from transferring them to a

jurisdiction out of reach for the World Bank's International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Venezuela, along with Bolivia and Nicaragua, withdrew from ICSID last May.

British judge Paul Walker declared that the case had no relevant connection to Great Britain and that the courts in his country do not have the power to order a global freeze on PDVSA assets. He also said that the US company must pay \$760,000 to PDVSA for legal costs.

ExxonMobil demands a \$5 billion compensation for its assets in the Orinoco Petroleum Belt territory while Venezuela estimates its value at \$1 billion. —LP.

“As long as the logging industry still has power, it will make sure that the norms are not carried out.”

— Bertha Oliva

sight. To date local people have had little say over the fate of their resources.

Civil society divided

The Coalition for Environmental Justice, a network of environmental organizations, headed up the drive for new legislation. Víctor Ochoa, director of the Environmental Organization of Olancho, which belongs to the Coalition, said that “this time we won out over the big logging interests.”

The sense of victory is not universal, however. Director of the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared (COFADEH), Bertha Oliva, argues that the effort to create a new law was misplaced.

“The problem is not the absence of a law. It is political. As long as the logging industry still has power, it will make sure that the norms are not carried out,” argued Oliva.

The activist claimed that it would have been more effective to promote gradual reforms to the former forest legislation “in a way that would have ended corruption and exposed the powerful interests that dominate the country.”

Oliva points to continuing violence against environmentalists as a strong sign that pow-

erful business interests are practically above the law. In December 2006 two activists were killed in the province of Olancho, a region that has experienced heavy logging over the past decades (*LP*, May 2, 2007). Charges were eventually brought against four policemen, although an EIA report from November 2007 claims the forces behind the crime were never brought to justice.

More recently, another ecologist organization member, Mario Guifarro, was murdered on Sept. 15, 2007.

This type of repression against those who oppose corporate interests has caused greater certainty among some sectors in society that system corruption will end once the reforms are introduced.

According to Aída Romero, of the Foundation for Democracy Without Borders, which headed up the Coalition for Environmental Justice, the law stipulates that anyone from COHDEFOR applying for a job in the newly-formed Conservation and Development Institute must undergo a rigorous professional evaluation from an independent firm. “We’ll be vigilant in demanding that the new legislation is respected,” she said. □

MEXICO

John Ross in Mexico City

AMLO: The comeback kid

As his party implodes, López Obrador rides the defense of Mexican oil back into the political spotlight.

As Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the leftist former mayor of the Mexico’s capital, made his way to the podium in the packed Zocalo plaza here March 18 — the 70th anniversary of the nationalization of an oil industry now threatened with re-privatization — hundreds of senior citizens, rose as one from their seats of honor at the side of the stage, raised their frail fists in salute, and chanted that they do not forget. “Tenemos Memoria!” — “We Remember!”

Tiburcio Quintanilla, 83, remembers when President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), called upon his countrymen and women to donate to a fund to pay indemnities to Anglo-American oil companies after the 1938 nationalization, he went with his father to the Palace of Bellas Artes and stood on line for hours with their chickens, their contribution to taking back “our chapopote,” Mexican slang for oil.

On the same stage from which he directed the historic seven-week siege of the capital after the contested 2006 election that awarded the presidency to his right-wing rival Felipe Calderón (*LP*, July 26 and Aug. 23, 2006), López Obrador looked more grizzled, weather-beaten, and little hoarse after two years on the road, signing up nearly 2,000,000 new constituents for his National Democratic Convention, or CND, which is embroiled in a bitter battle for control of the

center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Back in the spotlight

Now, leading the defense of Mexican oil against the privatizers, AMLO — as López Obrador is affectionately known — has leveraged himself back into the political spotlight, and once again, is leading a reinvigorated challenge to the faltering president who is expected to push for the privatization of the state oil company, PEMEX.

President Calderón is trying to persuade Mexicans that PEMEX is dying, that its reserves are running out, and that the nation’s only hope is in deep water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. The project would require partnerships with big oil companies. But as many experts point out, such as Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the president who expropriated the oil in the first place, it is not at all certain that these purported deep sea reserves are actually in Mexican waters.

López Obrador’s “informative assembly” on March 18 of the National Democratic Convention was certainly the most emotional since he convoked the CND in September 2006 after the courts had designated Calderón as president. Poised under a monumental tricolor flag that furled and unfurled dramatically in the spring zephyrs, and addressing tens

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

World Water Day. This year World Water Day, celebrated March 22, coincided with International Year of Sanitation, for which United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, called for “promoting actions on a crisis that affects one of every three people on the planet.”

According to the United Nations, every 20 seconds a child dies due to lack of potable water, adequate environmental sanitation and healthy hygienic conditions.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reports that in Latin America and the Caribbean, diarrhea — caused by infections transmitted due to a lack of sanitation — is the second cause of infant mortality, after respiratory diseases. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN Population with access to improved sanitation (2004)

Country	%
Uruguay	100
Cuba	98
Suriname	94
Costa Rica	92
Chile	91
Ecuador	89
Colombia	86
Guatemala	86
Jamaica	80
Paraguay	80
Mexico	79
Dominican Rep.	78
Brazil	75
Panama	73
Honduras	69
Venezuela	68
Peru	63
El Salvador	62
Belize	47
Nicaragua	47
Bolivia	46
Haiti	30

Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

of thousands of loyalists in the heart of the Mexican body politic, López Obrador told the story of Mexico’s oil.

Oil is a patriotic lubricant here and AMLO is imbued in what historians once called “revolutionary nationalism,” the apogee of which was Lázaro Cárdenas’ March 18, 1938 order expropriating the holdings of 17 Anglo-American oil companies who were about to secede from the union and declare themselves “The Republic of the Gulf of Mexico.”

Cárdenas’ subsequent creation of a national oil corporation, “Petróleos Mexicanos” or PEMEX was seen as the guarantee of a great future for Mexico. But things have worked out differently.

“Privatization is corruption!” AMLO harangues, “The oil is ours! *La Patria No Se Vende!*”, *La Patria Se Defiende!*” the crowd roars back, “The country is not for sale, The country is to defend!” “*Pais Petrolero, Pueblo Sin Dinero*” - “Country With Oil, People Without Money!”

López Obrador warms to the task, outlining plans for a new “civil insurrection” that will be led by “women commandos” who will encircle congress on the day “energy reform” legislation is introduced, shut down banks, the Stock Exchange, the airports, and block highways. If all that doesn’t work, AMLO calls for a national strike.

Indeed, López Obrador takes pains to warn the petroleum defenders about government provocateurs and those who would foment violence, perhaps a message to the Popular Revolutionary Army, which has

thrice bombed PEMEX pipelines in the past year.

A history as a leader

Andrés Manuel López Obrador is at his incendiary best as a leader of social upheaval. During the post-electoral struggle, his calls put 2,000,000 demonstrators on the streets of Mexico City on July 30, 2006, the largest political demonstration in Mexico’s history. Back in 1996, López Obrador led Chontal indigenous farmers in blocking 60 PEMEX oil platforms that had been contaminating their cornfields in his native Tabasco, a movement that catapulted him into the presidency of the PRD, later to become the wildly popular mayor of Mexico City.

Calderón says that he has no intention of privatizing PEMEX and that his energy reform aim to make the laws governing oil revenues more flexible and build a “strategic alliance” with the global oil titans.

Calderón’s legislative package is liable to steer away from constitutional amendment required for privatization and focus on secondary laws, a legal move that could take the wind out of AMLO’s sails.

In its early years, the PRD sought to define what it would be: A confluence of grassroots movements that ran candidates for public office as one means of achieving social change? Or an exclusively electoral formation intent on obtaining its quotient of power in which the party became an end in itself? Although the PRD has devolved into the latter, López Obrador’s 2006 campaign reinvented the activist side of the equation. □

HAITI

Inter Press Service

Farming sector in dire straits

Student activists call for an overhaul of the nation’s agriculture policies.

A petition recently submitted to the René Prével government by students of the Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine (FAMV) department at Haiti’s State University calls for a program spanning the country’s 10 departments to increase technical and expert assistance, give subsidies to the agriculture and fishing sector, promote egg and chicken-farming projects to ease reliance on Dominican imports, a nationwide campaign to provide agricultural credits to peasants and an incremental raising of tariffs on foreign agricultural products to benefit Haitian farmers.

They say a crisis has resulted in the country from its importing more than half of its food while local farmers are mired in poverty.

Other points of the petition deal with

strengthening environmental protection, improving access to social services and higher education for agronomy students, and supporting them to work in the field so that Haiti can develop its own well of local expertise. Of the 420,000 tons of rice Haitians consume yearly, 340,000 tons are imported. Of the 31 million eggs the Haitian population eats monthly, 30 million are imported from the Dominican Republic. About 80 percent of farmers earn less than US\$135 a year.

“We understand that it is not just a single person” who has caused these problems, said Stanley Belizaire, a fifth-year FAMV student. He said that people must “get together to change or improve the agricultural system and give a new orientation to this country.”

Before 1950, Haiti produced more than 80 percent of its own food and exported coffee, cocoa, meat and sugar. Since then, political instability, among other factors, has

“If you get clobbered every time you move forward, then you’re constantly wasting money. Nothing ever gets finished.”

— Patrick Elie

made the development of Haitian agriculture a low priority.

Dictatorships supported by Haiti’s small elite have been preoccupied with plunder and repression, while popular governments have often been preoccupied with survival and fending off coups d’etat.

International pressure

By the 1980s and 1990s, a huge amount of international pressure had been placed on Haiti to reduce its tariffs and open most of its markets to the world. This process has strengthened a demographic shift in which poor rural populations, out of work, have moved to urban slums, often working as street vendors. To reenergize Haiti’s rural economy, many analysts believe the government itself must intervene in order to create the space for jobs.

In a recent interview with a Canadian newspaper, the well-known Haitian political activist Patrick Elie explained the difficulties that Haiti faces in building national production.

“Roads in Haiti are difficult to maintain because of our limited means, but also because of the topography of the country: mountains, running water because of deforestation, and so forth,” he said.

“More importantly, the strength of the mobilization we had when [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide was elected in 1990 has been broken twice. During Préval’s first presidency, there was more interference. We have had no continuity. You don’t build infrastructure in two days, not even over one mandate. It requires a national plan that holds over a quarter or half a century. If you get clobbered every time you move forward, then you’re constantly wasting money. Nothing ever gets finished.”

Haiti’s forced reliance on neo-liberal policies makes change all the more difficult. According to one current government official,

more than 800 nongovernmental organizations work parallel with the agriculture ministry, but most define their own priorities. With many in the private sector preferring to import foods rather than invest in local agriculture, if change is to occur, the government will need to develop the means and plans for the incubation of a revitalized agricultural economy.

With a drop in violence and the possibility for increased foreign investment with the implementation of a textile-oriented trade act with the United States, known as HOPE, the government could find some room to maneuver in rebuilding the rural economy.

However, a rural/urban conflict over cost and jobs also means that raising tariffs on rice is good for farmers and rural peasants, but would be a severe burden for people living in destitute communities such as Cite Soleil in the capital.

One organization, the National Association of Haitian Agro-Professionals, or ANDAH, insists that the revival of the agriculture economy is possible as well as necessary and that tariffs could be slowly increased in order for a stable transition back to a successful rural economy.

One member of ANDAH, and an employee of the ministry, argued that government action is required at the micro and macro level. He said that selective trade liberalization, which is pushed by powerful international actors, is a major problem for Haitian agriculture. The same global actors have also pushed plans for a drastic privatization program upon the country.

Good suggestions

In a press conference in early February, Haiti’s agriculture minister acknowledged that the students’ petition made fair and reasonable recommendations which the government would implement. The protesters, while welcoming the promises, remain skeptical and say they will watch closely how the ministry moves forward with the agenda.

Recently the Haitian government blocked incoming shipments of poultry and eggs from the Dominican Republic because of the discovery of bird flu there.

While cross-border business owners are perplexed at this move, agronomy students say such policies could help local Haitian entrepreneurs and collectives to build up their own production. One group, a neighborhood assembly in Port-au-Prince, the Sositeyè Djòl Ansanm pou Demokrasì Patisipatif (SODA) is launching an urban farm plot and says it aims to increase milk and egg-producing projects for urban and rural peasant cooperatives. □

inbrief

- On March 19, ignoring a law that suspends evictions from indigenous community lands until 2010, a judge in the western Neuquen province of **Argentina** ordered the Mapuche community Paichil Antrio to leave their ancestral territory and return it to the alleged owner, US citizen William Fischer.

- Twenty-two international human rights organizations sent a letter of protest to Álvaro Uribe, president of **Colombia**, arguing that the statements of his adviser, José Obdulio

Gaviria, had a role in the murder of four union leaders between March 4 and 11 by paramilitary group members. The murders came after Gaviria linked the union leaders to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), despite having no proof.

- The International Civil Commission for Human Rights Observation considered the human rights situation in **Mexico** “extremely critical.” In its sixth visit, in February, the Commission detected harassment toward social organizations as well as an increased number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, as well as arbitrary arrests.

- On March 12, the Superior Court of Electoral Justice in **Paraguay** reported the existence of double and triple candidacies presented by parties and movements that will participate in the general elections on April 20. Irregularities have been detected in 57 cases, involving 18 political organizations.

- According to the International Labor Organization, **Peru** has the greatest number of child workers in Latin America. In the region, 5.7 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work, of which 1.2 million are Peruvian — 20.7 percent of the Peruvian population in that age range.

Activists persecuted

Authorities and community representatives who promoted a popular vote on mining companies have been accused of "terrorism."

The self-named Front of Unity Among the *Campesino* Community in Segunda y Cajas Civil Association accused a total of 28 people of terrorism — including mayors, local authorities, activists and human rights defenders — based on their support of a community vote Sept. 17 of last year against the Río Blanco copper exploitation project in Piura, owned by the Majaz Mining company.

According to the association, those charged belong to surviving groups of subversive organizations Shining Path and Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.

Nicanor Alvarado — coordinator for the San Francisco Javier Vicariate Environment Office in Jaen, in the northern Cajamarca department and one of the accused — claimed the allegations are much like a "witch hunt."

Javier Jahncke, lawyer for the Ecumenical Foundation for Development and Peace (Fedepaz), also accused, told local newspaper *La República*, "the accusation supports efforts to persecute every person and authority who is worried about the activities that affect the environment."

According to Fedepaz, the recently created association that supports all mining activity "is composed of people who are not even part of the *campesino* community of Segunda y Cajas and who have no representation in local social organizations."

A press release from Fedepaz adds, "It's interesting that this accusation has been presented in the context of a campaign taken on by certain media, companies and the government itself, and whose objective is to create the false idea that there is an alleged 'anti-system network' looking to destabilize the government and prevent mining investment."

But this is not the first campaign against supporters of popular vote (*LP*, Oct. 3, 2007). A month before the vote took place, citizen action was declared illegal by the National Electoral Board — the Peruvian electoral court — and President Alan García called the nongovernmental organizations who backed the vote, "communists" and "enemies of investment."

Death threats

Defending the environment against powerful mining companies is now equated with risking one's life (*LP*, Feb. 7, 2007). At the end of 2006, Father Marco Arana, Catholic priest and director of the Cajamarca-based Formation and Intervention for Sustainable Development, or GRUFIDES, was the target of an espionage and intimidation mission for his constant accusations of environmental damage caused by Yanacocha, the most productive gold mining company in Latin America.

Jahncke and other social leaders have received death threats for their defense of the communities' right to decide, leading to the opening of an investigation process and even the intervention of United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

Mirtha Vásquez of GRUFIDES told the National Radio Coordinator that the speed with which the accusation was processed and presented to the police's National Counter-Terrorism Office draws suspicion.

"At this time it is more and more evident that there is a persecution policy against groups and persons who defend the environment," Vásquez claimed. "Until now, there has never been a government so repressive that it tries to openly persecute with the aim of silencing the voices of those who support environmental protection and that gives all benefits to the mining companies."

Peruvian rights organization APRODEH sent a press release reminding that an investigation on Majaz — now Río Blanco Copper S.A. — is currently underway for its failure to respect communities' rights and it was recently fined for not complying with the compromises assumed in its environmental studies and for damage done to the environment.

"They are trying to jail us, looking to kill us or looking to make us disappear," Alvarado told the National Radio Coordinator. "I hold the central government and the mining companies responsible." □

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