



Same Plan (Puebla-Panama), New Name

By Duke Feldmeier, AFGJ Intern

On June 28, 2008, leaders from Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama and Colombia met in the city of Villahermosa in Tabasco, Mexico. The purpose of this meeting was reinvention, reconstruction, and rebirth of Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP). The PPP has become a distant memory for most people who are fighting against neoliberal hegemony in Latin America, but over the last few years it has continued to evolve in Mexico, Central America, and Colombia. The reinvention of the PPP has come under a new name: the

Mesoamerican project. The Mesoamerican project has become a more focused, stronger version of the PPP with specific goals that have been laid out over a ten-year period. These goals have been formulated as a continuation of the neoliberal developmental model in the region for the stated purpose of, “modernization and transformation.” The transformation of the PPP into the Mesoamerican project has revolved around eight specific areas that the countries involved

have signed onto and have begun implementing. Funding is coming from the Inter-American Developmental Bank (IDB), Andean Development Corporation (CAF) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), along with private interest groups, and individual countries. Each support different aspects of the Mesoamerican project. The eight goals have generated specific areas of focus. These areas include energy, telecommunications, transportation, commercial and competitive facilitation, sustainable development, health, natural disasters and housing.

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Onlookers support a protest against the PPP in Xela, Guatemala. Protesters carry a sign stating “Confronting globalization, the people are first.” (Photo: Courtesy of the Archive of Global Protests)

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Colombia: Occupation of Police Station Ends

By James Jordan, AFGJ National Co-Coordinator (Published in Narco News)

Narco News readers were recently informed of the occupation by over 5,000 indigenous community members of the Piñuña Negro police station of Puerto Leguízamo in Putumayo, Colombia. Their demands included an end to military and paramilitary harassment, negotiations with the government over coca eradication efforts and a commitment to social development. The eradication efforts had not included promised help with crop replacement or improvements to local infrastructure. In many areas, the two pronged attack of eradication and military/paramilitary threats has resulted in the forced removal of inhabitants. But the communities occupying the Piñuña Negro police station refused to be displaced.

We have recently received reports from FENSUAGRO (the National Federation of United Agricultural and Aquacultural Unions) that not only has there been a victory in that struggle, but also in similar struggles in Putumayo and the neighboring state of Nariño. What is required now is that recent agreements be monitored to see if they result in real improvements.

In the municipality of Puerto Leguízamo, the Puerto Piñuña Police Station, as well as four other police stations, was occupied for 63 days by over 6,000 families. These families were from eight indigenous communities situated along the Putumayo river. At first the government turned a deaf ear toward calls for negotiations but was finally compelled by the popular movement to enter into a dialogue. Eventually the government signed a 45 point accord promising more social investment and a gradual and voluntary crop substitution program.

This mobilization had caught the attention of US solidarity activists concerned about US support of the Colombian military and for eradication campaigns that cause displacement in places like Puerto Leguízamo. Military aid and eradication campaigns have been major components of Plan Colombia, which has received some \$7 billion in funding from the US. Plan Colombia has been officially described as both part of the War on Drugs and as a war against Colombian insurgents. However,

in each, the plan has been a failure. Cocaine production in Colombia is actually on the rise. Meanwhile, there has been a reconstitution of guerrilla forces and newly announced unity between the two largest such armies, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Army of Liberation).

In the proposed 2011 federal budget announced by the Obama Administration, there is no funding allocated for Plan Colombia. Colombia will continue receiving military and other forms of aid, but with 20% less than last year. Right now a lobbying campaign is underway by the Colombian government to make sure that any budget passed includes monies for Plan Colombia. Tom Burke of the Colombia Action Network believes, in light

“In many areas, the two pronged attack of eradication and military/paramilitary threats has resulted in the forced removal of inhabitants.”

of the agreement for the US to deploy on seven Colombian Air Force bases, that we are witnessing a change in strategies for the US. According to Burke, “Colombia solidarity activists should recognize that Plan Colombia is a failure and has only brought poverty, displacement and death. We should continue to mobilize against it during the upcoming budget debate. But the expansion into these new bases signifies that US military intervention in and around Colombia is being taken to a new level. The US is trying to take more direct control of an already doomed situation. People should call the White House and Congress and demand that there be no new funding for Plan Colombia and no new bases.”

The mobilizations in Puerto Leguízamo are indicative of a wave of popular resistance in the area. In the municipality of Puerto Asís, along the Ecuadorian border, more than 5,000 family and cooperative farmers carried out a 23 day protest concerning environmental impacts due to oil developments. They were also demanding more social investment in the area.

While officials with the government run oil agency, ECOPETROL, have not yet met with community members, representatives of private oil developers have agreed to improve relations with the local population

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Paramilitary U

By James Jordan, AFGJ National Co-Coordinator
(Published in Fight Back! News)

In early November, I received a copy of a death threat made against student activists at the University of the Atlantic in Barranquilla, Colombia. The threat was sent out in the name of the “United Self-Defense Forces (AUC)-Rearmed”. The AUC is the largest paramilitary organization in Colombia, though it supposedly demobilized due to government efforts. However, a number of organizations, from Arco Iris Corporation to Human Rights Watch, have reported that para-militarism is actually on the increase, often in the form of new or reconstituted organizations.

I am a Co-Coordinator for the Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ). Changing U.S. policy toward Colombia is a major concern of ours, especially since Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. military aid in Latin America. During the last ten years, the rate of military aid has doubled. U.S. support for war and repression also includes non-military aid. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has awarded tens of millions of dollars in grants to paramilitary owners of African Palm plantations. Additionally, U.S. Bureau of Prisons advice for restructuring of Colombia’s maximum-security institutions has actually increased the inhumane conditions, especially those affecting the political prisoners. AFGJ’s work centers on advocacy for Colombian farmers, political prisoners and students.

I often receive notices about threats against our Colombian partners, but this one was especially chilling. In a disturbing excerpt, the letter reads:

Today is a very important day since we are initiating the plan of extermination against those persons who have been inviting and



organizing the presence of communists, within the University.... This is not a game, already you are identified and targeted, this time you may not hide, meet together and make our work harder, we assure you that this year there will be no grades for any of you, no one is secure not even outside of Barranquilla....

This was the latest in a series of such threats against student activists. Among those targeted are Victoria Cañas Gonzales, leader of the University of the Atlantic’s Federation of University Students (or FEU, by its Spanish initials), and Henry Molina Garcia, a student representative in the university’s Superior Council. In fact, Molina was detained and tortured by investigative police and then threatened with death if he spoke out about what happened. Victoria Cañas was taken hostage at one point by unidentified assailants and interrogated for several hours before being released with a warning to cease her political activities.

One might expect that the University’s response would be to call for an investigation and take steps to assure the safety of these young activists. Instead, the school’s Rector, Ana Sofía Mesa De Cuervo, has accused seven students and one university vendor of a host of crimes, including “terrorism” and “inciting panic”. She went so far as to publish personal details, including home addresses, in a widely distributed campus publication. Three of these students, including Molina, Cañas and Fernando Miguel Martes Ortega, were among the students listed in the death threat quoted earlier. Listing such personal details under these circumstances is tantamount to aiding and abetting paramilitary violence and murder.

In fact, this publication follows several actions by the university and the state that have added to the student’s fears of reprisals. These include investigations for charges of “rebellion,” a catch-all, political charge used to jail members of the political opposition;

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The old cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua. (Photo: Courtesy of Virtual Tourist)

The Center of Nicaragua

By George Pauk, AFGJ Board Member

Managua is a wonderful town. Huge and busy with millions of people, it sprawls next to the polluted Lake Managua. After massive earthquake destruction, it has been reconstructed and it seems new but old. It is like a person in trouble who has aged too rapidly.

It is a city without addresses for the majority of its homes. To find a location for a home, one must give the taxi driver a two or three sentence description specific for each site. A mail address is the same. Sometimes the description refers to a landmark that is no longer in existence. The streets are busy with many old vehicles and heavy with diesel fumes. It is not a place for an unskilled driver.

A major industry of the city is guarding. Every individual home that contains items of value has a man employed to watch and defend through every night. They emerge quietly with bleary eyes in the early morning light and then disappear to their homes or, if very lucky, to another job. I know that some of them sleep during their nights' work.

The daytime "help" arrives and the inner sanctums of the homes are where the good life is. The definition of a family grows with "help". The sense that everyone knows everyone in Managua gives a pleasant intimacy and comfort to relationships. The enormity and complexity of Managua seems evident only to people who live elsewhere.

Due to the increased poverty caused by seventeen years of neoliberal governments, security remains important. A beautiful home interior in the central city is covered by high walls, bars, razor wire and locked metal gates to be maintained constantly by the guards. The very rich cloister far out on the edge of the Lake. Their enclave is the symbol of the economic problem of Nicaragua. They are also at home in Miami.

Managua is a wonderful town. For me it is the open friendliness of the Nicaraguan people distilled into an urban scene. One has to be sharp and resourceful in the city. Make connections with an enterprise and become a part of it. Develop yourself and you develop Managua. Help others to develop and you are part of the city. The characters of Managua are complex and diverse. Managua is rich in relationships. Like the constant humidity, one can feel it and gradually become comfortable with it.

Venezuelan Ambassador Responds to US Intelligence Report

(The following is a letter from Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera to Senator Feinstein)

Dear Senator Dianne Feinstein,

I was disappointed to read the testimony of Mr. Dennis Blair, Director of National Intelligence, before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. As in years past, the report is full of politically motivated and cynical accusations against my country.

Let me start by stating that Venezuela is a sovereign country that demands respect for its right to chart its own destiny. Unsubstantiated reports like the one presented by Mr. Blair to the committee you chair were used by the Bush administration to set the stage in the public opinion for the 2002 overthrow of President Hugo Chavez's democratically elected government and to impose politically motivated sanctions against my country that are still in place. That same coup led Congress to investigate the role that U.S. agencies may have played in President Chavez's overthrow.

I would like to use this opportunity to warn you and members of the committee that we are once again seeing attempts to criminalize our government and encourage sectors of the Venezuelan opposition that are looking for undemocratic ways to reach power.

The report states that "President Chavez continues to impose an authoritarian populist political model in Venezuela that undermines democratic institutions."

On the contrary, Venezuela is in the process of extending democracy to all of its people. This includes finding a balance between the state and the market that allows us to guarantee the welfare of our people and overcome the historical wrongs of poverty and inequality.

Over the last decade, Venezuela's ranking on the UN's Human Development Index has risen by 10 spots, as levels of poverty have dropped and access to social

services increased. In fact, political participation and consciousness in Venezuela have expanded dramatically over the last decade. These advances have occurred within what we call "Socialism of the 21st Century", a democratic political process centered around fostering the well-being of our people as an alternative to the capitalist model currently in crisis.

The report also states that Venezuela has "curtailed free expression and opposition activities by shutting down independent news outlets, harassing and detaining protestors, and threatening opposition leaders with criminal charges for corruption." Venezuela has not shut down any independent media outlets, but rather has applied relevant laws and regulations to outlets operating in the country, just like any other democracy. In Venezuela, more than 76 percent of the media on public airwaves is privately owned and operated, and most is controlled by the government's political opposition. Additionally, more than 184 channels broadcast freely through cable networks.

Anti-government protestors continue enjoying their constitutional rights to peaceful assembly. Moreover, many members of the Venezuelan opposition travel freely around the world promoting their political agenda, including to the U.S., and return to Venezuela to exercise the political rights that the 1999 Constitution grants them.

Contrary to the assessments of the report, criminal charges have been filed against a variety of individuals for charges of corruption, regardless of their political affiliations. Venezuela only recently averted a financial crisis when it took steps to stop a number of banks from threatening the integrity of the country's financial system. Two people charged in this case were very close to government officials. Both were detained and will stand trial for their crimes.

“...we are once again seeing attempts to criminalize our government and encourage sectors of the Venezuelan opposition that are looking for undemocratic ways to reach power.”

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These areas of focus each have individual projects that are funded differently, contain specific proposals for individual countries and have pilot projects that have been going on for sometime. As we explore each area of focus, I would like to stress that some goals can be for the good of the region if done correctly and with proper regulation. The region can benefit from some of the developmental projects, which appear positive at first glance, but as further research has shown they

“This dam project along with other dam projects like La Parota in Guerro, Mexico and Usumacinta in Chiapas, Mexico would also forcibly relocate indigenous people off of their land for the purpose of energy production.”

are largely a continuation of the neoliberal development model that has dominated Latin America over the last two decades.

With a change in the Mexican administration (Fox to Calderon) and the addition of Colombia the Mesoamerican project was born. Below there is a brief description of each area of emphasis.

1. Energy: The Electrical Interconnection System of Central America (SIEPAC) is a series of energy grids and transmission lines that aim to interconnect the region. SIEPAC along with a proposed Regional Energy Market (MER) serve as a mega-infrastructure project that has begun to encompass the whole region. It not only includes the building of energy grids and transmission lines, but also includes projects for producing the energy as well. These production projects focus on a combination of different bio-combustible projects (see sustainable development section) and proposed hydroelectrical projects. For example, the proposed Xalala dam in Guatemala is part of of the project and would be funded by the IDB. The construction and flooding for the dam would relocate over eighteen indigenous villages. This dam project along with other dam projects like La Parota in Guerro, Mexico and Usumacinta in Chiapas, Mexico would also forcibly relocate indigenous people off their land for the purpose of energy production. These projects have come up against major opposition from the indigenous populations that would be relocated. These people have lived and subsisted in these areas for years. Forced relocation would create new challenges for where they could relocate and how they would subsist.

2. Telecommunications: The Mesoamerican Information Highway (AMI) is a telecommunication system that is being installed along with the SIEPAC project linking countries with fiber optic wire. Funding for the AMI is being provided by IDB loans along with private investment. The privatization of an information network throughout Mesoamerica could lead to unchecked costs for the consumers. If transnational corporations gain a monopoly over the telecommunications industry, it will have an unavoidable cost for individuals, who will ultimately pay for the infrastructure. This has occurred before in Mexico with cell phone service. Telcell is able to charge unchecked rates to consumers, thus making cell phone usage a luxury. Private investment without regulation will come at the expense of the individual.

3. Transportation: International Network of Mesoamerican Highways (RICAM) is going to connect Mexico with Panama through a highway system. RICAM's stated purpose is to "...facilitate the flow of goods and people..." RICAM, at first glance, seems to be an infrastructure project that would aid development throughout Southern Mexico and Central America. Examining where some of the proposed roads are intended to go paints a different picture. Parts of RICAM's system of roads would go through particularly sensitive areas environmentally speaking. The proposed Atlantic Corridor would run directly through the Northern Transversal Strip, a region that includes Southern Mexico, Northern Guatemala, and Belize. This includes the largest continuous tropical forest north of the Amazon. Building this road would open up the region for development and exploitation likely lead to increased deforestation. The road would not serve the population that resides in the region. It will be used to ship goods that are extracted from mines and biodiesel farms that are being proposed in the region. Foreign corporations will benefit from this highway project by gaining greater access to the region.

4. Commercial and Competitive Facilitation: Mesoamerican Procedure for International Freight Traffic (TIM) is attempting to facilitate trade by reducing the time it takes to move goods across borders in the region. TIM will be used to decrease wait times for commercial transport between countries. Expediting trade can benefit countries if it is done in a responsible

manner.

5. Sustainable Development: The Mesoamerican bio-fuels program ties into the energy program. Since the addition of Colombia to the Mesoamerican project, bio-fuels have become a major part of the infrastructure and development programs. The use of cultivatable land in Chiapas, Mexico as well as Guatemala has been marked for monocrop plantations that would serve bio-fuel plants. Some plantations take up cultivatable land that was being used for food production so that they can benefit from the cheap labor and exploit the land. Money has been allotted for the construction of three plants by the Colombian government in Honduras and El Salvador. Farms will grow bio-fuel crops and ship them directly to the plants for production. These agricultural areas will take over small family farms. Small communities will be pushed out so their lands can be exploited. Evidence of this is occurring in Chiapas, Mexico in the communities of Laguna El Suspiro and Laguna San Pedro. Farming communities have been subsisting in this region for years. Relocating people to turn their land into monoculture upsets the balance of the area. Communities will no longer be producing for themselves, their land will produce for capitalist profit.

6. Health: The Mesoamerican project aims to connect the region with healthy corporations. The Mesoamerican project promotes a variety of neoliberal programs that have been implemented in these countries. One example of this is a program in Mexico, known as Oportunidades, is a cash transfer program that focuses on health and school attendance funded by the IDB. This program gives a financial stipend to families for school attendance and healthcare. Families are paid when their children attend school, healthcare clinics and when mothers participate in monthly community service. If one of these programs is not attended, the stipend is withdrawn. Parts of Oportunidades are cause for concern. For example, rural communities that do not have convenient access to healthcare facilities are not afforded stipends. The poorest of the poor are excluded from the program before they can even join. Additionally, mothers are made to do community service, taking them away from individual duties at home or in the work place.

7. Natural Disasters: The interconnection of the Mesoamerican states will coordinate amongst themselves to reduce the costs and risks caused by

natural disasters. Helping countries to coordinate services and response after natural disaster may be a positive effect of the Mesoamerican project.

8. Housing: The housing program for the Mesoamerican project's stated aim is "Long-term development in the region, a market for housing finance to be sustainable, to address the housing backlog and future needs." According to the Mesoamerican website, the concentration of housing development will be in urban areas and be funded by microfinancing loans. The Central American Bank will provide these loans for economic integration. Mexico is being used as a template for the housing program being undertaken by the Mesoamerican project. The Mexican model is a project known as Ciudades Rurales (Rural Cities), an IDB funded project used to build rural communities in the state of Chiapas. These rural cities are supposed to bring small isolated communities together for the purpose of services. The idea of rural cities is troubling because it moves people from their land and into concentrated cities, becoming low-income neighborhoods that take people away from their indigenous homes. The rationale for this project was to move people closer to social services like healthcare and education. The real purpose is to move people from productive land into areas where they can be concentrated as a cheap labor pool for transnational corporations. The program would move indigenous people from the land they have been cultivating for years and concentrate them in areas where they can be used for labor in maquiladoras or giant plantations that are used for growing goods like

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flowers, cacao and African Palm.

The neoliberal ideals that went along with the PPP have resurfaced as the Mesoamerican project. The same policies that have influenced Latin American governments for years are being recycled to the detriment of the population in the name of development. The Mesoamerican project has not changed the basic principles of the PPP. Instead, it has become more focused and will lead to greater displacement and exploitation.

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and a declaration in 2008 by DAS (Colombia’s version of the FBI and Homeland Security combined) that Federation of University Students constitutes an arm of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This is a common accusation used to intimidate activists, and it is often leveled against journalists and even peace negotiators who cover or negotiate the release of prisoners held by the guerrillas.

What are the crimes the students are being accused of? The Rector claims that during a protest against financial cuts, they destroyed security cameras, set up a roadblock with burning tires, damaged university equipment, and threw water balloons at a university event. In a report to the Attorney General’s office in Barranquilla, the persons carrying out these actions are described as “hooded.” This could be anybody. It is common for protesters to wear handkerchiefs to cover their faces, in order to protect their identities from police and military death squads. While death squads threaten to murder students on campus, the official focus is on punishing student protests. Outrageous! It seems the students need to protest more, not less.

Several other pieces of evidence are described, including video recordings and photographs, however none of these are conclusive. They include photos, for instance, of Molina and other student organizers talking on cell phones, smiling, meeting together before the protest and so on. These show the student organizers busy preparing for the mass march and protest, not committing any crimes. Nothing links them to the more militant acts that other students or protesters commonly do in Colombia where repression is heavy.

The threats and repression being carried out against the students of the University of the Atlantic are not isolated phenomena. For instance, false information and fake Facebook accounts have recently appeared from the city of Medellin spuriously linking student leaders to the FARC and the Clandestine Communist Party. These fabrications were followed by a new proposal by Colombian President Álvaro Uribe to pay 1,000 students in Medellin \$50 a month to act as informers for the Colombian Armed Forces. According to Defense Minister Gabriel Silva, Colombia already has a network

of 2.2 million civilian informers, including 3,000 informers already paid a monthly fee of \$50. This is the largest such network in the Americas and represents just under 5% of the entire population. In other words, one in every 20 Colombians is an informant. U.S. tax money helps pay for these spy networks.

The gravity of this situation is best illustrated by the increase in arbitrary arrests of student and labor activists and members of the political opposition. Such arrests are based on false evidence fabricated by the Colombian Armed Forces and paid testimony from informants. Between 1992 and 2002, there were 2,000 illegal arrests that were thrown out of court for lack of evidence. Since President Uribe took office, that number has grown considerably. According to Colombia’s Permanent Committee for Human Rights, between 2002 and 2006 alone, there were 7,500 such arrests and the pace has not abated. Persons arrested usually serve one to three years before having their cases dismissed. Based on my own visits with Colombian political prisoners, a high percentage of those arrested are students.

Another development regarding student activists is the January 22 announcement by the Colombian Attorney General’s Office that ESMAD (the Spanish initials for the National Police Anti-Disturbance Mobile Squad) was responsible for the death of Johnny Silva Aranguren on September 22, 2005. Silva, a 21-year-old student at the University of Valle in Cali, was a participant in a demonstration against a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. At 2pm that day, students and professors had started a blockade of one of the university’s streets. After nightfall, around 7pm, and after a suspicious failure of streetlights, ESMAD agents attacked the demonstration with tear gas and live ammunition. Other participants were able to run, but Silva was unable due to a congenital defect. He was shot in the neck. Demonstrators took him to a hospital, where he died soon after.

Cali Police Commander Jesús Antonio Gómez Méndez declared that the police had not entered the campus and that Silva had not been shot by police officers. However, video evidence showed otherwise. There were also testimonies from people who overheard on police radio airwaves that the cutting of the lights had been prearranged. ESMAD had not secured the

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legal requirements to enter the campus nor to use live ammunition against the crowd. When the evidence was produced to show that Gomez had lied, the response of President Uribe was to announce that there is nowhere in Colombia that the police and military are not allowed to go.

So far no penalties have been assessed against any of the officers involved in this assault. There is a more than 95% rate of impunity for military and paramilitary political assassinations. We can only hope that this will be an exception to the rule, and justice will be served.

The issue of immunity is driven home by another development affecting Colombian youth: the failure of the government to punish those already found responsible for the “false positive” scandal. This scandal involves the proven murders of some 1,700 mostly young people, executed by the Colombian military and dressed in the garb of guerrillas so they could be falsely claimed as enemy combatants slain in battle. Most of these were not university students, but youth unable to pursue higher education because of a lack of resources and public funding. This scandal was a result of the U.S. encouraging incentives and rewards for soldiers and officers who kill guerrillas. More so, it comes out of attempts to inflate numbers of those killed in battle in order to feign success for the U.S. government’s Plan Colombia – a strategy of military victory versus the pursuit of a peace process. Those fired for this scandal include three generals and the commander of the Colombian Army.

On January 20, Colombian Senator Gloria Inés Ramírez Ríos made the following statement: In effect, over recent months 31 members of the military charged with ‘false positives’ have been set free due to the fact that the 90 days set down in the law had transpired without the Public Prosecutor having brought them to trial. In an equivalent situation we find another group of 23 soldiers who, with no change to the application of the law, were also set free.

When we, as U.S. citizens, look at the repression daily endured by Colombian students and youth – and the impunity for those who threaten their lives – it angers us to realize that war and repression

in Colombia is made in the USA, funded with our tax dollars and given an official seal of approval. Our response must be to demand the US government stop funding war in Colombia and support negotiations for a just peace. One way to begin is to contact the Alliance for Global Justice to receive alerts about Colombia and other Latin American struggles by writing to info@afgj.org

“Putumayo” Continued from Page 2

and have committed to undertake social investment in the region. Also, commissions from the Ministry of the Environment have been conducting studies to assess the damage of contamination due to oil development.

A mobilization in excess of three thousand families occurred for some 22 days in the municipality of Orito, along the border of the adjacent departments of Putumayo and Nariño. In this area, there was some dispute regarding which department was responsible for the community. This dispute had resulted in a lack of social service and infrastructure development. Because of the demands of the people, agreements were signed between the government of Nariño, seventeen community action councils and three indigenous communities. Terms of the accord include the funding and naming of staff for a health clinic and the allocation of resources for the expansion of a school as well as other development projects.

According to Nidia Quintero, who serves as FENSUAGRO’s treasurer, “It is hoped that all of the signed accords in all these mobilizations will be fulfilled with seriousness and in the established places. If it is to the contrary, the farming communities of Putumayo will no doubt mobilize anew in order to avail themselves of their rights and to defend the dignity of their territory.”

The US-based Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ), which has a close solidarity relationship with FENSUAGRO, has agreed to continue closely following developments in each of these cases and will mobilize international solidarity in the event that agreements are not honored by the government and other entities. Those wishing to do so can send an email to info@afgj.org requesting to receive updates.

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“Venezuela” Continued from Page 5

We cannot and will not allow corrupt criminals to hide behind the notion of “political persecution” to avoid facing justice in Venezuela. In that regard, we have recently solicited the cooperation of U.S. authorities to extradite one banker who has fled Venezuela’s justice system and is currently living in the U.S. with money he stole from Venezuelan taxpayers. By granting some of these fugitives safe haven, the U.S. has politicized the sacred concept of political asylum. It is worth highlighting that over the past few years Venezuela has deported several criminals that were wanted by the U.S.

The report also claims that President Hugo Chavez, along with his counterparts in sister nations in the region, “are likely to oppose nearly every US policy initiative in the region, including the expansion of free trade, counter drug and counterterrorism cooperation, military training, and security initiatives, and even US assistance programs.”

Venezuela engages openly with its regional



neighbors through a number of mechanisms, including the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), the Union

of South American Nations (UNASUR), the South American Common Market (MERCOSUR) and a variety of energy initiatives such as PetroCaribe. These mechanisms allow the countries of the region to better cooperate on issues of mutual concern, particularly in developing strategies to overcome poverty. These alliances do not threaten the U.S. – in fact, a hemisphere more aggressively working together to fight social exclusion is more likely to be stable in the long-run.

On counter-terrorism, Venezuela seeks especially to attack the conditions that allow terrorism to grow, while on counter-drug operations Venezuela believes strongly in shared responsibility approaches that escape the failed military and supply-side based models. It bears mentioning that drug seizures in Venezuela increased by 38 percent after 2005, the year that we ended our cooperation with the DEA.

The U.S. will benefit if it develops a multilateral approach to these important issues and collaborates openly and equally with countries in the region. Of course, this cooperation must flow both ways – since 2005, Venezuela has been waiting for Luis Posada Carriles, a known terrorist living freely in South Florida, to be extradited to Venezuela for his role in the 1976 bombing of a civilian airliner. In the U.S., he has only been accused of lying to immigration officials. This is a travesty of justice.

After reading Mr. Blair’s report, one cannot help but wonder what a country like Venezuela has done to the U.S. to justify the cynicism and unsubstantiated accusations its government so irresponsibly lobbs at us. The only answer seems to be that we have refused to “obey” hegemonic prescriptions and have decided to chart our own path towards full democracy and equitable development. We are only a “threat” to those that still see Latin America as part of the U.S.’s “backyard” instead of co-equal regional neighbors. Unfortunately, this report is just a carbon-copy of the Cold War mentality that for too long reigned over U.S. relations with the region, favoring dictatorships and allowing gross human right violations in the name of U.S. interests.

Let me reassure you that, contrary to Mr. Blair’s report, there is no “anti-Americanism” in the Government of Venezuela. However, we do reject imperial policies that dictate the kind of development and democracy we should seek. This is why we demand respect for and will defend our sovereignty at any cost.

The report issued by Mr. Blair reproduces the politicized and ideological intelligence script that has accompanied U.S. intervention in the affairs of sovereign nations in this hemisphere for decades. Such reports can be interpreted by some groups in the region as an invitation to explore anti-democratic means to achieve political ends. As Venezuela’s ambassador to the U.S., it is my responsibility to alert you and your colleagues in the Senate about our concerns with the intentions of such intelligence reports, which are full of half-truths and false accusations that hamper efforts for understanding among our two countries.

Respectfully,

Bernardo Alvarez Herrera
Ambassador

News from Nicaragua

Feb. 2 - March 23, 2010

Social Investment

The Sandinista government has scrambled to insure availability of food and seed as it responds to the set-back of its goal to achieve food sovereignty through the reactivation of peasant agriculture caused by the El Niño generated drought. The government has now begun the distribution of 900 tons of basic grains to the families of peasant farmers in the 37 municipalities most impacted by the drought. The food distribution program will cover the poorest localities in the Departments of Madriz, Matagalpa, and Nueva Segovia and will continue through this coming August. President Daniel Ortega said that the National Basic Food Company (ENABAS) will have increased its reserves enough after the third harvest (known as the *apante*) to provide food for the estimated 40,000 people in the dry regions of the country. He also said that the government would drill 392 new wells in the most vulnerable zones and make credit available for farmers to plant their crops as the 2010 rainy season begins. Ortega added that the army is assigning 300-500 troops to fight forest fires and guard the forests. The departments suffering from the drought, he said, have set up 36 nurseries with 287,000 seedlings to reforest 271 hectares, with a national goal for the year of reforesting 14,000 hectares.

Nationwide the Ministry of Education will feed one million students during the 2010 school year and expand school gardens from 1,400 to 1,800. With the goal of placing all children, youth, and interested adults in school, the Ministry of Education (MINED) extended the enrollment period for the 2010 school year to March 31 for most students and until June for non-regular education.

The populations of Diria and Diriomo in the Department of Granada received sewer treatment and water on March 6 when the National Water and Sewer Company (ENACAL) inaugurated a treatment plant with the capacity to process 1,450 cubic meters of sewage each day. The system utilizes seven bio-filters and a reforestation project for a 1.7 acre septic area which is being reforested, and four new wells. Masaya Mayor Félix Trejos also inaugurated a work program for the building 80 homes saying, "The people have acquired the right to be guaranteed the life they merit as a human being." The housing project offers the

opportunity for people forgotten by past governments to live a dignified life, he said.

In addition to building new homes, the Nicaraguan government is also taking steps toward improving old homes. The Commission of Truth, Reconciliation, Peace and Justice presided over by Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo oversaw the transportation of 10,000 corrugated metal roofing sheets and 2,012 pounds of nails to Masaya to be distributed to families of demobilized combatants from the war of the 1980s. The commission has already delivered more than half a million roofing sheets in 53 municipalities, benefiting 50,000 families. This year the Central American Credit Bank (Bancentro) plans to finance 1,500 new homes costing \$10,000 or less. The Nicaraguan government also came to an agreement with construction companies to provide, through a private bank, around US\$45 million to finance the building of up to 4,800 affordable homes in the country.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines reported that its Rural Electrification Program in 2009 brought electricity to 11,311 homes in 245 rural communities benefitting 67,377 residents. It extended the power grid by 524.34 kilometers, investing a total of over US\$9 million. In the first three years of the Ortega government, it has brought electricity to 31,746 rural homes. The Rural Electrification Program has included extending existing distribution lines but also construction of small hydroelectric projects, micro-generators and installation of solar panels in isolated parts of the country.

The Cuban-Nicaraguan health brigade that conducted a four month long national census to determine the numbers and needs of Nicaragua's handicapped population reported their findings. The census project was named A Voice for Everyone (*Todos con Voz*). The team reported that it visited 43 municipalities and did 82,501 consultations with handicapped people and their families in 71,747 homes. Genetic testing specialists also performed 8,984 examinations.

Daniel Zelikow, Executive Vice-President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), visited Nicaragua for several days and praised the Ortega government's commitment to poverty reduction. He said, "One of the factors that has led us to double the money for Nicaragua has been that the government has shown a capacity for administration and use of funds under its established priorities for reducing poverty.

Opposition political leaders, however, criticized the government's economic management. Eduardo Montealegre, a leader of one of the Liberal parties said, "The government is a bad investor and most expenditures of the government are bureaucratic and have no effect on economic growth." Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) leader Edmundo Jarquin said that if the international financial institutions would adopt the position of many governments of cutting aid until the issue of alleged fraud in the 2008 municipal elections was resolved, Ortega would have to cede to the demands of the opposition with relation to the political and judicial systems and "restore the democratic rule of law."

In non-election news from the Coast, Siuna mayor Julian Gaitan has agreed to suspend development projects in the Bosawas Nature Preserve that violate environmental protection laws. Laws requiring municipalities to provide basic services to residents and environmental laws restricting development within the nature preserve are in conflict. On the morning of Feb. 3, National Environmental Ombudsman Jose Luis Garcia announced postponement of an operation by a government commission that was to visit the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, evaluate damage to the forest, and notify the mestizo peasant farmers and land traffickers who have "invaded" the zone of their eviction. Indigenous groups blamed the delay on the FSLN and PLC which are vying for votes among the mestizo "invaders." The Nicaraguan government planned the operation in order to address threats to the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve from colonists and resource traffickers who had entered the area and destroyed large sections of tropical forest. Today there are more than 30,000 colonists who have taken over nearly 10,000 acres and destroyed around 5,000 acres of forest. Government officials made several visits last year in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the colonists to leave.

Last year the Ortega government gave communal property titles to the indigenous groups (Mayagnas and the Miskitos) that inhabit the reserve. Many from the indigenous communities have received death threats from the colonizers. Also in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) the Rama and Creole territorial government denounced death threats and attacks by Spanish-speaking Nicaraguan settlers within indigenous territory and demanded action from the national and regional governments. The settlers have threatened teams demarcating indigenous land and have destroyed boundary markers. They threatened to burn down the homes of peasants who housed the technical team personnel. The technical team was forced to leave the area with their survey work unfinished by death threats and a nighttime visit by 12 armed men who threatened them and damaged their equipment.

Virgilio Silva, president of the National Port Company, announced that it has obtained 50% of the financing needed to begin port construction in Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) and is ready to accept bids for the construction of a deep water port at Monkey Point to be initiated when the National Assembly passes the Law Concerning Ports. Silva said the total cost for constructing a new Bilwi wharf to 10 meters depth is US\$42 million. It will accommodate boats of 10-



Suzanne Baker, Chuck Kaufman, Bert Muhly, and Diana Bohn were among the participants from Northern California committees of the Nicaragua Network who gathered on March 7 in Santa Cruz to share victories and challenges of their many solidarity projects with Nicaragua. Also discussed were US-Nicaragua relations and the political environment in Nicaragua. (Photo: Courtesy of Arnie Matlin.)

Atlantic Coast

The North and South Autonomous Regions (RAAN & RAAS) held elections Mar. 7 for their 45-member Regional Councils. In the RAAN, the Sandinista Party (FSLN) and its ally the indigenous Yatama Party, easily outpolled the Constitutional Liberal Party and can form the government of that region. In the RAAS, the PLC won a plurality, but it is unclear whether it will be PLC or the FSLN which will put together a coalition with smaller parties to form the government. The PLC is alleging "irregularities" in four council districts.

15 tons. Bilwi's wharf, which was already in severe disrepair, was destroyed in 2008 by Hurricane Felix, incapacitating the North Atlantic Autonomous Region's capital city's fishing industry.

Amnesty and Appointments

Intense negotiations continue among the political class about appointments to 25 high level government posts whose terms have expired or are about to expire. A Special Committee on Nominations is interviewing hundreds of candidates nominated by the political parties and segments of civil society – 62 alone for the five members and five alternates of the Supreme Electoral Council. Each appointee will need to receive a 56 vote super-majority in the Assembly to win appointment, guaranteeing that political horse trading will continue for some time. Meanwhile, the National Assembly has been unable to meet because Liberal parties are boycotting the sessions in order to force a vote overturning the decree by President Daniel Ortega extending the terms of the 25 positions until the National Assembly has named their replacements. Liberal parties apparently see a political advantage to paralyzing the judicial and electoral branches and executive branch agencies which would not be able to function until the appointments are made.

Liberal parties have abandoned for now a strategy to hold appointments hostage to passage of a bill granting amnesty to all government officials who committed crimes under the Chamorro, Aleman, and Bolaños governments (1990-2006). Former President Arnoldo Aleman and Liberal factional leader Eduardo Montealegre, both of whom face corruption charges, would have been the primary beneficiaries of an amnesty bill. Both men want to run for president in 2011.

International Affairs

A US State Department mission led by Christopher Webster, director of Central American Affairs, met on March 15 with Nicaraguan Attorney General Hernan Estrada and other government officials to review cases of "US citizens" whose property was confiscated during the Sandinista government of the 1980s. US law requires that aid be cut off unless the Secretary of State issues a waiver. The US has based the annual waiver on "progress" in resolving these cases. In a television interview on Mar. 17, Estrada stated that he believed that the Nicaraguan government has met the conditions this year to receive a waiver.

He said that 53 cases have been resolved in the past year, five more than the previous year. The majority of cases are those of Nicaraguans linked to the Somoza dictatorship who later became US citizens. Estrada said that claims remain from 258 Nicaraguans who obtained US citizenship, but that an agreement was reached to remove former officers of the Somoza's National Guard and former officials of the dictatorship. He said that the Ortega government has paid US\$5 million in bonds to compensate for properties that could not be returned. From 1990-2001 the Nicaraguan governments paid out US\$1.104 billion to resolve property claims.

Nicaragua refused an entry visa to Honduran coup leader Roberto Micheletti who had planned to attend a meeting in Boaco of the PLC. While heading the coup government, Micheletti was named a vice-president of the Liberal International, the international association of Liberal Parties. Micheletti said he had a "clear conscience" and hadn't committed any crimes. He confirmed that the United States also has not reinstated his visa and said, "With the attitude of this ambassador [Hugo Llorens] against me, I don't think I'll have the option to acquire a North American visa."

The European Union asked the Central American countries to improve their offer on access to their markets for European products in preparation for trade talks March 22-26 in Brussels, which it is expected will result in the signing of an "association agreement" on May 18 in Madrid. Central American negotiators are concerned about European farm subsidies which could give the EU products an unfair competitive advantage.

President Ortega was the only Central American president who did not attend a March 5 Central American presidential summit or send an envoy to represent him. The summit was held in Guatemala and was attended by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. At the summit the presidents agreed on the "immediate return" of Honduras to the Central American Integration System (SICA) and decided to support its return to the Organization of American States as well. Nicaragua has not recognized the government of Porfiro Lobo who was "elected" under the coup government.

Ortega attended a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean heads of State in Cancun, Mexico, where the hemisphere's leaders agreed to form a new organization without the United States and Canada. Ortega used the meeting to praise the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) and to call for guarantees that there will be no more coups – like the one in Honduras – in any other Latin American countries.

Vice-President Jaime Morales Carazo met in Nicaragua with US Senators Christopher Dodd (D-CT) and Bob Corker (R-TN), accompanied by US Ambassador Robert Callahan. Among the issues discussed were the upcoming elections on the Caribbean Coast, new appointments to the Supreme Electoral Council and the fight against drug trafficking. Morales said in a press conference following the meeting that on the issues of combating narcotics, arms, and human trafficking and the struggle against international terrorism they “coincided fully.” Dodd said, “It is not the US’s job to decide the Nicaraguan elections, but we have an interest in knowing how the process is going.” Dodd did not say, however, that the US would not interfere in Nicaragua’s elections through the National Endowment for Democracy and US Agency for International Development as it has done in every election since the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.

Abortion

The woman known only by her first name of Amalia will finally receive treatment for cancer according to Debora Grandison, Special Ombudsman for Women. She said that the treatment would “inevitably result in a suspension of her pregnancy, but the system could not prosecute any physician for saving a woman’s life under these conditions.” In 2006, the Nicaraguan government criminalized therapeutic abortion which had been legal in the country for over 100 years. The government has said that the Protocols of Attention to Obstetric Emergencies contemplate situations such as this, but human rights organizations say that doctors are reluctant to risk prosecution under the law which makes no mention of exceptions.

Manuel Martinez, president of Nicaragua’s Supreme Court, said last week that the recent declarations by Minister of Government Ana Isabel Morales at a United Nations Human Rights Council meeting in Switzerland were the opinion of the administration of President Daniel Ortega and had no impact on the decision that the justices of the Supreme Court must make about the constitutionality of the criminalization of therapeutic abortion. The Nicaraguan government was strongly challenged at the UN meeting where Morales said that Nicaraguans thought the fetus was a person with a right to life. Martinez said he did not know where Morales got her information that a majority of Nicaraguans were in favor of criminalizing therapeutic abortion. He added, that based on Morales’ statements, you could see why the Supreme Court Justices who are

affiliated with the Sandinista Party have not expressed interest in meeting to issue the final ruling on the cases before the Court which challenge the measure as unconstitutional.

Economy

With 87 out of 92 votes in favor, the National Assembly, on Feb. 24, passed a law establishing a moratorium on payments on micro-finance loans benefiting 5,000 farmers and merchants many of whom belong to the so-called “Won’t Pay” Movement. The interest rate which will apply to renegotiated debts will be 16% (many lenders charge up to 60% annually). Under the bill borrowers have four or five years to repay their loans with a grace period of six months. Leaders of the Association of Micro Finance Institutions (ASOMIF) are demanding that President Daniel Ortega veto the law and threaten that it will reduce micro-lending in the country. Ortega is unlikely to veto the law. Leaders of the Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) said that a solution to the conflict should be found that will not result in less availability of credit for UNAG members.

In what Dean Garcia, Executive Director of the Nicaraguan Association of Textiles and Dressmaking (ANITEC) called “the first symptom of recovery” in the free trade clothing assembly sector, GD Maquilador de Nicaragua S.A. opened a new plant in Nicaragua. The company has invested US\$21 million and generated 900 new jobs. Juan Marcos Villareal, president of Grupo Denim cited “the favorable investment conditions such as the benefits of the free trade zone (FTZ), the excellence of Nicaraguan labor, and the help of the government, business and regulatory agencies.” Grupo Denim has assembled clothing for Vanity Fair for 20 years and has a signed contract for the next ten years. By the end of 2010 the company hopes to employ 2,000 Nicaraguan workers.

On the same day, the opening of a new call center employing 600 Nicaraguans, mostly high school graduates with English fluency, was announced. The company Stream Global Services, Inc. has invested US\$2.7 million in their center. Salaries are reported to be “substantially higher” than in other free trade zone companies – as much as US\$500/mo. The Ortega government has actively sought free trade zone companies, like call centers, which employ people with greater skills and pay better wages than the garment assembly plants.

Arts

Salvador Cardenal Barquero, one of Nicaragua's most important contemporary composers died March 7 at age 50. El Nuevo Diario called him "one of the greatest geniuses of this country." Among his best known compositions were "Guerrero de amor" and "Casa abierta." He performed solo and with his sister Katia in the group Guardabarranca.



Compas de Nicaragua will be organizing our third Women in Action dance tour from September 12 through November 2, 2010. The tour will bring 6 young women from WIA to the U.S. to perform traditional cultural dances, while educating audiences about Nicaragua's culture and current conditions. For more information, or if you are interested in hosting this unique program, please contact Compas at: compas@turbonett.com.ni

Miscellaneous

Attorney General Hernan Estrada on Mar. 17 hand delivered the charter for a new organization of

former banana workers, survivors of illnesses caused by agricultural use of the chemical Nemagon, called the Association of Nicaraguan Former Banana Workers (ASONEF). Estrada promised government support for national and international legal actions by the new association.

On March 9, the Association of Nicaraguans Affected by Chronic Renal Insufficiency (ANAIRC) completed one year of encampment and protests in Managua where they have been demanding negotiations with the Pellas Group's Nicaragua Sugar Estates, Ltd., owner of the San Antonio sugar plantation and mill. Conditions there are blamed for causing the kidney disease that has affected thousands of workers. The international boycott of Flor de Caña, Nicaragua's world famous rum, will continue until the Pellas Group responds to ANAIRC's demands.

In 2009, 11,000 women were victims of violence in Nicaragua. On March 8, International Women's Day, the Network of Women against Violence and the Nicaragua Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) organized a march from the Military Hospital to the University of Engineering in Managua. At the Departmental Congress of Sandinista Women, thousands of Managua women celebrated the social programs implemented by the government of President Daniel Ortega. Yara Perez, Superintendent of Property and adjunct departmental political secretary of the FSLN for Managua, said that the principle beneficiaries of the programs put in place by the Sandinista government have been women, with 70% of programs such as Zero Hunger, Zero Usury, and property titling directed at women.

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