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Family members of victims of Peru's paramilitary Colina Group demand Fujimori's extradition in Santiago, Chile.

CHILE

Benjamin Witte in Santiago

Fujimori's path to freedom

Chilean judge denies Peru's request to extradite former leader, bewildering many on both sides of the border.

In the face of such apparently strong evidence against him, many here are scratching their heads and asking why a Chilean Supreme Court judge would deny Peru's request to extradite ex-President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) to his homeland to face charges of corruption and human rights abuses.

On July 11 Judge Orlando Álvarez dismissed all 12 cases that Peruvian prosecutors had presented against Fujimori. The former head of state, who has been in Chile for 18 months, is accused of numerous crimes ranging from illegal telephone tapping, to inappropriate use of state funds, to state-sponsored massacres

"In all 12 of these cases, the [evidence] does not sufficiently demonstrate that Alberto Fujimori participated to the extent that the extradition request suggests," the judge concluded. "It's therefore possible to deduce that in this case there isn't proof that the defendant committed the crimes for which he's been accused."

Not only is the ruling overwhelming unpopular — a recent poll conducted by the Santiago-based think tank the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, known as Flasco, found that some 93 percent of Chileans think Fujimori should to be extradited — but it also runs counter to several previous court decisions.

Just last month Chilean Supreme Court prosecutor Mónica Maldonado, tasked with filing an official, though non-binding, recommendation on the case, found there to be enough evidence behind most of the charges originally presented to warrant Fujimori's extradition.

Among the cases for which Maldonado recommended extradition are the so-called Barrios Altos and La Cantuta massacres, both committed by an infamous government-backed death squad known as the Colina Group (*LP, June 27, 2007*). Prosecutors suggest that Fujimori had direct knowledge of and may have even ordered the Colina Group's anti-subversion operations. In total, 25 people, including a small child and a professor,

Latinamerica Press is a bi-weekly (fortnightly) journal of information and analysis from Latin America and the Caribbean, with emphasis on the issues that affect marginalized populations within the region. Spanish version: **Noticias Aliadas**

The journal is produced by **COMUNICACIONES ALIADAS**, a Peru-based non governmental organization that for more than 40 years has been producing independent and reliable information and analysis. Our objective is to demonstrate the situation facing excluded and marginalized sectors of the population within Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Printed by: Ediciones Atenea E.I.R.L.

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www.noticiasaliadas.org (in Spanish)

In addition to the journal, we have a range of other resources, including a website, in-depth reports and a free email information service.

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were murdered in the two massacres, which took place in 1991 and 1992, respectively.

Those same incidents have also gone before the Organization of American States-backed Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR). Last November, in the case of "La Cantuta vs. Peru," the IACRC found the Peruvian state guilty of numerous human rights abuses. The court ordered Peru to apologize for the 1992 massacre and pay reparations to victims' family members. In 2001 the IACHR reached a similar conclusion on the Barrios Altos massacre.

Why, then, would Álvarez reach a decision that runs so counter to both general sentiment and established rulings about Fujimori government's role in past human rights abuses? Opinions vary.

One theory is that the judge's ruling was influenced by certain behind-the-scenes political maneuverings — possibly from Japan, where Fujimori now plans to run for Senate.

According to Raúl Paiba, president of a group called the Committee of Peruvian Refugees in Chile, the move to block Fujimori's extradition was based on international commercial interests. Indeed, on the same day that Álvarez issued his ruling, Chile's Chamber of Deputies approved a free trade agreement with Japan. "We understand that the trade deals are beginning. Commercial obligations are what really interest the leaders of this country," said Paiba, a Peruvian native, and former university teacher who has been living in Chile as a refugee since 1992.

Sharing that opinion is the president of Chile's Humanist Party, Marilén Cabrera Olmos, who told Latinamerica Press that in cases like this, there are always "practical interests" at work.

"They're not visible, but they exert a tremendous amount of pressure," she said. "We think that economic interests are given more weight than interests having to do with justice, truth or the power of the people. We have no doubt that there were economic interests behind this."

Both President Michelle Bachelet and Judge Álvarez were quick to deny politics had anything to do with the decision. "That would be absurd," Bachelet said.

Not everyone here is convinced by the prompt denials. Former presidential candidate Tomás Hirsch, also from the Humanist Party, said he finds it suspicious just how quick Bachelet was to deny any role in the decision. "The fact that she had to say something suggests some type of guilty conscience," said Hirsch. "This is a very serious situation, not just for Peru, not just for Chile, but for the future protection of human rights in our continent."

Socialist Party Sen. Jaime Naranjo blasted the ruling, but disagrees that it was influenced by political pressure. Álvarez simply mishandled his task, Naranjo says. Rather than examine the evidence in the context of whether it warranted further investigation in Peru, meaning granting extradition, the judge treated the case as if he were trying Fujimori here in Chile, he explained.

"I think he did a poor job of handling the elements that needed to be considered, and he caused tremendous damage to the credibility of Chile's justice system," said Naranjo. "He also very much hurt our country's international image, because anyone who's even somewhat informed can draw [the conclusion] from the ruling that in our country human rights violators and state terrorists like Fujimori enjoy impunity."

Álvarez' political leanings also came up in conversation with Flacso's Lucia Damert, director of the think tank's program of security and citizenship.

"Here in Chile you really don't know, there are no in depth analyses of him, but in Peru the whole analysis has been made on him being a judge during the military process," she said. "He has always voted in every case against [prosecuting] Pinochet, he has always been very conservative in all types of ruling."

The Fujimori extradition case, currently under appeal, now returns to Chile's Supreme Court, where it will be examined by a panel of five judges. Analysts expect the upcoming ruling — which will be binding — to be issued within the next two to three months. □

PERU

Cecilia Remón in Lima

Chilean judge's ruling questioned

Chile's Supreme Court to decide Fujimori's fate.

Flimsy, inconsistent and lacking of judicial rigor were just some of the words used to describe Chilean Supreme Court Judge Orlando Álvarez's early July ruling that rejected Peru's request to extradite former President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000).

Álvarez said there was insufficient proof on all 12 cases presented by Peruvian authorities early last year.

Legal experts like Diego García Sayán, a judge for the Inter-American Court of Hu-



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LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

For the poor and excluded. The Latin American Episcopal Council concluded its 31st ordinary meeting held in Havana, Cuba July 10-13 with a push for pastoral ministries to better attend to the region's poorest and most excluded inhabitants.

Some 50 bishops from 22 Catholic Episcopal conferences throughout Latin America met to choose new directors for the organization to serve until 2011.

Mons. Raymundo Damasceno Assis, archbishop of the Brazilian city Aparecida, where the Latin American Bishop's Conference was held in May (LP, May 30, 2007), was elected president.

Pope Benedict XVI authorized the publication of the final declaration from Aparecida that urges local churches to be present in "the new realities of exclusion and marginalization that the most vulnerable groups are living in."

For the bishops, globalization has brought a new face to the poor and excluded, groups that now include migrants, victims of violence, people-trafficking and kidnappings, displaced persons and refugees, disappeared, those with AIDS, the homeless, miners and landless *campesinos*. —LP/IPS.

ARGENTINA

Trial begins against torturer chaplain. The trial against Catholic priest Christian von Wernich, who was chaplain of the Buenos Aires provincial police during the 1976-83 dictatorship, began on July 5.

Von Wernich was charged with seven counts of murder, 42 kidnappings and 31 cases of torture. Family members of the seven murder victims said von Wernich was in charge of collecting US\$1,500 per family so that those in custody could be thrown out of the country, which never happened.

In 1984, police officer Julio Emmed testified before the National Commission on Disappeared Persons that he was with von Wernich when police doctor Jorge Bergés gave lethal injections to four of the seven victims.

The trial, which is taking place in the city of La Plata, is the third one since 2005 when two amnesty laws — the Final Point and Due Obedience laws from 1986 and 1987, respectively — were overturned. These laws prohibited legal action against dictatorship-era human rights repressors (*LP, June 29, 2005*).

The first trial was against police officer Julio Simón, who was sentenced to 25 years in jail in 2006, followed by former Buenos Aires police commissioner Miguel Etchecolatz, who was given a life sentence. Witness Jorge Julio López, 77, disappeared a day before he was scheduled to testify at this trial. His whereabouts are still unknown (*LP, Oct. 18, 2006*). —LP/IPS.

man Rights (IACHR), and former Peruvian prosecutor José Ugaz said that Álvarez's ruling is full of flaws.

"The jurisprudence of the Chilean judiciary for extradition cases is of reasonable presumption," said García Sayán in a recent press conference. "What [Álvarez] is demanding is practically a video, a recording, a personal testimony of someone who was present the moment Fujimori gave the order or put the money in his pocket."

Ugaz says that Álvarez disregarded the arguments made by the Peruvian state.

"It really calls my attention that the judge, in a clearly slanted attitude, only took into consideration the defense witnesses' testimony and questioned the prosecutor's witnesses' testimony. According to him, these latter contradicted each other, they were inconsistent, they were testimonies by hearsay. There was a biased analysis of the proof," Ugaz said.

One of the major criticisms of Álvarez's ruling is the fact that he supposedly ignored a previous ruling by the IACHR.

"What Álvarez says is that the IACHR in the Barrios Altos and La Cantuta [massacre] cases did not punish Fujimori himself, but simply the Peruvian state and made a reference to the probable responsibilities of high ranking members of the executive branch," said García Sayán.

"There is a serious legal inconsistency here, and it's worrying that a Supreme Court judge from an IACHR and American Convention on Human Rights state member apparently ignores that a human rights tribunal never convicts nor is able to convict individuals because it is not a criminal court," García Sayán said.

The Peruvian quickly appealed the decision, and this is currently awaiting a final verdict from the Supreme Court.

But both Ugaz and García Sayán agree that there are now three possible scenarios: that the Supreme Court extradites Fujimori for all cases as was recommended in June by Chilean prosecutor Mónica Maldonado — two human rights cases and seven corruption charges — or that it upholds Álvarez's decision not to extradite the former leader. The third possibility is that Fujimori is extradited only to face the corruption charges in Peru, but not the human rights cases.

"This final scenario is undoubtedly the most politically complex and difficult for Peru because by extraditing him for a certain kind of crime, the charges for the others would be voided," García Sayán explained.

"It's clear to me that if he's not going to be handed over for the most serious crimes, among them crimes against humanity, it's preferable that Judge Álvarez's ruling is upheld," said Ugaz. "If he comes for minor crimes, with the possibility of walking free in the mid- or short term, it really ties the hands of the Peruvian judiciary since it wouldn't be able to try him for the most serious crimes."

For Ugaz, this ruling and the previous rulings of this judge show that it has to do more with ideological leanings than anything else.

Álvarez was also opposed to convict former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-90) for the so-called Caravan of Death and Plan Condor cases, as well as for the multi-million-dollar accounts in the Riggs Bank (*LP, Aug. 25, 2004*).

In Fujimori's case, "the fact that Álvarez is considering that the killings were military actions ... it seems to me that it reveals a certain sympathy toward authoritarianism rather than understanding what was the true nature of these events," Ugaz said. □

COLOMBIA

Susan Abad in Bogota

The kidnapping capital

With more than 3,000 people kidnapped, only 45 can hope for a political solution.

The 800-kilometer walk from his native town of Sandona in western Colombia to the capital, Bogota, that professor Gustavo Moncayo and his daughter trekked last June is a symbol of the powerlessness Colombians have grown to feel toward kidnappings.

With a photo of his son stamped in his t-shirt, his hands in chains, Moncayo is seeking that the government negotiate a humanitarian agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that would allow army Cpl. Pablo Emilio Moncayo to go free. He was kidnapped almost 10 years ago, on Dec. 21, 1997.

The International Criminal Court lists kidnapping on its list of 11 crimes against humanity. The crime has plagued Colombia since 1933 when the young Elisa Eder was kidnapped. But since the 1990s it has become widespread, as common criminals, drug-traffickers, guerrilla groups and paramilitaries use kidnapping as a means to attain their economic or political goals.

According to the National Fund for the Defense of Personal Liberty, which works

under the Defense Ministry, there have been 23,144 kidnappings reported in Colombia since 1996. Of those cases reported, 6,772 are attributed to the FARC, 5,289 to the National Liberation Army (ELN), the country's second-largest guerrilla group, 3,775 to common crime and 1,163 to paramilitaries. Authorities are unsure which group or individuals are responsible for the remaining 6,000 crimes.

The Fund, known as Fondolibertad, says there are 3,143 people currently in the hands of kidnappers in Colombia. A group of 45 people are considered "exchangeable" by FARC members. These prisoners survive under FARC's watch in the Colombian jungle.

Some of these prisoners were Police Capt. Julián Guevara, who died in January 2006 of an undisclosed illness, 11 departmental lawmakers being held in the southern Valle del Cauca department, who were killed by the FARC on June 18, and two hostages who managed to escape. Fernando Araújo, now foreign minister, escaped from hostages Dec. 31, 2006 and police officer John Frank Pinchao managed to do the same, and tell of his chilling story, on April 28.

There are some 32 police and military personnel — most of whom have been in captivity for more than eight years in the jungle — 10 politicians including one of the most famous cases, that of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, and three US contractors the FARC is trying to exchange for 600 guerrilla prisoners. FARC members have demanded a demilitarization of the Pradera and Florida municipalities in the Valle del Cauca, a request President Álvaro Uribe quickly declined.

"These are the most visible kidnapping cases, but there are more than 3,000 people in captivity and the government does not have it clear how to set them free," said Olga Lucía Gómez, director of the nongovernmental organization País Libre, meaning "Free Country" in English "They're business people, engineers, livestock farmers, public officials, housewives, and children who would not benefit from an eventual humanitarian agreement."

The majority of kidnappings take place for extortion, not for political reasons, and it is unclear just how much money is moved through kidnapping.

A July 2004 study by the National Planning Department found that between 1996 and 2003, kidnapping cost US\$260 million. The Colombian government spent \$110 million to counter the crime, and the remaining \$150 million were paid as ransom by the victims' families.

The *El Tiempo* newspaper said in a July 1 article that guerrillas, paramilitaries and common crime had obtained \$2 billion from kidnapping in the last 20 years.

But even though the crime has continued, the number of kidnappings has decreased over the last five years, according to Gómez, thanks to efforts by the Uribe government.

"The most significant drop happened between 2002 and 2004, precisely in the first two years of Uribe's government, when cases dropped from 2,882 to 687 kidnappings per year," she said. "Today we have a rate of more or less 600 kidnappings per year, the same rate we had 10 years ago."

The government has taken a hard line against kidnapping. Two new laws in 2002 and in 2004 increased the maximum prison sentence from 28 years to 42 years for kidnapping with extortion, which can increase to 50 years in prison for aggravated kidnappings.

But the government has also taken initiatives to benefit victims of kidnapping.

An August 2005 law forced public, private and multinational companies to pay family members the kidnapped persons' salary, and suspend their tax or loan payments — for healthcare, housing and education — until the person is freed.

On July 5, some 15 million Colombians dressed in white marched throughout the country against this crime, demanding all hostages be freed and that the bodies of those who were killed or who died in captivity be returned to their families. □

BOLIVIA

Martin Garat in La Paz

Social rebellion in the heights of capital

Country's poorest and most radical city gains political relevance.

In La Ceja, or "The Eyebrow," a busy transit hub connecting El Alto and La Paz, the shouts of street vendors are drowned out by the loud motors of the hundreds of buses that pass through here. Informal merchants clog the streets selling a wide variety of products.

"Aymara and Quechua *campesinos*, miners, teachers and vendors live in El Alto. It's a complex social composition," said Absalón Gómez, a philosopher and academic coordinator of a school in the area. "La Paz can't grow anymore, so El Alto is growing now."

COLOMBIA

Unionists under threat. Between 1991 and December 2006 2,245 union members have been killed in Colombia, and 138 have disappeared, according to a July 3 Amnesty International report. In more than 90 percent of the cases the authors of the murders have not even entered the legal system.

The report, titled "Killings, Arbitrary Detentions, and Death Threats: The Reality of Trade Unionism in Colombia," says that paramilitaries backed by the army, as well as the security forces, are behind most of the killings.

Unionists "have been subjected to repeated death threats, killings or enforced disappearances by paramilitaries in recent years," the report says, adding that a climate of almost complete impunity prohibits authorities from cracking down on the issue.

Workers in the health care, education, public services, agriculture, mining, energy and food industries are most at risk. Sixteen unionists have been killed so far this year.

"Trade unionists across Colombia are being sent a clear message: Don't complain about your labor conditions or campaign to protect your rights because you will be silenced, at any cost," said Susan Lee, Amnesty International's Americas Program Director. "By failing to adequately protect trade unionists, the Colombian authorities are sending a message that abuses against them can continue, while companies operating in Colombia risk being held accountable for human rights abuses for which, through their conduct, they may bear responsibility." —LP.

CHILE

Aymaras confront mine. The Aymara community of Cancosa on the Chilean Altiplano region of Tarapaca, bordering Bolivia, will spare no effort in its struggle to rehabilitate a wetland dried out by the Cerro Colorado Mining Company (CMCC), an affiliate of the Anglo-Australian BHP Billiton company.

In 2005, the government Directorate General of Water (DGA) concluded that this ecosystem had been dried out by underground water extraction by the CMCC copper mine.

The DGA found in February 2005 that "clear environmental damage had been done to almost the whole of the Lagunillas bofedal. The state of degradation" was such that "self-recuperation or natural recuperation is no longer possible."

The wetlands and bofedales, which are fed by surface and underground waters, have been legally protected since 1992.

They supply pasture and water for vicuñas, guanacos, llamas and alpacas that are the main livelihood of many Aymara, Quechua and Atacameño indigenous communities.

Despite two cases against the CMCC — one for environmental damage and one for remedying the alleged damage — both have been paralyzed by delaying tactics used by the company. —IPS.

It all began in 1985, when then-President Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1985-89) decided to close state-owned mines, throwing thousands of mining families into the cities in search of work.

La Paz did not have the space to house this influx of migrants, so many settled in the satellite city of El Alto, located above La Paz, 4,000 meters above sea level. The city is known for its frigid nights and unforgiving midday sun.

Later came massive internal migration, from the indigenous communities of the Bolivian altiplano, and El Alto turned into a bridge between the countryside and the capital city, the motor of western Bolivia's economy.

Early this year, El Alto became the second-most populous city of Bolivia thanks to the incessant rural-urban migration. With almost 1 million inhabitants, only the eastern city of Santa Cruz has a larger population.

El Alto is extremely poor and is dominated by the informal economy. Vendors from El Alto bring their wares from Chile or from the Bolivian interior to sell them in the capital or in the massive July 16 Market, a weekly bazaar here. Leather artisanry and furniture is another important industry.

Gómez says an important social class in El Alto is the "cholo" bourgeoisie.

"They're mestizo merchants with high incomes. Their aim isn't collecting money, though," he said. "They prefer to spend their money on parties to increase their prestige among neighbors and relatives. It's the Andean vision as opposed juxtaposed to the capitalist one."

El Alto is famed for having led a popular rebellion against ex-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-97 and 2002-2003). During the so-called "Black October" of 2003 more than 60 El Alto residents were killed in clashes with the army, before the then-leader fled to the United States (*LP, Oct. 8, 2003*).

Miners backed by powerful unions brought Marxism to El Alto. "That influence mixed with the 'great rebellion against the authorities,' an Aymara concept that looks for solutions through protest. In El Alto, the people push specific demands with their demonstrations; they're not trying to get to power," Gómez said.

Because of its geographic position — El Alto is above La Paz, blocking the road out of the city — El Alto residents could easily isolate La Paz and block the road to neighboring Peru.

Currently, El Alto is the greatest stronghold of leftist President Evo Morales, whom its residents call "one of ours."

"His political party, the Movement to Socialism (MAS), uses symbols of the Andean culture. For El Alto residents, who have strong Andean roots, Morales means the recovery of their identity," said Gómez.

At the moment, no one can predict the effect of El Alto's rapid growth on national politics. Equally unpredictable is the future political mood of the city itself, according to Ismael Moreno, a political analyst and professor at the Public University of El Alto.

"For now, the city supports the government unconditionally. But the government hasn't significantly improved their living conditions. Sooner or later, there's going to be a reaction," he said.

The Federación de Juntas Vecinales, a grouping of El Alto neighborhood committees, surged during the October 2003 protests and again in June 2005, when marches ended in the resignation of President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005). Today, El Alto residents do not trust as fully in the group's leadership.

"The El Alto residents unite only when they have common interests," said Gómez. "To mobilize under the [group's] banner was a way to channel the demands of El Alto in critical times, such as during 'Black October,'" he said, adding that the neighborhood grouping can only mobilize El Alto residents to express their demands, not when "they don't feel the need to act."

For student youth leader Benito Apaza, social organizations, spokespeople for the radical positions in El Alto, "are no longer an alternative for young people."

"They've been sold to politics. We see how many leaders use their organizations and bases to get political power," he said.

For Alteños, more than political ideologies, results are important. As a result, Bolivia's most leftist city elected a right-wing mayor in 1999, José Luis Paredes. They reelected him in 2004 after "Black October." Paredes — who is currently the governor of the La Paz department — simply followed through on his campaign promises.

El Alto will continue growing at a fast pace, becoming home to a larger Bolivian electorate, and its political importance will increase, but its political support may prove elusive.

"The great majority of El Alto residents live in poverty, even extreme poverty, and they're not going to accept it anymore. They have the power needed to demand their rights," Moreno said. □

PARAGUAY

Gustavo Torres González in Asuncion

Rural activists at risk

The politically powerful and traffickers may be behind a series of murders and disappearances of *campesino* leaders.

Rural poverty in Paraguay is strongly linked to large-scale agriculture and major land owners. As social protest becomes criminalized, rural workers here are facing increasing danger, and even death.

The export-oriented development model based on agriculture present in Paraguay leaves large areas of land in the hands of very few individuals or companies (*LP, Feb. 7, 2007*), which not only affects *campesino* communities but also indigenous ones who face the loss of their land and forced displacement.

Large plantations are also managed by illegal groups — often tied to the political class — where there are marijuana fields and clandestine runways for contraband trafficking, including the illegal logging trade.

To the thousands of *campesinos* who leave their rural homelands every year for the sprawling shantytowns in urban centers in Paraguay or abroad — according to some studies 30 percent of the Paraguayan population has already emigrated — they face disappearances and even murder for trying to occupy unused lands, or blocking roads to voice their problems, including the country's massive soy monoculture. Local drug trafficking rings and illegal logging on nature reserves are also among their complaints.

More than 100 *campesinos* have been killed in the fight for access to land since the fall of the 1954-89 Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship, says Maguiorina Balbuena, one of the founders of the Paraguayan *Campesino* Movement in 1980 and the National Coordinating Group of Rural and Indigenous Women in 1999.

Only one of these killings has resulted in a conviction. Peasant leader Esteban Balbuena's killer was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The rest have gone unpunished.

Maguiorina Balbuena points to the murder of 25-year-old Antonio Almada, a rural youth leader who was a member of the Paraguayan *Campesino* Movement in the department of Canindeyú near the border with Brazil. On May 26 of this year, he was ambushed in his hometown, and tortured to death. His body was found 1,000 meters from his home, on a nearby road. The state attorney ruled the crime a traffic accident. His relatives, however, reported that his body had been beaten.

"His nails were pulled off, his genitals were blown off and he had a bullet hole in his neck. Several neighbors said they heard screams from a nearby abandoned house that night, where they found blood," reported the Secretariat for International Relations of the Popular Socialist Convergence Party. The victim was a departmental member.

Faced with pressure from *campesina* organizations demanding justice, the state prosecutor has reopened the case.

Another recent case is the June 25 kidnapping of Perfecto Irala, a rural leader in the Caaguazú department. He was reported missing by the Popular Agrarian Movement, and his whereabouts are still unknown.

Irala along with other families was occupying a piece of land that had been sold by the National Rural and Land Development Institute to foreign companies, but it was originally designated for agrarian reform. According to his organization, a police officer may be involved in the disappearance.

"We are extremely worried about this new wave of *campesino* leader killings. The prosecutor's office is delaying the results of the autopsy done on *compañero* Antonio Almada, who was tortured and killed for the mafia tied to local politicians," said Balbuena.

Balbuena has no doubt that ruling Colorado Party lawmaker Julio Colmán was behind the crime.

She says the political class is connected to illegal loggers and marijuana traffickers, and the reason Almada was killed. He was a vocal opponent to these activities in the areas where he lived, she said.

In 2005, Colmán was supposed to answer to an investigation about illegal logging in the area and was found in contempt of court, but he was never indicted.

"The selective murders of *campesino* leaders is going to continue," said Balbuena. She says the situation is likely to worsen if senators approve an anti-terrorism law that has already been approved by the lower chamber of Congress. "We believe that this law is going to deepen the criminalization of social struggles, something we feel every day."

The struggle for land has brought 2,000 *campesinos* to face charges since 2003. The cases against rural workers for protests and demonstrations are a serious threat to *campesino* demands.

"The state pressures popular movements, especially *campesino* organizations, which



Maguiorina Balbuena

"We're living under state-sponsored terrorism."

— Maguiorina Balbuena

GUSTAVO TORRES GONZALEZ

“Peru is one of the countries in Latin America that invests the least per student.”

— Javier Diez Canseco



Javier Diez Canseco

shows that we're living under state-sponsored terrorism,” she said. “The creation of [para-police] civilian guards in the shadow of the law is another way to stomp on those social fighters. Little to nothing has changed in the democratic process. The dictatorship practices are still in force in the country.” □

PERU

Interview with political leader Javier Diez Canseco

“There are cries of indignation and a rejection of inequality”

As the first year of Peruvian President Alan García's (1985-90) second government draws to a close, the country was wrought with protests — many of them violent, in some cases fatal.

Cecilia Remón, Latinamerica Press editor, spoke with Javier Diez Canseco, a former lawmaker and current president of the Socialist Party and one of Peru's most respected leftists, about what is causing these demonstrations.

What is the motivation behind these protests?

These movements are expressing an enormous frustration and weariness, and they're not new. I think that there's a surfeit of very peculiar conditions. [Since 2000] we've had an average growth of 5.5 percent per year [*LP, Sept. 20, 2006*], and this year, they're saying we'll border on 7.5 percent, 8 percent, but there's no redistribution of the wealth.

The wealth is concentrated in few hands, mainly those of the transnationals that control mining, oil and gas that now are extremely profitable. Mining alone last year had some US\$6 billion in net earnings. Nevertheless, it's not paying anything additional to Peru for their earnings, being one of the promises of President Alan García, when he was a candidate: putting a tax on windfall profits.

There are cries of indignation and a rejection of inequality to the big economic groups, the transnationals, that are filling their pockets with the high prices that the extractive industry is generating today in the country without redistributing wealth because there is a highly beneficial tax system for them. They don't pay the royalties that are established by law and in general, they manage things to their advantage with the government's support.

There is an enormous unrest because of the continued state corruption, where authority doesn't answer to anyone, where there are no mechanisms of effective participatory democracy. The population has grown tired and has understood that it has no other channel than raising its voice to obligate the state to make some changes.

All of these are social groups that are demanding regional development, progress, services and economic conditions adequate for their regions. These movements swept away the national-wide parties in the November 2006 regional and municipal elections, when the [ruling] Aprista Party went from 12 regional presidencies to two and when its present allies [right-wing] National Unity party and [ex-President Alberto] Fujimori party didn't win one regional presidency.

Is the influx of social struggles an indication that the popular movement is recovering? Are they unified or does each sector have its own agenda?

Both. There is a reuniting of the unionist and labor movement, due to the expansion of production and services that accompany the economic growth. But there is also a phenomenon of the social movement's recomposition in regional movements, a reactivation of regional defense fronts, of civil fronts, of pro-development committees. This is also happening in the *campesino* movement where there are new factors in action: particularly by the conflict between farming and mining, which has reignited many *campesino* movements, in the fight for water, against contamination ... so that [*campesino* communities] don't lose their inalienable right to their land and resources.

There is an important reawakening of popular women's movements, of survival organizations, soup kitchens, facing the government's attempt to cut social programs and manipulate their structure. Finally, there is a participation of youths along with their growing political interest.

The teachers' strike that began July 5 was key. What was at the bottom of it?

It's a deep crisis throughout Peru's education system that has been present for years. Peru is one of the countries in Latin America that invests the least per student. It invests only 3 percent of its gross domestic product on education, whereas political parties in Congress have signed a national agreement that states Peru will invest no less than 6 percent of the GDP on education.

A teacher today in Peru earns roughly 22 percent of what he or she earned in 1965. His or her ability to stay informed, buy books, have a computer, while earning some

US\$350 per month, is evidently nil.

There are 60,000 schools in Peru and 25,000 have one single teacher. Ninety percent of the latter are in rural areas, and 35 percent of the school-aged population is undernourished, a figure that increases to 45 percent in rural areas.

The Education Ministry has a lower budget for 2007 than in 2006, even though in 2007 the state has had a higher income.

Farmers and *campesinos* have also taken to the streets to protest the government's disinterest to give them new markets...

The agriculture sector is facing serious problems. It's facing the difficulty of the free trade agreement with the United States, which would mean a severe threat due to unfair competition from subsidized products from the United States.

It is also facing a conflict with extractive industries, particularly mining, and in the case of native communities [in the Amazon], oil and gas, connected to the issue of water, environmental contamination and their corresponding rights. It's a sector that is facing abandonment by the state.

The country is experiencing enormous growth but the rural areas don't see it. Only the sectors linked to agro-exportation see it. The internal market is not supported, it's not strengthened, the rights of the *campesina* communities are run over, and the management of their lands is taken over by mining concessions. □

ARGENTINA

Pablo Waisberg in Buenos Aires

Demanding a forestland law

Lawmakers under pressure to curb illegal logging.

A bill seeking to limit illegal logging in Argentina's virgin forests has been stuck in the country's Senate for more than four months.

Following a strong campaign that included street demonstrations, the bill's supporters cheered the lower house's decision to approve the initiative in mid-March, sending it to senators for a debate and vote.

According to Greenpeace, deforestation in Argentina totals more than 250,000 hectares (620,000 acres) a year, equal to 1 hectare (2.4 acres) every two minutes.

On June 5, World Environment Day, Greenpeace activists protested in front of the congressional building in Buenos Aires shouting, "Senators, Wake Up! Forest law, now!" Similar protests took place around the country, but their demands were not heeded.

"While this bill has been shelved, there has been an uncontrolled number of [logging] permits that would mean the destruction of virgin forests in provinces like Salta, which in the last four months have called assemblies to authorize the felling of 155,855 hectares (385,000 acres) of forest, double of what was permitted last year, and more than half of what is cut down per year in the whole country," warned Hernán Giardini, coordinator of a forest campaign for Greenpeace Argentina.

In June, the provincial government of Salta granted permission for the clearing of 1,670 hectares (4,120 acres) in the Yungas forest, which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared a world biosphere reserve in 2000.

"The senators look the other way, the loggers don't stop and keep destroying our last virgin forests, displacing *campesino* and indigenous communities," said Giardini. "The forests play a fundamental role in the regulation of the climate, the maintenance of water sources and soil conservation. When we lose the forests we become very vulnerable to rains and we run the risk of floods."

Senators representing the northern parts of the country are the most reluctant to approve the bill, despite enormous social and environmental claims in the area. There was a similar sentiment in the Deputies' Chamber, where lawmakers from Misiones, Salta, Formosa and Santiago del Estero opposed exercising federal control over logging activities in native forests.

Lawmakers from northern provinces, before approval the bill, obtained that a clause stating that Argentina is experiencing a "forest emergency" be removed.

"Natural resources have been devastated to the point where 30 percent of the forestlands remain. This means a dark future, with the desertification of vast areas," said Dep. Miguel Bonasso, head of the congressional Environment Commission and one of the bill's authors after its approval in March.

He said lawmakers must take the situation facing *campesino* and indigenous communities into account, adding that they are "expelled by a new oligarchy of sectors concentrating on the production of wood and soy."

Before the bill was approved in the lower chamber, representatives of these rural communities camped out in front of the door of President Néstor Kirchner's summer

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

Little progress on MDG. With just eight years to go before the 2015 deadline for the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, Latin America has obtained five, but is far from the principal goal: halving poverty, according to a report released July 2 by the United Nations Development Program.

Despite advances in education, gender equality, infant mortality rates, maternity health care and the fight against HIV/AIDS and other diseases, the report says the region is lagging in eradicating extreme poverty — those living on less than US\$1 a day — and bridging income gaps.

Extreme poverty rates in Latin America and the Caribbean dropped only from 10 percent in 1990 to 9 percent in 2004, the report states, adding that income gaps in the region are the highest in the world's developing countries, and that the fifth poorest sector of the population is credited with only 3 percent of national consumption. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN National poverty rate* 1990-2003 (average)

| Country | % of population |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Haiti | 65.0 |
| Colombia | 64.0 |
| Bolivia | 62.7 |
| Guatemala | 56.2 |
| Peru | 49.0 |
| El Salvador | 48.3 |
| Honduras | 48.0 |
| Nicaragua | 47.9 |
| Ecuador | 46.0 |
| Panama | 37.3 |
| Dominican Rep. | 28.6 |
| Venezuela | 31.3 |
| Brazil | 22.0 |
| Costa Rica | 22.0 |
| Paraguay | 21.8 |
| Mexico | 20.3 |
| Argentina | 17.0 |

Source: UNDP

*Poverty line considered appropriate by each country's government authorities.

retreat in El Calafate, in the southern Santa Cruz province. Their protest was effective as they later went to the Casa Rosada presidential palace to discuss the issue with government representatives.

"The situation in Algarrobal Viejo, in Santiago del Estero province, is very similar to what is happening to many other communities in our country, where the *campesinos* and indigenous peoples, the traditional inhabitants of the forests, are displaced by the bull-dozers," said Juana Rosario Arias, a member of the Madres del Monte *campesino* organization that represents communities in Santiago del Estero and Salta. "Many times this happens with the permission of the provincial governments. That's why we need [this law] approved urgently."

Arias and other participants left the meeting with a long list of promises from government officials, among them the law's approval, but this bill remains stalled in the Senate, where the ruling party has a majority.

The senators opposed one of the bill's articles that proposed maintaining a set area of virgin forest, but that would impede the cultivation of grains — northern lawmakers complain — and would paralyze the logging industry.

Although the initiative will not impede timber companies from opening new plantations, loggers' objective is to expand the area of pine and eucalyptus plantations for the production of paper and furniture. □

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

AIDS patients lack basics

A critical moment for the fight against the disease with widespread medicine shortages.

Juan Carlos Romero, a doctor at the Roosevelt Hospital Infectology Department in Guatemala City, fears he might have to turn his patients away as the public health service could soon be facing a shortage of antiretroviral drugs.

"I feel so helpless! What am I going to tell my patients? Come back for treatment in three months time! They'll probably be dead by then!" Romero said.

In June of this year, Erick Rousellin, head of the government-run National Aids Program said he was confident that all HIV patients would have access to treatment and denied the possibility of a drug shortage.

However, Romero warns that many patients have become immune to the drugs currently used and has urged the government to purchase a new set of second-line antiretroviral drugs needed to treat thousands of HIV sufferers across the country.

According to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria some 78,000 people are HIV-positive in Guatemala, and 13,000 are dependent on antiretroviral drugs. But only half of those patients have access to treatment due to a shortage of antiretroviral drugs and a lack of adequate health centers in many rural areas.

Romero explains that when local pharmacies receive a new purchase order, they need to contact their headquarters, a process that can take up to two months, as new anti-retroviral drugs are not readily available on the local market.

But the National Alliance of HIV/AIDS Patients and other social organizations such as the Network for Sexual Diversity have warned that time is running out for HIV-positive Guatemalans and have stressed that a delay in purchasing the drugs could prove fatal.

Health experts and HIV/AIDS sufferers blame the Health Ministry for the current crisis and have pointed out that a lack of foresight and planning, excessive bureaucracy as well as an increase in the demand for antiretroviral drugs on the world market have caused to the shortage.

Terminal AIDS sufferers also face a dire predicament as the drugs required for their treatment are more expensive and more difficult to obtain. "Drugs for terminal patients are becoming scarce and we could run out in a matter of weeks," warns Virginia Gularte, a doctor who also works at the Roosevelt Hospital.

According to Gularte, around 70 percent of patients treated by the infectology wing have already developed full-blown AIDS, which often means they have experienced considerable weight loss and are prone to opportunistic infections. A 24-hour delay in their treatment could cost them their lives.

The high price paid by the Guatemalan government for second-line antiretroviral drugs, as used by patients who have become immune to first-line treatments, also represents a significant obstacle to maintaining and extending treatment to these patients.

A case in point is the drug Lopinavir/Ritonavir, recommended by the World Health Organization and marketed as Kaletra by US-based Abbott Laboratories. In June 2006 Abbott bowed to international pressure and agreed to sell Kaletra for US\$500 per patient per year in Low Income Countries like Malawi and Cameroon. But for health authorities in middle income countries like Guatemala and Honduras, the drug costs \$2,200 per

PERU

Racism proves costly. The exclusive restaurant and disco Café del Mar, in an upscale Lima neighborhood, Miraflores, was fined for the second time in early July for discriminatory practices and closed for two months.

Peru's government-run consumer defense office INDECOPI fined the club US\$76,000 and requested that the Miraflores municipal government close it for 60 days. Officials quickly complied.

A television exposé showed that Café del Mar's security guard allowed a light-skinned person to enter the club, but refused entry to a *mestizo* couple.

The same result happened in December 2005, when INDECOPI agents conducted their own undercover investigation. The club was then fined some \$40,000 (*LP*, April 5, 2006).

Wilfredo Ardito, from the Peruvian human rights organization APRODEH, said that the measure is an important step because "racial discrimination continues to be broadly practiced in Peru against people of Andean or black features." —*LP*.

patient per year, making it prohibitively expensive. The problem is an international one and does not just affect AIDS drugs. According to a recent OXFAM report, "poor people are needlessly dying because drug companies and the governments of rich countries are blocking the developing world from obtaining affordable medicines."

The charity accuses the US government and its giant pharmaceutical companies of bullying developing countries into not using measures in the Doha declaration – a groundbreaking deal to give poor countries access to cheap drugs.

Doha allows poor countries to buy cheap copies of desperately needed drugs but the US is accused of trying to prevent countries such as Thailand and India, which have manufacturing capacity, of making and selling cheap generic versions so as to preserve the monopolies of the drugs giants.

According to Regina Escudero, Doctors Without Borders coordinator in Guatemala, although there have been widespread advances in tackling HIV/AIDS in Guatemala, further action needs to be taken on a number of key issues.

"Before, doctors in rural areas were reluctant to treat HIV sufferers. Attitudes have definitely changed but much work remains to be done, especially in terms of prevention and sex education", she said.

Escudero believes that the government needs to rethink its priorities and invest more resources in healthcare. Guatemala currently has the lowest healthcare budget in Central America, which amounts to a paltry 1.3 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

What's worse, the social security system covers less than a 25 percent of the working population as almost three-quarters of Guatemalans are currently employed in the informal economy and are therefore excluded from the public health care system. □

COLOMBIA

Anastasia Moloney in Bogota

Legal abortions elusive

Despite landmark legislation, conservative ideology prevents many women from receiving legal and safe abortions.

More than a year after Colombia's Constitutional Court partially legalized abortion, research shows that few women have had legal terminations.

In May 2006, the court ruled 5-3 that abortion was legal under special circumstances: when the life or health of a pregnant woman is in danger, when pregnancy is the result of rape or incest or when the fetus has serious genetic malformations that would prevent life outside of the womb.

But despite the landmark ruling, legal abortions are rarely practiced in Colombia. The Colombian Association of Integral Medicine Companies, known as ACEMI, says that just 40 legal abortions were performed across the country in public hospitals in 2006, and around half of those involved girls aged 11 to 13. Bogota's Health Secretariat reports that only 10 legal abortions were performed in public hospitals in the capital during the same period.

Meanwhile, roughly 350,000 to 400,000 illegal abortions are performed in Colombia each year (*LP, March 8, 2006*). According to Héctor Zambrano, district health secretary of Bogota, more than 1,000 women die each year in Colombia as a result of badly performed abortions and clandestine terminations, the fifth-largest cause of death in the capital.

Ensuring that public health service providers adhere to the new legislation is proving an uphill battle across Colombia. In some cases, the court's ruling is difficult to implement as government health authorities debate how to confirm that a woman seeking an abortion was raped or what exactly constitutes a fetal malformation.

Nongovernmental organizations and pro-choice campaigners complain that some public hospitals are failing to provide an abortion service to women who are legally entitled to it, and in some cases, are placing obstacles in accessing it.

Sandra Mazo, Colombia co-coordinator of the Latin American pro-choice organization, Catholics for the Right to Decide, says one of the main reasons why so few women have benefited from the new abortion laws is because some doctors and public hospitals are refusing to perform the legal abortions.

"Any doctor can refuse to perform an abortion based on their right to conscientious objection, said Mazo." However, if this is the case, the doctor is obliged to recommend a nearby clinic and or doctor where legal abortions are performed, but we've heard of many cases when this doesn't happen."

A recent survey carried out by Laura Gil, gynecologist at the Santa Fe de Bogota Foundation Hospital, found that while 85 percent of gynecologists favored the new abortion laws, only a third interviewed were prepared to perform a legal abortion under any circumstances and only 38 percent of those said they would be willing to recommend a colleague who does practice abortion.

inbrief

- The Surui people of northern **Brazil** has teamed up with Google to protect their environment. The indigenous group plans to use the satellite images from the company's Google Earth program to detect illegal gold miners and loggers.

- Osvaldo Romo, one of the most infamous figures from the 1973-90 dictatorship in **Chile**, died July 4 from a heart attack at the age of 69. "Potbellied" Romo, as he was known, was serving 37 years in prison at the time of his death for various charges of murder, torture and disappearances of dissidents.

- The Supreme Elections Tribunal of **Costa Rica** has scheduled a referendum for Oct. 7 on whether the country should adopt the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America and the Dominican Republic.

- The government of **Ecuador** announced July 16 that it plans on presenting a case against Colombia before the International Court of Justice in The Hague for its aerial sprayings of coca crops along the countries' shared border, which Ecuadorian officials say has caused health and environmental damage.

- Mexican telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim Helú has displaced the US software tycoon Bill Gates as the world's richest person. According to the US magazine *Forbes*, by the end of June Slim Helú's fortune totaled US\$67.8 billion, equal to 8 percent of the gross domestic product of his native **Mexico**, where a third of the population lives in poverty.

“Many women simply don’t know their rights and how to go about gaining access to the law.”

— Sandra Mazo

Organizations and pro-choice campaigners also highlight the lack of awareness among women as another main reason why so few legal abortions are performed in Colombia.

Mónica Roa, a Colombian pro-choice champion and the lawyer who led the national campaign to decriminalize abortion in the country, says while the legal framework is now in place, there still remains a lack of awareness among women and health care providers about the new legislation.

“I think that there’s still a lack of knowledge about rights, obligations and procedures among women and health care providers,” she said.

Mazo agrees. “Many women simply don’t know their rights and how to go about gaining access to the law,” she said.

Catholics for the Right to Decide is urging the government to spend more money on publicity campaigns, including those in schools, to raise awareness about abortion rights.

“There are virtually no commercials or adverts that let women know about the new abortion laws,” said Mazo.

In a conservative Catholic country like Colombia, the Church remains a vocal and powerful opponent of abortion and has publicly threatened to excommunicate those doctors who practice legal abortions.

Last August, the Catholic Church in Colombia publicly branded those responsible for performing a legal abortion on an 11-year old girl in a public hospital in Bogotá as “criminals.” The girl had become pregnant after being raped by her stepfather.

However, it is difficult to measure the real impact of the new abortion laws as no national government figures on the numbers of legal abortions performed in Colombia are available. It is expected that the Ministry of Social Protection, the government ministry responsible for public health, will publish official figures next year.

Meanwhile, most pro-choice campaigners say that reducing the number of clandestine abortions in Colombia also involves tackling the high number of teenage pregnancies in the country. According to government figures, in Colombia, 90 out of every 1,000 teenagers are pregnant, while in neighboring Venezuela the figure is 51.

Despite more government publicity campaigns highlighting the importance of condom use, it is believed that less than half of Colombian teenagers always use one. A recent survey funded by the Latin American Center for Health and Women shows that just 44 percent of Colombians aged from 14 to 21 use a condom every time they have sex.

Meanwhile, Catholics for the Right to Decide continue to denounce public health providers who refuse to practice legal abortions.

“No public health service provider can deny any woman an abortion service if they are legally entitled to it and we’ll continue to campaign that these places are publicly denounced and disciplinary measures taken against them,” Mazo said. □

MEXICO

John Ross in Mexico City

Free Frida

As Kahlo centennial hits full hype, Mexico’s right wing tries to claim painter’s leftist soul.

The battle for the possession of Frida Kahlo’s soul erupted this June 13 on the alabaster esplanade of Mexico’s maximum house of culture, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, a rococo wedding cake of a palace that is slowly sinking into this mega-city’s subsoil.

The occasion for the artful free-for-all was a visit by freshman President Felipe Calderón to cut the ribbon at the Mexican government’s official homage marking the centennial of the painter and her feverish oeuvre. Kahlo’s work is considered one of Mexico’s most lucrative national treasures.

But many here in Mexico City are convinced that Calderón stole the presidency last July 2 from the wildly popular former mayor, leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador (*LP, July 12, 2006*) and availed themselves of the opportunity of the opening of the magna Frida show to display their convictions.

In anticipation of Calderón’s arrival, several thousand López Obrador supporters crowded onto the steps of Bellas Artes to reclaim Frida from Mexico’s rightist president, some indeed dressed as replica Fridas. “Frida belongs to the left,” they shouted, “Calderón! Don’t prostitute our Frida!”

The arty, angry mob of Kahlo’s defenders was met by metal barricades, phalanxes of vizored cops, tear gas, and truncheons. There were sharpshooters up on the roofs surrounding Bellas Artes’ glass dome, now stained nicotine-brown by the capitol’s unquenchable traffic flow.

The press was barred from what Calderón’s press office insisted was “a private act.” In fact, the inauguration of the Kahlo centennial was as much of a “private act” as

Calderón's own inauguration as Mexican president last Dec. 1 in a private ceremony attended only by high-ranking officials.

June 13, the 100th anniversary of her birth, was not the first melee that Frida Kahlo has unleashed at Bellas Artes. When Frida died at the age of 47 53 years ago, painter Diego Rivera, an outspoken member of the Mexican Communist Party, and his comrades rolled her casket into the fine arts palace where she lay in state proudly draped by a red flag with a prominent hammer and sickle emblazoned upon it, a scandalous breach of political decorum back in the Red Scare 1950s. The next day, then-President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-58), a Cold War ally of Washington, summarily fired the director of Bellas Artes.

Kahlo's leftist credentials are still in working order. She followed her larger-than-life husband, Rivera, 20 centimeters taller than the diminutive Kahlo, 20 kilos heavier, and 20 years older, into and out of and back into the Mexican Communist Party.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Joseph Stalin, often fondling a dove of peace, was a frequent motif in Frida's paintings and drawings. She wore a corset decorated with a hammer and sickle and by 1954, the year her pain-wracked, morphine-saturated body gave up the ghost, she had begun to incorporate Mao Ze Dong in her work.

Her last public appearance was in a wheelchair (her leg had been amputated) at a march outside the US embassy to protest the CIA's overthrow of the leftist Jacobo Arbenz (1951-54) government in Guatemala at which she purportedly carried a "Yanqui Go Home!" sign.

Given her militancy on the anti-Yanqui Left, Frida must be spinning in her sarcophagus these days. The tab for the magna exposition of her life work at Bellas Artes is being picked up by Wall Street — the show's patrons, Alfredo Harp Helú and Roberto Hernández, are president and CEO of Banamex, now owned by Citigroup.

In fact, Harp Helú's foundation which specializes in the preservation of archives, has been given exclusive control over a treasure trove of 26,000 "intimate" Kahlo-Rivera items — drawings, correspondence, and priceless memorabilia — that will be exhibited incrementally at the Casa Azul, now a museum and the touchstone for international Fridamania.

The much-ballyhooed Kahlo centennial show is more hype than homage — Bellas Artes expects 300,000 visitors during the summer tourist season. About 120 of Kahlo's paintings are on display, many of them still-lives that seem to have been knocked off for street sales in her Coyoacan neighborhood and portraits of wealthy patrons that she hustled for ready cash. But to be sure, Frida is everywhere in the main gallery — with her heart in her hand, with her other Frida, with monkeys, with parrots, with flowers, cradling baby Diego in her arms.

Although the iconic Frida dominates this mammoth exhibit, the political Frida is hardly in evidence, consigned to a fourth floor cubbyhole and marginalized by Calderón's curators in an apparent ploy to white out Mexico's — and Kahlo's — red past.

Kahlo's intense suffering — polio at six, a horrendous streetcar accident that drove a metal rod through her spine at 18 — and her courage as an artist, made her an overnight icon for the burgeoning Chicana movement.

Kahlo's tortured paintings became a hot investment item. She opens at US\$7,000,000 on the international art market.

The commodification of Kahlo has been brutal. She has become a doll, a perfume, a brand of tequila, a line of clothing, designer sneakers, even a pizza parlor in San Francisco's Mission District.

Calderón prefers to view Kahlo not as a political activist but as a heroic cripple who "overcame adversity", sort of a charity Telethon idol. In his remarks at the centennial exhibit's "private" inauguration, the President championed Frida as "an example of how we can overcome adversity so that Mexico can move forward" and warned the leftists marching outside "all that impedes the nation's progress should be left behind."

"Free Frida! Free Frida!" the Fridas out on the Bellas Artes esplanade responded, "If Frida was alive today, she would be out here in the street with us." □

NOTE TO OUR SUSCRIBERS

The next edition of
Latinamerica Press,
Vol. 39, Nº 15,
will be published
Aug. 22.

 latinamerica press

APARTADO 18-0964, LIMA 18, PERU

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Printed Matter
IMPRESOS

VÍA AÉREA - AIR MAIL

VOL. 39, Nº 14 — JULY 25, 2007