

\$97 Million from U.S. to Bolivian Separatists

By Eva Golinger

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Recently declassified documents obtained by investigators Jeremy Bigwood and this author reveal that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested more than \$97 million in “decentralization” and “regional autonomy” projects and opposition political parties in Bolivia since 2002. The documents, requested under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), show that USAID in Bolivia was the “first donor to support departmental governments” and “decentralization programs” in the country, proving that the US agency has been one of the principal funders and fomenters of the separatist projects promoted by regional governments in Eastern Bolivia.

Decentralization and Separatism

The documents confirm that USAID has been managing approximately \$85 million annually in Bolivia during the past few years, divided amongst programs related to security, democracy, economic growth and human investment. The Democracy Program is focused on a series of priorities, the first outlined as “Decentralized democratic governments: departmental governments and municipalities.”



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One document, classified as “sensitive,” explains that this particular program began when USAID established an Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI) in Bolivia during 2004. The OTIs form a division of USAID and function as rapid response teams to political crises in countries strategically important to US interests. The OTI only address political issues, despite USAID’s principal mission dedicated to humanitarian aid and development assistance, and they generally have access to large amounts of liquid funds in order to quickly and efficiently achieve their objectives.

The OTIs operate as intelligence agencies due to their relative secrecy and filtering mechanism that involves large contracts given to US companies to operate temporary offices in nations where OTIs requires channeling millions of dollars to political parties and NGOs that work in favor of Washington’s agenda. After the failed coup d’état against President Chávez in April 2002, USAID set up an OTI in Venezuela two months later, in June 2002, with a budget of over \$10 million for its first two years. Since then, the OTI has filtered more than \$50 million through five US entities that set up shop in Caracas, reaching more than 450 NGOs, political parties and programs that support the opposition to President Chávez.

In the case of Bolivia, the OTI contracted the US company Casals & Associates to coordinate a program based on decentralization and autonomy in the geographical region called the “media luna” (half-moon), where the hard core opposition to President Evo Morales is based, particularly in the province of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Casals & Associates was also charged with conducting a series of

training seminars and workshops to strengthen opposition political parties that were working against then presidential candidate Evo Morales in 2004 and 2005.

After Morales was elected president at the end of 2005, the OTI directed the majority of its funding and work to the separatist projects that later produced regional referendums on autonomy in Eastern Bolivia. Their principal idea is to divide Bolivia into two separate republics, one governed by an indigenous majority and the other run by European descendants and mestizos that inhabit the areas rich in natural resources, such as gas and water. After 2007, the OTI, which had an additional budget of \$13.3 on top of USAID's general Bolivia program funding, was absorbed into USAID/Bolivia's Democracy Program, which since then has been dedicating resources to consolidating the separatist projects.

USAID's work in Bolivia covers almost all sectors of political and economic life, penetrating Bolivian society and attempting to impose a US political and ideological model. The investment in "decentralization" includes all the support and funding needed to form "autonomous" regions, from departmental planning to regional economic development, financial management, communications strategies, departmental budget structures, and territorial organization designs – all prepared and implemented by USAID representatives and partners in Bolivia. As part of the program titled "Strengthening Democratic Institutions" (SDI), USAID describes its work to "enrich the dialogue on decentralization; improve management of departmental budgetary resources; and promote regional economic development." Through this program, USAID has even created "territorial organization laboratories" to help regional governments implement their autonomy successfully.



When Evo Morales (center) was elected president of Bolivia, the U.S. began directing money toward separatist projects.

In one document dated November 30, 2007, just months before the separatist referendums held in Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija during early 2008, the Democratic Initiatives Program of OTI/USAID worked closely with the Prefects (regional governments) to "develop sub-national, de-concentrated" models of government. In those regions, those promoting such "sub-national, de-concentrated" models, or separatism, have made clear that their objective is to achieve a political, economic and territorial division from the national government of Bolivia, so they can manage and benefit solely from the rich resources in their regions. It is no coincidence that the separatist initiatives are all concentrated in areas rich in gas, water and economic power. The multi-million dollar funding from USAID to the separatist projects in Bolivia has encouraged and supported destabilization activities during the past few years, including extreme violence and racism against Indigenous communities, terrorist acts and even assassination attempts against President Morales.

Strengthening Political Parties in the Opposition

Another principal priority of USAID in Bolivia as outlined in the declassified documents is the extensive funding and training of opposition political parties. Through two US entities, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), both considered international branches of the Republican and Democratic parties in the US that receive their funding from the Department of State and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), USAID has been providing funding and strategic political aide to political groups and leaders from the opposition in Bolivia.

During the year 2007, \$1.25 million was dedicated to “training for members of political parties on current political and electoral processes, including the constituent assembly and the referendum on autonomy.” The principal beneficiaries of this funding have been the opposition political parties Podemos, MNR, MIR and more than 100 politically-oriented NGOs in Bolivia.

Intervention in Electoral Processes

An additional substantial part of USAID’s work in Bolivia has been devoted to intervening in electoral processes during the past few years. This has included forming a network of more than 3,000 “observers,” trained by USAID grantee Partners of the Americas, a US corporation that also receives funding from major companies and entities that form part of the military-industrial complex. The creation of “networks” in “civil society” to monitor electoral processes has been a strategy utilized by Washington in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua, to later use such apparently “independent” observers in an attempt to discredit and delegitimize elections and denounce fraud when results are not favorable to US interests.

In the case of Venezuela, for example, the organization that has implemented this strategy is Súmate, a Venezuelan NGO created with funding and strategic support from USAID and NED, that has presented itself in the public opinion as “apolitical” but in reality was the principal promoter of the recall referendum in 2004 against President Chávez and later the leader in denouncing fraud after every electoral process in Venezuela lost by the opposition, despite that such events have been certified as legitimate and “fraud-free” by international institutions such as the Organization of American States, European Community and the Carter Center. These “networks” function as centers for the opposition during electoral processes to strengthen their position in the arena of public opinion and through the mass media.

Penetration in Indigenous Communities

USAID’s work in Bolivia is not just oriented towards strengthening the opposition to Evo Morales and promoting separatism, but also involves attempts to penetrate and infiltrate indigenous communities, seeking out new actors to promote Washington’s agenda that have an image more representative of the Bolivian indigenous majority. One declassified document clearly outlines the necessity to give “more support to USAID and Embassy indigenous interns to build and consolidate a network of graduates who advocate for the US Government in key areas.” The document further discusses the need to “strengthen democratic citizenship and local economic development for Bolivia’s most vulnerable indigenous groups.” According to USAID, “this program shows that no one country or government has a monopoly on helping the indigenous. The program shows that the US is a friend to Bolivia and the indigenous...”

The declassified documents in original format and with Spanish translation are available at:

www.jeremybigwood.net/BO/2008-USAID