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The Return of the Repressed?
South America in the Age of US Supremacy

JORGE ROGACHEVSKY

At this time, South America finds itself steeped in the quagmire of its own historical failures, a situation fraught with both promise and danger. Economic chaos could give way to social chaos and ultra-right political shifts. On the other hand, new alternatives for progressive social change could emerge, at a time when few such options appear to be taking root anywhere else in the world. The United States will certainly play a key role in any future developments, just as it holds significant responsibility for the failures of the past.

Three South American societies—Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela—show the overall limitations of US policy towards Latin America. Each in its own way threatens to dismantle the post-Cold War policy framework developed by the United States.

US Historical Role as Co-Conspirator

To understand the present and what the future might bring, it’s important to recapitulate the role of the United States as a co-conspirator in the history of atrocities that precedes the current moment.

In the 1970s, an unprecedented challenge to US hegemony in Latin America appeared. In South America, 1970 saw the election of Salvador Allende, a Socialist heading a left-wing coalition. Three years later, Argentina’s military rulers had to give way and allow the installation as president of strong-man Juan Domingo Perón, after almost 20 years in exile. Little links Perón and Allende directly, except that historically both represent, from opposite poles, a populist and nationalist resistance to US control of Latin America’s economic and social resources.

The United States could have taken numerous paths to confront these challenges. In Chile, for example, the United States could have accepted the democratic will expressed by its people, and looked for ways to engage constructively the government of Salvador Allende, a highly cultured, principled, and democratically-minded political leader.

This was not the path chosen. Starting with the overthrow of Allende and his replacement with the brutal Pinochet dictatorship in 1973, the United States decided to fight the revolutionary fire spreading through Latin America by throwing dynamite on the flames. The result was an unprecedented wave of repression in a continent with a long and sad experience of dictatorial rule. More than 3,000 people were disappeared and killed in Chile according to official accounts.

As military rule spread from Guatemala to Tierra del Fuego, progressive social movements were dismantled, and revolutionary movements were stymied.

In the 1980s, though, new dangers manifested themselves, as the remedy used to fight the “disease” of social transformation began to have unintended side-effects. Military corporatism was unstable. It could tilt towards left-leaning populism, as was the case with Omar Torrijos in Panama. It could also embrace right-wing nationalism,

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as the pampered Argentine military demonstrated. To stem a wave of increasing domestic unrest, the Argentine military decided to cash in its chips after having perfected the dirty war in the Southern Cone and then moving on to train and advise the Guatemalan army and the Nicaraguan contras, by invading the Malvinas in 1982. It took a full-scale war mobilization on the part of the British—and major US intelligence support—to put the Argentine military in its place.

That place, however, could no longer be as guarantors of the Pax Americana. Moreover, as the Cold War reached its whimpering climax, it would hardly do for the United States to promote “democratization” in Eastern Europe while tying itself to some of the most murderous governments on earth; neither was it sound policy to continue investing US resources in militarizing Latin America and stifling not only dangerous social change but also profitable economic activity. The US slowly distanced itself from its former military allies and promoted a process of pacification and democratization.

For the US government, the 1990s became the era of self-congratulatory posturing. The sudden and profound collapse of the former Soviet Union left the United States as the sole military and economic superpower. With progressive social change effectively suppressed in Latin America, the United States supported democratic rule, which favored the return to power of the traditional managerial political and into the beginning of this new century, that Latin America was now safely enshrined within the democratic camp (with the salient exception of Cuba, of course).

The elements of the neo-liberal formula were tightly interrelated:
1) Fight inflation by reducing government spending and maintaining tight monetary controls;
2) Reduce spending by decreasing public services and reducing government employment;
3) Increase competition by divesting the state of the public sector and reducing or eliminating tariffs and duties;
4) Reduce the leverage of the labor movement by reducing the size of the public workforce and creating greater competition for jobs;
5) Promote investment confidence by reducing the cost of labor, maintaining tight monetary controls, and granting major tax concessions;
6) Fill in any threatening cracks in the neoliberal economic dike through a major program of state borrowing facilitated by the implementation of measures 1-5.

That formula had led to the so-called “economic miracle” in Chile, and the US promoted it as the cure for a century of economic woes in Latin America. And, for a generation of technocrats uplifted by Mary Poppins’ intonation that “a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down,” the neo-liberal medicine was coated with a veneer of democracy. It became a self-affirming mantra of US officialdom in the 1990s, and into the beginning of this new century, that Latin America was now safely ensconced within the democratic camp (with the salient exception of Cuba, of course).

This highly self-serving and optimistic assessment has been severely tested in the first months of the new century.

Colombia

Colombia is in the throes of the longest-lasting military conflict in the Americas, a civil war that began almost 40 years ago. Of the four major armed sectors in Colombia today, the largest is the security apparatus, consisting of about a quarter million troops distributed among the military branches and the National Police. Confronting this apparatus are two major guerrilla organizations: the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) numbers 15-20,000 armed combatants, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) has approximately 5,000 troops.

In addition to these more “traditional” combatants, paramilitary organizations began to crop up in the 1980s under the pay-roll of drug traffickers. Despite being declared illegal in 1989 due to their extreme brutality, these forces have continued to grow, and in 1997 merged into a unified command known as the AUC (Auto- defensas Unidas de Colombia), with approximately 8,000 combatants. The AUC is the fastest growing armed group in Colombia, and by far the most bloodthirsty. Even though all combatants in the Colombian conflict are accused of carrying out atrocities, the Colombian Commission of Jurists found that the paramilitaries were responsible for 79 percent of the deaths and disappearances of non-combatants in 2000, compared with 16 percent for the guerrillas and almost 5 percent for the military. (The relatively low level of atrocities directly ascribed to the Colombian military is not a signal of its adherence to human rights norms).
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principles; even the US State Department has acknowledged that there is often significant cooperation between military officers and the AUC.) In 2000 alone, over 26,000 people died as a result of the violence, or 1 out of every 1,500 inhabitants; a comparable death rate from terrorist activities for the United States would have produced 187,000 victims in this country.

Given the staggering level of violence that the protracted armed conflict in Colombia has generated, and the very real danger that the spiral could generate even greater levels of atrocities, one might hope that the US government would search for a peaceful resolution to the decades-long war. And in fact this is what the State Department itself proposed in a May 17, 2001 report:

Support for the Colombian peace process remains a vital element of US policy. Despite the slow progress made to date, the peace process represents Colombia’s best chance to escape the forty-year cycle of violence. A military solution is not a viable option, as Colombia’s armed forces are not strong enough to defeat these groups of irregular forces with increasing income from drug trafficking.

However, the last thing on the agenda, in Washington and in Bogotá, is negotiating with the rebels. The lame-duck government of President Andrés Pastrana broke off negotiations with the FARC last February and with the ELN in May. Each side assigned the other with responsibility for the breakdown of the peace process. In May, Alvaro Uribe Vélez won the election after campaigning on a hard-line policy of escalating the war against the guerrillas. Uribe, who is to become president on August 7, 2002, is reputed to have received support from the AUC during his campaign.

At the same time, the Bush Administration is set to fuel the Colombian fires even further. On July 2, Otto Reich, Undersecretary of State for Latin American Affairs, asserted that Uribe will need “to take the war to the guerrillas,” according to the Los Angeles Times. The United States has already contributed almost $2 billion to Colombia’s military in the past five years, and Bush has asked Congress for upwards of $500 million more for 2003. Colombia is the third largest recipient of US military aid. In addition, the Bush administration has asked Congress to expand the anti-narcotics focuses of funding to include anti-terrorism.

These elements are familiar. In Colombia, the United States is following its Central American policies from the 1980s, fighting fire with dynamite. Given the regional context surrounding Colombia, it becomes clear why the United States has set its sights so closely on that nation.

Just to the north lies Panama, still a major trade and strategic resource for the US. Wounds of the senior Bush Administration’s invasion of Panama in 1989 are still very much open inside that nation. To the south lies Ecuador and the promise of major oil reserves. Ecuador has experienced severe economic and social disruptions that have brought about an ongoing political crisis. No president has served out a normal four-year term since 1996. The current president, Gustavo Noboa, came to power after a highly organized indigenous sector helped force the resignation of the elected head-of-state, Jamil Mahuad. And to Colombia’s east lies Venezuela, the third largest supplier of oil to the United States, and a country facing significant social upheaval.

Venezuela

Venezuela presents a different challenge to the United States. If Colombia replays the scenario made familiar in Central America, Venezuela, in the figure of the current president, Hugo Chávez, harks back to the tradition of nationalist, charismatic, ex-military leadership. Chávez is treading the path of the aforementioned Trujillo and Perón, looking to forge a policy independent of Washington’s dictates and working on a foundation of grassroots support as leverage to internal elite opposition.

Hugo Chávez came to prominence in 1992 when, as an officer in a paratroop regiment, he led an attempted coup against the highly unpopular government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. Pérez’s second presidential term had begun inauspiciously in February 1989, when he attempted to implement austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ensuing riots left 277 civilians dead. Subsequently, the Pérez administration was accused of corruption. In 1993, the Attorney General indicted the president for misappropriation of funds. The Supreme Court removed Pérez from office so that he could be tried, and he was eventually found guilty.

Hugo Chávez spent two years in jail for his participation in the failed coup attempt.

In Colombia, the United States is following its Central American policies from the 1980s, fighting fire with dynamite.

However, the popularity of the attack against a broadly reviled old-camp politician was demonstrated in 1998. Chávez won the presidency of Venezuela with 56 percent of the vote. He then moved quickly to capitalize on his momentum and charisma to push forward his “Bolivarian Revolution.” Chávez called for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, and his supporters gained 121 out of 128 seats in the assembly. In 2000 Chávez was reelected under the new constitution, this time receiving almost 60 percent of the vote to begin a six-year term.

Like Perón, Chávez seems to be attempting to implement a policy of independence from Washington, looking for allies where he can find them. When released from prison in 1994 he visited and was warmly received by Fidel Castro in Cuba; the two maintain a warm relationship. After winning his second bid for the presidency, Chávez was the first head-of-state since the Gulf War to visit with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Domestically, Chávez has consolidated his government by implementing the constitutional revisions, maintaining grassroots Bolivarian committees, reshuffling key executive appointments, as well as promoting tepid economic reforms in contrast to a more combative rhetoric. James Petras, well-known Latin American scholar, has summed up Chávez’s reforms as follows:

The key point to remember is Chávez’s record on domestic policy. He’s increased spending for housing, schools, and health. He’s increased income by a small margin—3 or 4 percent. He’s increased taxes to some limited degree.

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Plan Pueblo Panama Threatens Region

InterAmerican Development Bank Paves Latin America

BRENDAN O’NEILL

The InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) is literally paving the way for corporate globalization in Latin America with the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). The PPP, and its southern twin, the Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA), are a new package of corporate-led development projects threatening the social and ecological integrity of Latin America. The IDB has recently crowned both the PPP and IIRSA as their two priority “regional integration” projects for Latin America.

The PPP and IIRSA, massive infrastructure projects, lay the foundation upon which “free trade” can be built and expanded to encompass what is nearly the entire geographical area of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The FTAA proposes to extend the misery of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to 34 countries in Central and South America. The PPP and IIRSA are a package of megaprojects that include: the construction of hydroelectric dams in indigenous territories, the dredging of deep water ports in fragile ocean ecosystems, the paving of high-impact roadways through indigenous communities and currently intact rainforest ecosystems, and the creation of sweatshops throughout the region. These projects, coordinated by the IDB, will be funded by a combination of sources, including development bank loans, private corporations and public institutions.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is a complement plan to the PPP, also being pushed by the InterAmerican Development Bank. As Enrique Iglesias, President of the IDB remarked at a June meeting at its headquarters in Washington, DC, “A free trade agreement would strengthen Central America’s position as a destination for foreign investors interested in accessing the US market.” Also present at the meeting were representatives from the more infamous corporate globalization institutions, including the WTO and the World Bank, to discuss and collaborate on plans for corporate globalization in Central America.

Any advancement in the PPP, IIRSA, as well as CAFTA, is a step towards passing the FTAA. Conversely, opposition and alternatives to any one of these free trade plans offers the possibility of creating locally based, socially and ecologically just alternatives. While the anti-globalization movement has targeted, with reason, the WTO, World Bank and IMF for their roles as champions of globalization, there also exist regional globalizers, including the IDB, that need to be included as pressure points in the social and ecological justice movements. Furthermore, while opposition to the FTAA has been strong, there is a need to expand analysis and awareness of the relationships and interconnections between the PPP, IIRSA, CAFTA and the FTAA.

Development for and by Whom?

Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) is a “regional integration and development” project originally proposed by Mexico’s President, Vicente Fox, to create a link from Puebla, Mexico, all the way to Panama with north-south industrial and transportation corridors running along the Pacific Coast. The PPP also proposes a series of “dry canals” running east-west across Southern Mexico and Central America as well as the creation of key industrial development zones throughout the region. Dry canals are high-

Reading the Alphabet Soup

Below is a partial listing of the abbreviated names relevant to Colombia and US/transnational policy in the region.

CAFTA—The US/Central America Free Trade Agreement is currently being negotiated. President Bush has referred to CAFTA as a top priority for his administration, as it will help move forward FTAA.

FTAA—Free Trade Area of the Americas is a proposed trade agreement scheduled to be implemented no later than 2005 that will encompass the all of the Americas from Alaska down to the tip of South America’s Tierra del Fuego. Some opponents have called it “NAFTA on Steroids.”

IDB—The InterAmerican Bank, the oldest and largest regional multilateral development institution, was established in 1959 to “help accelerate economic and social development in Latin America and the Caribbean” and is the main entity promoting the PPP as well as providing funding for the IIRSA.

IMF—International Monetary Fund, established in 1945, supplies member states with loans to help them overcome short-term balance-of-payments difficulties. Such money is only made available after the recipients have agreed to policy reforms in their economies through a structural adjustment program.

IIRSA—Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative, the PPP’s southern cousin, is a regional infrastructure development scheme for a large part of South America.

NAFTA—North American Free Trade Agreement is the major trade agreement that went into effect in 1994 between the US, Canada and Mexico which has cost tens of thousands of workers in the US their jobs, lowered environmental standards and devastated communities throughout North America.

PPP—Plan Puebla Panama is a massive regional infrastructure development scheme that is planned to go from Puebla, Mexico all the way through Panama.

WTO—World Trade Organization, established in 1995, is a powerful international body that develops and enforces rules for trade and investment. It promotes the “free trade” agenda of multinational corporations above the interests of local communities, working families, and the environment.
ways and railways that connect ports on both coasts of the Isthmus, and threaten to displace rural indigenous peoples and destroy ecosystems of the region.

Officially, there are 8 initiatives of the PPP: 1) Sustainable Development, 2) Human Development, 3) Natural Disaster Prevention, 4) Tourism Promotion, 5) Trade Facilitation, 6) Road Integration, 7) Energy Interconnection, 8) Telecommunications Development. However, only two initiatives seem to be drawing time or resources from the Interamerican Development Bank: energy interconnection and road integration. These two initiatives have received over 80% of total PPP investment thus far, demonstrating that they are the two most valuable plans for investment capital. The regional energy grid is being pushed and primarily funded by the IDB and the Spanish multinational corporation ENDESA. However, Applied Energy Services, Duke Energy and Harken Energy are also jockeying for position to invest in the newly privatized energy market.

The highway and infrastructure initiative is being funded by the IDB and World Bank, among others. One of the most controversial highway projects includes a "dry canal"(highway and high speed railway to ship goods) that will run through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Southern Mexico, connecting the Pacific port of Salinas Cruz with the Atlantic port of Coatzacoalcos. Indigenous organizations such as the Organization of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI) have adamantly rejected the Isthmus of Tehuantepec dry canal declaring: "The Isthmus is not for sale!" Resistance to mega-projects by UCIZONI and other indigenous groups had organized long before the PPP was officially announced.

From March 4-18, 2002, Action for Community and Ecology in the Regions of Central America (ACERCA) led a fact-finding delegation to Nicaragua's North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). The indigenous communities living in the region are currently threatened by specific projects of the PPP. The expansion of the Bilwi-Puerto-Cabezas port could potentially transform the port into the largest in the Caribbean. A private US corporation calling itself DELASA is a major player behind this $150 million, three-part business plan that threatens to irrevocably alter the entire region. DELASA revealed its plans to

the ACERCA delegation: enlarge and pave the new Managua to Bilwi road, expand and dredge the port, and displace nearby communities to create an export-processing-zone in Bilwi-Puerto-Cabezas. Strong indigenous resistance in the region to these projects includes ACERCA's partners, the Sumu/Mayagna indigenous community organization SUKAWALA, and the Nation of Mosquitia Consejo de Ancianos.

Resistance to the PPP

Critics of the PPP argue that, like the FTAA and NAFTA, the PPP has been created by a handful of regional political and corporate elites. They argue that the IDB has intentionally excluded those who will be impacted the most by the creation of the project and point out that the IDB has held only token "consultations" offered only to hand-chosen organizations in the region. With every proposal of the PPP, whether in the form of a hydroelectric dam that displaces indigenous peoples, the privatization of natural resources, the creation of sweatshops, or the construction of "dry canals," there is solidarity, resistance and alternatives being built from the bottom up.

For example, at the November 2001 forum against globalization and the PPP held in Managua, Nicaragua last month. At the meeting ACERCA coordinated an exchange in Managua between the Atlantic Coast Indigenous peoples and another of ACERCA's partner organizations, UCIZONI, from Oaxaca, Mexico. The indigenous-to-indigenous exchanges are an important part of ACERCA's work. This exchange in Managua will create a space for important dialogue between indigenous communities of the region to share common experiences and coordinate action for mutual goals of autonomy, self-determination and ecological justice in their communities.

Brendan O'Neill works at Action for Community and Ecology in the Regions of Central America (ACERCA), which received a grant from RESIST this year. For more information contact ACERCA at acerca@sover.net, www.acerca.org. Information from this article comes from interviews with ACERCA partners and DELASA representatives, "Supplement E-bulletin..." (March-April 2002) available on line at www.interaction.org.
Peace through Solidarity
CUSLR Works to Change US Policy in Colombia

MARCIE LEY

Javier Sánchez, a representative of the Peace Community of San José de Apartado, Colombia, spoke these words during a recent visit to Ithaca, New York: "We made a decision: first, to defend our lands and also to resist becoming involved in the war. It wasn't an easy decision to make or follow through with but despite all of our hardship, we know why we are doing this and why we continue with our struggle.

Part of a national tour organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Javier's stop in Ithaca was sponsored by a local group, the Committee on US-Latin American Relations (CUSLR). As the oldest continuously active solidarity organization in the country, CUSLR's mission is to raise awareness about the effects of US policy toward Latin America. We believe that one of the most powerful means to educate people about US foreign policy is to hear the stories of those that are directly affected by such policies. Javier's visit gave us a first-hand perspective on the violence that ravages his people.

Ask most people living in the United States what Colombia is like and the inevitable reply is that it is a land of drugs, violence and guerrillas. For someone who pays moderately close attention to the mainstream press this picture is fairly accurate, for it is more or less all that is presented to American audiences. But ask one of the more than one million Colombians living in the US to tell you something about their homeland and you will be greeted by images of a country tremendously rich in terms of cultural traditions, biological diversity, and natural resources. This fierce national pride may contrast starkly with the popular image of a country plagued by violence. Yet this richness lies at the heart of the 38-year civil war that has driven so many from their homes. Whether it be drugs, oil, human labor, access to markets, etc., Colombia has something the rest of the world wants.

Plan Colombia is a Plan to Kill

For decades the US has maintained a strong presence in Colombia and in other Andean countries under the pretext of fighting the War on Drugs. In the last several years this involvement has largely taken the form of direct military aid to the Colombian government. Of the $1.3 billion proposed by the Clinton administration and allocated by Congress in 2000 for Plan Colombia, the overwhelming majority is designated for military equipment and training. The rationale is that the guerrilla armies, most notably the FARC (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia), rely on narco-trafficking to fund their revolutionary activities. Under this logic, destroying the FARC would devastate the Colombian drug trade and significantly reduce the amount of cocaine and heroin entering the US market.

For years critics have attacked the supply-side emphasis of the current drug policy as expensive and ineffective. A RAND study recently found that it is 26 times more cost effective to use education and treatment to address the drug problem in the US (www.rand.org). Furthermore, Colombia's cocaine production and export has increased rather than diminished in recent years. Meanwhile in the US the street price for cocaine has gone down while purity has increased. Clearly, if Plan Colombia's main objective is to reduce the supply of drugs in this country, billions of our tax dollars have been squandered.

If we stop to consider where this money goes we get a clearer picture. Of the $1.3 billion aid package, $600 million is designated for the purchase of helicopters such as the Blackhawk which is manufactured by Sikorsky, a US-based defense contractor. Another $350 million is allocated for maritime and aerial interception which often takes the form of fumigation. The chemical used in aerial spraying is glyphosate, known as Ultra-RoundUp, and is manufactured by the US-based Monsanto Corporation. And, $96 million is budgeted to strengthen the Colombian police forces which often receive training from their US counterparts.

What this breakdown means is that more than half of the money allocated for Colombia does not actually leave the US. Rather, the majority of this aid to Colombia goes to pay salaries, purchase equipment and supplies, and contract services to mostly US citizens and corporations. A quick look at which interest groups (defense contractors, chemical manufacturers) and elected officials (such as Sen. Joe Leiberman of Connecticut, home of Sikorsky) support such an aid package reveals what factors really determine our foreign policy. Given that the Bush administration has requested an additional $567 million in mostly military aid, the focus on militarization will undoubtedly continue to dominate the strategy in Colombia.

For the people of Colombia, however, the costs of militarization are extremely high. In four decades of civil war, over 40,000 people have been killed, the majority of whom were civilians. In addition to the one million people that have fled the country, another 2 million have been internally displaced due to intolerable levels of violence and oppression. As Javier pointed out in his presentation to CUSLR, to be forced to leave one's land and move to urban slums with no means of self-sufficiency and no community structure is so tragic that many choose to remain and suffer the consequences.

While Colombia is indeed embroiled in a civil war, and atrocities are committed by all armed actors, it is impossible to place blame primarily on the guerrillas. In fact, 70% of the violence is attributed to the paramilitary groups who carry out most of the massacres of civilians. The main paramilitary group, the AUC (Self-Defense Units of Colombia) have been placed on the State Department's list of known terrorist groups (see "Picking our Enemies: US Doesn't Mind Terrorists in Colombia," RESIST Newsletter, May 2002). They share this distinction with the FARC, yet unlike the guerrillas the AUC maintains a close relationship with the Colombian Army. It is widely acknowledged by paramilitary leaders and Colombian government officials that without this collaboration, the FARC would control far more of the Colombian countryside.

"We stated our opposition to Plan Colombia in every possible way because we knew that it is a plan to kill." Javier affirms what human rights reports—including those prepared by the US State Department—have documented: militarization leads to violence and the majority of the victims are civilians. By supplying the Colombian Army with weapons and training, while acknowledging their strong ties to the paramilitaries, the US is essentially
They Want Us to Leave Our Land

During the 1980s and '90s, the FARC maintained a strong presence in the northern Uruba area of what is now the Peace Community of San José de Apartado. Javier remembers being offered guns by the guerrillas as an invitation to join their struggle. Nearly everyone in the community refused to take up arms. Shortly thereafter, the army stepped up its repression of the FARC by helping to create and support paramilitary groups which also terrorized the community. Many of the residents fled, and it wasn't until the community took the courageous step of declaring itself a Peace Community that people started to return. Those families who came back did so at tremendous risk to their lives, a sacrifice that many were willing to make, having experienced the poverty and isolation of living in urban slums. As Javier points out, “Coming back means returning to their homes and lands and being able to work again.”

Despite having declared neutrality, San José de Apartado continues to suffer persecution. The community has seen 107 of its members killed, 90% of them by the paramilitaries. Recently, a paramilitary group blocked the main road into the community, virtually paralyzing it economically. As Javier points out, “The idea is that we go hungry so that we abandon our lands. Above all, there is economic interest in the land.” He explains that foreign interests pressure the government of Colombia to allow the establishment of mines and large cattle ranches. “We also know well that there are large projects being planned like a dry canal that will link the two oceans.”

While the location of San José de Apartado is of strategic interest to many, the same can be said about much of the country. Control of Colombia’s vast natural resources lie at the heart of the conflict. The Bush administration’s proposal to allocate $98 million to train a Colombian army battalion to defend an oil pipeline owned by Occidental Petroleum, based in Los Angeles, is evidence of the link between corporate interests and foreign aid.

As the FARC pointed out during the recently suspended peace negotiations, the civil unrest in Colombia will continue until the underlying structural inequalities are addressed. It is impossible to pursue peace without alleviating poverty and inequality. However, groups that express opposition to governmental policy and are politically more in line with the guerrillas have been violently repressed. Assassinations of community and labor leaders, journalists, and activists are common and contribute to a general stifling of political dissent. Without the participation of civil society, democratic reform will remain elusive and Colombia will continue to be racked with violence. US lawmakers need to keep this in mind when creating foreign policy.

CUSLAR operates under the assumption that a clearer understanding of what is really happening in Colombia is necessary to affect positive change. By sharing his experiences with residents of our community, Javier inspires us to change what he and the people of Colombia cannot—a US foreign policy that is responsible for the suffering and inequality of so many. He offers us an opportunity to support struggles for peace, justice, and sustainability and reminds us that it is possible to create policies that will alleviate poverty and injustice, promote peace and respect for human rights in Colombia. CUSLAR’s job is to make his voice heard as loudly as possible.

Marcie Ley is Coordinator of the Committee on US-Latin American Relations (CUSLAR), which received a multi-year grant from RESIST. For more information, contact CUSLAR, 316 Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14850; www.rso.cornell.edu/cuslar.

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student movements, and landless workers' organizations. It also presided over the so-called Brazilian economic miracle—a dozen or so years of rapid growth financed by loans from foreign banks. This left the general population a legacy of huge interest payments and punitive economic policies.

After a sustained economic crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s the military dictatorship signed an austerity agreement with the IMF in 1983. Being the world's largest debtor nation affected Brazil's poor in predictable ways. In order to generate cash to make interest payments on the debt, more and more land was put towards cash crops like coffee and soy, displacing hundreds of thousands of subsistence farmers. Many fled to the cities, where they settled in burgeoning shantytowns. Others were relocated to places such as the Amazonian Rondonia, where they cleared forests in an effort to farm the land. Brazil suffers not just from its immense foreign debt, but also from the hidden costs of environmental destruction, many internally displaced people, and an impoverished rural population—what many Brazilians call the "social debt."

Progressive Resistance

Unions and the fragments of the Brazilian left that had survived 15 years of dictatorship founded the left-wing Workers' Party (PT) in 1979. [In subsequent years] grassroots social change movements grew, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST), and of opposition political parties such as the PT. Since the return to elections in 1988, the PT has won key state and local elections, and instituted important reforms.

The MST, with support from the Catholic Church, began its struggle in 1985, taking over an unused plantation in the south of the country. The occupiers gained title to the land two years later. Since then, the MST has helped 300,000 families settle on previously idle land, while close to 100,000 other families are living on land they have occupied, waiting for government recognition. In May 2000, 30,000 MST members took over federal buildings across the country in a successful bid to persuade President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to address the country's extreme economic inequality. In response to pressure from the MST, Cardoso promised $1 billion in relief forms. In addition to its successful resettlement program and considerable grassroots power, the MST boasts a sophisticated literacy program for adults and adolescents, as well as 1,000 primary schools.

The MST is not popular among certain segments of Brazilian society. The police and military, as well as landlords' private gunmen, still target activists. According to the Roman Catholic-run Pastoral Land Commission, over 1,100 people were killed in land disputes between 1985 and 1999. And only 47 cases have gone to trial, leading to just 18 convictions.

In addition to violent repression, the MST faces other challenges. According to Global Exchange, "landowners and some elected officials are trying to repeal the clause of the Brazilian constitution that says land should be used for social purposes—and can be redistributed if it is not. That provision has formed the legal foundation of the MST's occupations of unused lands."

Furthermore, the World Bank's $2 billion "land bank" program, which offers loans to small farmers to purchase land, is transparently designed to undermine the grassroots-based MST. Today, 3% of Brazil's population still owns two-thirds of the country's arable land, much of which lies idle. Meanwhile, millions of peasants struggle to survive by working in temporary agricultural jobs.

While in Herval, in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Canadian activist and writer Justin Podur and I had the opportunity to talk with Joao Pedro Stedile, a member of the MST's national board.

—Cynthia Peters

What are the MST's main achievements?

JPS: Our most important success of all has been to build an organization and a social movement. We've won back the worth and dignity of the peasant. That has immeasurable value. It doesn't show up in statistics. But when a person stops being humiliated, stops being a slave, and they can walk with their head up, master of their own future, that's the most important thing we're building.

Beyond that, over the last 18 years, we've gotten land for 300,000 families, and though many of them remain poor, nobody in our settlements goes hungry. Everybody has work all year around. There are schools in all the settlements. All the children go to school. Everyone can build their own home. The houses may be humble, but nobody has to pay rent to anyone. At the very least, the people enjoy the basic rights of all people. That's what retaking the land means.

We're not satisfied with these modest achievements. Because in Brazil there are four million landless families. Our struggle continues.
[W]hat gratifies us the most is hearing about the people in the United States, even if they’re not a majority yet, who are mobilizing as well, and fighting against their government.

You spoke of changing society. What are the next steps for the MST?

JPS: The challenges are huge. It’s not going to be an easy struggle, nor a quick one. The road ahead will be rocky, not smooth. But there are both long-range struggles and more immediate ones.

In the long term, we’re doing battle over what may decide the future of our country. I’m talking about the US offensive to impose the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) on the Americas as a whole. The FTAA is more than a trade agreement. It is the US government’s plan to control our land, our wealth, our development, our technology, our currency, and our language. It would mean our submission to the interests of US capital—to the less than 500 corporations at the top. And if that happens, we’re back to being a colony, this time under the rule of the United States. We have to stop the FTAA from being imposed on Brazil. And not just on Brazil, but on the whole of Latin America.

What are the criticisms?

JPS: That, in the end, the people really only have a say over 5%—or, at the most, 10%—of the budget. Because the rest—including salaries, foreign debt payments, etc.—is fixed by law. All public budgets in Brazil have 13% of the total tied up by the IMF. They’re required to deposit this in the bank to pay the debt. So, for example, in this state, which is governed by a people’s government, by the left, education gets 11% of the budget, while the IMF gets 13%. That means the power of the people to change things through the participatory budget process is very limited.

What do you think of the Workers’ Party’s participatory budget process?

JPS: Well, there are some positive things about it, but also some criticisms to make.

What are the positive side?

JPS: It’s that the participatory budget creates an opportunity for the people to voice their opinions. For the people to have a say about the overall problems of their society. It’s like an exercise that points toward creating a general assembly of the society as a whole. Here in Rio Grande do Sul, we have a population of 12 million. You can’t fit 12 million people into a single room. But the idea of the participatory budget process is that everyone can take part and have a say. So the main value of the process is not how much of the budget people have a say over, but as a democratic exercise that teaches people that they have a right to a say.

What would you say to activists and social movements in North America?

JPS: We’re very interested in US social movements. The landless movement enjoys the support of solidarity committees in many US cities, which help us and help publicize our efforts. But what gratifies us the most is hearing about the people in the United States, even if they’re not a majority yet, who are mobilizing as well, and fighting against their government. We understand that the people of the United States don’t know the real impact of the actions of their government. We hope that, slowly, they will begin to realize that, as peoples, we’re the same. It’s like an old US journalist put it. He was a “cousin” or an “ancestor” of you who have come here from the United States. And he really said it in your honor. Because he was a social activist, and he went to cover the Spanish Civil War, like you have come here to Porto Alegre. When he came back, he wrote a book, which was called No Man is a Foreigner—meaning “man” in the general sense. What does that mean? That all peoples are alike. It’s governments and capital, which enriches itself from the labor of others, that are bad. So we have to build a great, international alliance, which is what this forum is for. And we hope and expect that US activists, fighting in the dragon’s own gut, will help us kill this monster.

This article was translated from Spanish by Alejandro Reuss and excerpted from Dollars and Sense (May/June 2002). For more information, contact Dollars and Sense, 740 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02141; www.dollarsandsense.org
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so that the upper classes pay something, rather than nothing.

But for all this, he has also deregulated the financial system. Spanish banks have become very involved in the deregulated system. He privatized Caracas's [sic] electrical system. US oil companies haven't been hindered—they pay slightly more on the petroleum tax. In other words, there's been no radical or even moderate redistribution of income. There has been no expropriation of any property—except unutilized farmland that's paid for in cash. That's about the most conservative land reform you'll see anywhere in Latin America—market prices for the land, paid in cash.

Despite this moderate program of economic reform, Chávez has generated unwilling opposition from Venezuela's economic elite. Quoting Petras again:

Chávez is a nationalist in foreign policy and a social liberal in domestic policy. From year one, he has been in favor of class collaboration. The opposition isn't interested in any kind of class collaboration—they want it all.

The Venezuelan opposition is in a position to reject any kind of collaboration with the Chávez government precisely because the latter's nationalist foreign policy has put him on a collision course with Washington. Despite the lip-service given to the support of democratic leadership in Latin America, and Chávez's unquestioned credentials as a democratically elected leader, the US government has put out very clear signals that his ouster by undemocratic means would find favor.

Such a scenario played itself out on April 11. After months of conspiring, much of it done through meetings at the US embassy in Caracas, an anti-Chávez rally turned violent and culminated with the death of 14 protesters. The Chávez opposition saw an opportunity to act and, with expectations of support from the Venezuelan military and the US government, quickly moved to arrest Chávez and declare an end to his government and the Bolivarian Revolution. Washington, in fact, did play its assigned role, with statements blaming Chávez and indicating support for his ouster.

The coup quickly unraveled, though. Externally, Latin American leaders, then meeting in Costa Rica, sharply rebuked the

The Return of the Repressed?

Women bang pots during a protest in Argentina. Photo courtesy of AP

Underdemocratic ouster of Chávez. In a rare sign of independence, Latin American politicians, including Bush's strong ally, Vicente Fox of Mexico, broke with Washington in a very public manner. This swift, strong action ensured that Washington's statements of support of the new government in Caracas never turned into direct recognition.

Internally, the new government, headed by Pedro Carmona, head of the business federation Fedecámaras, overplayed its hand, dismissing the National Assembly and the Supreme Court and declaring void the 1999 constitution. Carmona's heavy-handedness apparently alienated his military backers. They began to move away, allowing Chávez supporters within the armed forces to regroup and mobilize. At the same time, Chávez's grassroots supporters within the lower classes came out in mass to counter the middle-class opponents who had staged the April 11 march. All of these fast-moving developments led to Chávez's reinstatement on April 13.

Since then, the situation has continued to be highly charged. After Chávez reassumed office, Bush Administration officials sent out public warnings that it was best for him to mend his ways. Former US president Jimmy Carter traveled to Caracas in early July, 2002, to mediate between the factions. But despite Chávez's offer to allow the Organization of American States and the United Nations to participate in further mediating efforts, the opposition failed to turn out to discussions sponsored by Carter. As part of the failed Carter-led discussions, Chávez had offered to the opposition that he would allow his presidency, which is not set to expire until 2006, to be placed before a referendum in 2003.

Opposition to Chavez continues to press on. A July 11 rally to commemorate the April 11 events brought out as many as 200,000 people; this time no violence erupted. The Venezuelan Supreme Court has also used a loophole in the law to open the way for Chavez's possible indictment for alleged campaign financing irregularities. And, the main labor confederation, the CTV (Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos) is reaching out to the Church, the political opposition, and business and academic groups to promote a call for a national strike to press for Chavez's resignation. Meanwhile, Chavez is calling on his supporters to come to his defense.

It is unclear how much longer Chávez will be able to traverse the political minefield placed at his feet. If he can weather the current crisis, fend off the internal opposition, consolidate his support within the armed forces, keep Washington at bay, and reinvigorate his popular backing, he will have emerged stronger for having been tested in this fashion. It will then be seen whether he can take the next step and move beyond his nationalist and populist rhetoric to promote a program of radical social reform.

Argentina

Meanwhile, at the far end of the continent, in Argentina, unprecedented crisis and potential have emerged, as the second-largest country in South America—and in the 1990s the darling of the neo-liberal prophets—has run aground economically.

In the 1990s, Argentina moved to stem one of the worst cases of hyperinflation in history by pegging the peso to the dollar. At the same time, it followed the IMF prescription of privatizing its state sector and significantly reducing public spending. But, after an initial influx of capital from privatization, the Argentine economy began to stall as it experienced the reverberations of economic shocks in Mexico, Asia, Russia, and Brazil.

As investment capital began to dry up, and Argentine exports suffered due to an overpriced peso, the Argentine government of the Peronist Carlos Menem parlayed its good relationship with Washington and the IMF into government loans intended to prop up its sagging economy—generating a foreign debt of $132 billion, the largest in the world.

Borrowing from Peter in order to pay Pablo was a sure formula for Argentina to secure short-term solvency by delaying an inevitable financial collapse. The collapse hit in December 2001. Even though IMF-imposed austerity measures had generated
an official unemployment rate of around 20 percent, IMF pressures continued. Despite Argentine government pleas to ease up and provide short-term relief in the form of capital it could use to service an impending debt payment, the IMF continued to apply a political and economic tourniquet. Neo-liberal pundits in the United States went on the attack, declaring that the Argentine crisis was due to a profligate population that was unwilling to tighten its belt and meet its debt obligations.

Backed into a corner, and facing severe capital shortage and a run on the banks that had generated over $1 billion in withdrawals at the end of November, in December the Radical Party government of Fernando de la Rúa imposed a limit on bank withdrawals of 250 pesos a week. The government also announced that privatized pension funds would be replaced by government bonds in order to free up capital to continue servicing the debt. These measures provoked the middle class to join the working class, whose leadership had called for a general strike in mid-December.

Massive unrest broke out in Argentina’s major cities on December 19, leading to de la Rúa’s resignation on December 20 when the army refused to come out in support of his government. After ten tempestuous days that saw the exit of three provisional presidents, Congress selected Peronist Senator Eduardo Duhalde, de la Rúa’s main opponent in the 1999 elections, to complete de la Rúa’s term. Duhalde, however, has been equally unable to stem the economic collapse and the popular unrest. He did win concessions from provincial governors to reduce transfers from the national budget, but the IMF has continued to maintain pressure, announcing in early July that a team of advisors would travel to Argentina at the end of the month to suggest ways of reforming the banking sector, but refusing to extend hope that a new influx of capital would be forthcoming.

The Bush administration appears intent on maintaining a hard-line policy, intoning to the IMF, but rather from listening... Given the exchange rate, given the economic depression which the IMF policies had already brought about, given the huge debt, given that the IMF did not provide any convincing economic strategy to get out of the mess, given that there were open capital markets so that anyone who wanted to could move their investments to safer havens elsewhere in the world, it was highly unlikely that anyone—especially when the government signed an agreement to reduce its deficit further, predictably causing more unemployment and lower output—would start investing more. Given the absence of new capital resources, Argentine bank deposits have remained frozen. Many in the middle class have lost most of their life-savings, and the devalued peso has lost more than 70 percent of its value since the beginning of 2002. With greater austerity measures signaled, the working class, and in particular the unemployed, have also been severely hit.

The one bright light in the cavernous pit into which Argentine society has fallen is that the mobilization which brought down the de la Rúa government in December has remained unabated. Currently, the government is experiencing a wave of recurrent actions as a result of the death of two unemployed youth in a confrontation with police during a protest action on June 26. On July 9, Argentina’s Independence Day, 35,000 people marched on the Plaza de Mayo, where the president’s palace is located. This was the second mass demonstration in as many weeks, with a third one called for the third week in July. These demonstrations have brought together sectors of the labor movement, the unemployed, human rights groups, left-wing political parties, students, and neighborhood committees which emerged from the December mobilizations.

There are also ongoing expressions of a developing alliance between “piqueteros y cacerolas” (strikers and potters—the latter referring to the practice of middle-class housewives of banging pots as a sign of protest which originated in Chile against the Pinochet regime), calls for “una segunda independencia” (a second independence movement), and the removal of president Duhalde and the IMF. Given this ongoing pressure, Duhalde, with the clear backing of the Bush Administration, has called for early elections in March 2003 to release some pressure from the cooker.

What Lies Ahead?

It is unclear where Argentina’s deepening political and economic crisis, combined with mounting popular mobilization, will lead. So far, the military has remained at the margin, but, as is clear in Colombia and Venezuela, the Bush Administration’s commitment to peace and democracy in Latin America is an easily discarded rhetorical posture. Will the growing unrest in Argentina lead to the development of a broad-based grassroots political movement that will challenge the political and economic status quo? What response would be generated from the Argentine oligarchy, political class, military, and the US government? And what will be the impact from other regional developments, in particular the October elections in Brazil, where Worker’s Party candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) is the front-runner? The unpredictability of current circumstances suggests that there is much to watch for in Argentine developments.

Colombia, Venezuela, and Argentina—each in itself, and all three together—clearly point to the imminent potential for deepening conflict in South America. They also raise the possibility that a new century may indeed bring about a new beginning for people in Latin America.

Jorge Rogachevsky is a member of RESIST’s Board of Directors and teaches Spanish and Latin American Studies at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

Resist awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in activism for social and economic justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our June 2002 allocation cycle. For information, contact the groups at the addresses below.

Committee in Solidarity with Central American People (CISCAP)
458 Blair Blvd., Eugene, OR 97402
ciscap@efn.org

CISCAP has organized for the past 20 years to counter US economic and military interventions across Latin America. In the last year, CISCAP branched out to facilitate a number of coalitions focusing on immigrant and economic justice issues and started a Colombia Interest Group in response to US Plan Colombia. CISCAP has been very successful at emphasizing the relationships between unjust economic and social policies within the US and in Latin America.

Resist awarded CISCAP $2,000 for general support for their work around Central American solidarity organizing.

Filipino American Coalition for Environmental Solutions
16 West 32nd Street, Suite 10B2
New York, NY 10001
www.facessolutions.org

The Filipino American Coalition for Environmental Solutions (FACES) operates nationally through local chapters to engage Filipino American communities in organizing around the environmental effects of US military bases in the Philippines. Through their military base clean-up campaign, FACES hopes to increase the capacity of Filipino communities to take political action against environmental racism.

Resist awarded FACES a $3,000 grant for general support.

Seattle Young People’s Project
123 21st Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122
www.sypp.org

For the last 10 years, the Seattle Young People’s Project (SYPP) has been empowering youth for social change in their own communities by providing a supportive framework for youth-led organizing. SYPP allows young people the opportunity to initiate and implement their own organizing projects. Through the Youth Undoing Institutional Racism Project, youth organizers are working on a two-pronged campaign: confronting institutional racism within their own schools while countering military recruitment at Seattle’s Public Schools.

Resist awarded the Seattle Young People’s Project $3,000 for their Youth Undoing Institutional Racism Project.

Southeast Regional Welfare Rights Network
5808 Wexford Lane
Knoxville, TN 37921; Jay8@icx.net

The Southeast Regional Welfare Rights Network is a newly emerging organization that seeks to organize a cohesive force to change welfare policy on both the state and federal levels. Coming from a perspective that organizing for justice in the South requires a unique set of strategies, the Regional Network will work throughout the area to challenge TANF and other welfare policies.

Resist awarded the Southeast Regional Welfare Rights Network $2,000 to hold the first welfare rights conferences in the South organized by grassroots organizations.

Young Women United
PO Box 12261
Albuquerque, NM 87195

Young Women United is a new organization founded by and for young women to protect and build the organizing strength of young women of color. Through their Circle of Strength program, Young Women United offers training and leadership development for teenage women to organize around health and violence issues in their lives. The program serves to raise consciousness of the multiple oppressions encountered in young women’s lives, while empowering them to take action within their communities.

Resist awarded Young Women United $3,000 for the Circle of Strength program.