

# Report

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## Cuba's Defiance Applauded at the Summit of the Americas

**By: Medea Benjamin, founder of Global Exchange and Code Pink**

*Ed. Note: In addition to celebrating much anticipated rapprochement between Cuba and the US, regional leaders were nearly unanimous in rejections of Obama's Executive Order sanctioning Venezuela on March 9*

For the small island of Cuba, the VII Summit of the Americas in Panama marked a kind of "coming out" party. Banned from the for-capitalists-only gatherings from the time they began in 1994, Cuba was not only invited to participate in the Summit this year, it was the belle of the ball. Cuba's presence was heralded in the speeches of every nation's leader and the handshake between President Obama and Raul Castro was the Summit's Kodak moment.

In Raul Castro's 48-minute speech, he joked that because Cuba had been excluded from six prior Summits, he deserved six times the recommended eight minutes, and he gave a history lesson of past US attacks on Cuba—from the Platt Amendment to sup-

porting the dictator Fulgencio Batista to the Bay of Pigs invasion and the opening of the Guantanamo prison. But he was gracious to President Obama, saying he was not to blame for this legacy and calling him an "honest man" of humble origins.

President Obama certainly won praise throughout the Summit for turning this page in the Cold War. Some leaders insisted on clarifying, however, that Cuba was not at the Summit because of Obama's nice gesture; Cuba was there because the leaders of Latin America insisted that there would not be another Summit without Cuba.

Colombia President Juan Manuel Santos, no lefty, recalled his position at the last summit, which he hosted, that Cuba must be invited to the next one. Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and others had threatened to boycott any new gathering without Cuba.

Argentine's Christina Kirchner Fernandez went a step further in taking credit away from Obama. She said Cuba was at the table because it had fought valiantly and defiantly for over 50 years while suffering under the US blockade.

Ecuador's Rafael Correa said that Obama's opening was good, but not good enough. He insisted it was time to end the "inhumane and illegal blockade" that had so damaged the Cuban people and to return the "occupied territory" of Guantanamo.

Bolivia's Evo Morales dismissed any notion of the US as a benevolent force now coming to aid poor Cuba; instead, he said, the US should just compensate Cuba for over 50 years of damages to its economy.

It's hard for many Americans to understand the oversized significance Cuba has in the hemisphere. Colombia's Santos thanked Cuba for its mediation of peace talks between his government and the FARC rebels. Other governments thanked Cuba for sending doctors to their countries, treating patients in poor areas where their own doctors refused to go, or for setting up medical schools or training their nationals in Cuban schools. There was praise for Cuba sharing its successful literacy program. But what most Americans fail to understand is the pride felt by so many people in Latin America—even people who don't like Cuba's

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*Apr. 11, 2015, US President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro shake hands during their meeting at the Summit of the Americas in Panama City.*

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policies—that for over 50 years the tiny island has managed to fend off the attempts by the US Goliath to overthrow it.

From the very beginnings of the revolution, the US government has used every means it could conjure up to overthrow Fidel Castro—from poison cigars to funding saboteurs to diplomatic isolation. History is littered with CIA and exile-sponsored dirty tricks, including the October 1976 attack on a Cuban jetliner that killed all 73 people aboard. Even in Panama, where the Summit took place, there was a plot in November 2000 to kill Fidel Castro by blowing up an auditorium where he was scheduled to speak.

So the fact that Cuba has managed to thumb its nose at the US for all these years is seen by many as nothing short of a miracle. “I was in Cuba on vacation,” Gabriela Gomez, a teacher from Panama told me. “I found its economy in tatters, with buildings literally falling apart. And I don’t like the restrictions on free speech and free assembly. But I love the fact that Cuba has managed to survive as a communist nation in the face of so much outside aggression.”

But is the US government really accepting Cuba as a sovereign nation that has chosen a different path? Or is it simply trying to overthrow the Cuban government by different means?

Reverend Raul Suarez, who runs the Martin Luther King Center in Havana and in Panama for the Civil Society Forum that preceded the Summit, sees the same old intrigue, interference and manipulations. “Just look at what has happened at the Civil Society Forum,” he said. “The Americans paid for Cuban dissidents who have no following in Cuba to come to Panama and participate as Cuban representatives of civil society. Meanwhile, many of the representatives of Cuba’s mass-based organizations were not allowed in.”

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“Half our delegation got here only to find that they couldn’t get the credentials they were promised, and were shut out of the meetings,” said Gretchen Gomez Gonzalez of the Cuban Federation of University Students, “while dissident Cubans who don’t represent anyone but themselves were given credentials to represent Cuban civil society.”

Pro-government Cubans confronted the dissidents in the streets and at the meetings, calling them mercenaries for taking US money and carrying photos showing some of them embracing convicted terrorist Jose Posada Carriles. They also say that former CIA operative Felix Rodriguez, blamed for killing revolutionary hero Che Guevara, was at the Summit working with the dissidents. The dissidents said they were being attacked by pro-government mobs simply for promoting free speech and free assembly. The US State Department condemned what it said was “harassment” and “use of violence” against participants.

The cordial meeting between Obama and Castro showed the positive face of the opening, while the clashes on the streets of Panama



*Gender Sub-commission of the FARC negotiating team whose role is the review of the peace agreements with respect to the demands of women and LGBT of Colombian society.*

City represent the rocky road ahead for US-Cuba relations. But at least the path forward is a new one, with fresh momentum emanating from the Panama Summit.

Obama said the US opening could lead to more American visitors, more commerce, more investment and more resources for the Cuban people. If the US government could do that while leaving it to the Cuban people themselves to push for greater individual freedoms, that would be—to take a page from the Castro brothers—truly revolutionary.

Source: *TeleSUR.com*, April 14, 2015

## Archbishop Oscar Romero to be Beatified

By **Joshua J. McElwee**, NCR Vatican correspondent

Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, the murdered prelate of the people, is to be beatified May 23 in San Salvador. The ceremony will be in Plaza Divino Salvador del Mundo, said Italian Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, chief promoter of the archbishop’s sainthood cause, at a news conference in San Salvador. Paglia called the beatification a gift for the world, but particularly for the people of El Salvador.

Romero was archbishop of San Salvador during the bloody and tension-filled time leading up to his country’s 1979-1992 civil war. Shot dead while celebrating Mass in 1980, the archbishop has long been considered a saint by many in Latin America, but the official Vatican process

of sainthood had lingered for years. It’s speculated that this was due to unease because of Romero’s embrace of liberation theology.

Pope Francis paved the way for Romero’s beatification in February when he formally decreed that the prelate was assassinated as a martyr for the Catholic faith.

Romero’s murder, Paglia said, was part of a “climate of persecution against a pastor that followed the evangelical experience, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, of Medellin” and had chosen to combat a government and a type of oppression “that leaves the poorest without life.”

Source: *National Catholic Reporter*, March 11, 2015

## CUBA: Necessary Steps to Normalization

By Marc Becker, professor of history and member of Code Pink delegation to Cuba in February

Ed. Note: *President Obama has decided to lift the US designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, a decision that removes a principal impediment to the establishment of diplomatic relations.*

*The long-awaited action, which was announced in a message to Congress on April 14, follows a pledge made by Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro last December. Congress has 45 days to consider Cuba's removal from the list before it takes effect but it cannot interfere with Obama's decision without voting on separate legislation.*

Most Cubans are very optimistic by the thawing in diplomatic relations between their country and the United States. Despite the restrictions that the US government has placed on interactions between the two countries, Cubans have long had intimate contact with US culture and welcome the opening.

Cubans, however, insist that the December 17, 2014 announcement of US president Barack Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro to re-establish diplomatic ties was only the first step toward a full normalization of relations between the two countries. After more than fifty years, at least three steps remain to be taken before interactions achieve the level that they should have.

First, the US must remove Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The State Department includes countries on this list that have "repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism." Only four countries are on the list: Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Cuba.

Ronald Reagan added Cuba to this list in 1982 for providing safe haven for members of the Basque separatist group ETA and Colombia's FARC rebels, and for providing political asylum to people such as African American activist and Black Panther Party member Assata Shakur. George Bush subsequently added a complaint that Cuba refused to join its so-called "war on terror."

The Cuban government considers its inclusion on the list as hypocritical and unfair. Dating back to the 1960s the US has persistently violated international law by engaging in terrorist acts against Cuba. These include, for example,

Operation Mongoose that targeted Cuban leaders with assassination. In 1976, the CIA operative Luis Posada Carriles blew up Cuban airlines flight 455 from Barbados to Jamaica, killing all 73 people on board. In 1997, Posada Carriles bombed a series of Cuban hotels. Today, the US harbors this terrorist operative who walks free on the streets of Miami.

In contrast, no evidence exists that Cuba materially supports any groups that the State Department defines as terrorist. In fact, Cuba currently hosts negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government. Fortunately, Obama has instructed the Secretary of State to review Cuba's inclusion on this list.

Second, the US must end its blockade of Cuba. The US imposed a commercial, economic, and financial embargo on Cuba in October 1960 in response to Cuba's nationalization of US-owned oil refineries. The US

repeal will take congressional action. In the face of a hostile Republican congress it will be difficult to realize this objective. In the meantime, the blockade creates unnecessarily onerous restrictions on Cuba.

A final demand is for the return of the Guantanamo naval base to Cuba.

In 1903, Havana and Washington signed an Agreement on Coaling and Naval Stations which granted the United States access to Guantanamo and Bahía Honda (although the latter was never used) to do "all that is necessary to outfit those places so they can be used exclusively as coaling or naval stations, and for no other purpose." The US military continues to maintain and pay for this 117.6 square kilometer area of a country with which it has not had formal diplomatic relations for more than 50 years.

In a direct violation of the treaty, the United States uses the base to house political prisoners from its so-called war on terrorism. Furthermore, Cubans consider the US occupation of the base to be a violation of their sovereignty, and the government refuses to cash the checks it receives every year as payment for the base.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration has indicated that it will not consider a return of the Guantanamo base to Cuba. For some observers, this is the strongest indicator of the motivation behind Washington's overtures to Cuba.

The US government is not interested in normalizing relations with its neighbor, but in searching for new and more effective ways to maintain the country under its imperial control. With Cuba's socialized economy that privileges human needs over private profit still firmly in place after fifty years, the US policy of regime change has clearly been a failure. Some critics worry that Obama's policy changes will replace all that is good in Cuba with all that is bad in the US.

United States government and corporate attempts to control Cuba's destiny is not in the interests of either the Cuban people or those in the US. It is our responsibility as citizens of both countries to assure that government policies reflect the concerns of the people and not those of wealthy private individuals.

Source: *UpsideDownWorld*, February 23, 2015



*Fernando Gonzalez, one of the Cuban Five and current V.P. of ICAP and Dale Sorensen.*

government has subsequently tightened the embargo through the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. This legislation restricts financial transactions with Cuba with a goal of changing Cuba's form of government.

Although the US has not maintained a physical blockade of the island since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Cubans insist that this legislation in effect creates a blockade because of how it restricts trade with third countries. Every year since 1992 the United Nations General Assembly has passed a resolution that the blockade is a violation of international law. In recent years, only Israel has joined the US in voting against the resolution.

Although Obama is dismantling the blockade piecemeal through executive action, a full

## Mexico: Ayotzinapa Families Bring Their Struggle to the US

By Ted Lewis Director of Mexico Program for Global Exchange

In March, a dozen mothers, fathers, classmates, and teachers of the 43 disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa teacher's college launched a major tour to bring their story and demands for justice to 45 cities across the United States. March 26th marked six months since the students forcibly disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero in September. This atrocious attack set off a crisis that now pits Mexico's ruling elites against a powerful justice movement that directly questions their legitimacy.

Just six months ago, Mexican President Peña Nieto was riding a seemingly unstoppable wave of political success. He had repeatedly convinced super majorities in both houses of Mexico's congress to pass sweeping, investor-friendly amendments to the Federal Constitution and then rammed ratification through state legislatures.

But Peña Nieto's winning streak came to a swift halt last October amidst growing rage over the disappeared students and suspicions that local police and military were responsible. Enormous marches and protests, led by the families of the Ayotzinapa disappeared, garnered massive support. Calls rang out for Peña's resignation. The president's standing was also tested by reports unmasking an Army cover-up of the June 30, 2014 Army massacre of 22 unarmed detainees in the town of Tlatlaya, in the president's home State of Mexico. Then came charges that luxury housing was given to Peña's wife in exchange for favors to foreign investors.

The shock waves from Ayotzinapa spread far beyond Mexico. Demonstrations in support of the Ayotzinapa families—mostly led by Mexicans living abroad—were held in dozens of cities across North America, as well as in capital cities in Europe and South America. For a few weeks last November and December, Peña Nieto stumbled and seemed politically vulnerable in ways modern Mexican presidents seldom have.

But then President Peña Nieto got a reprieve. He visited President Obama in Washington on January 3, where, in an open attempt to restore business as usual, the Ayotzinapa case and all the thorny issues surrounding it were avoided. Under intense pressure prior to the DC trip, President Peña

Nieto had agreed to a high-level, independent, on-the-ground investigation by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) which, importantly, has a Mexican General Secretary for the first time in its history. IAHRC General Secretary, Emilio Álvarez Icaza was a leader in and strategist for Mexico's Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD) just prior to taking on the IAHRC job. The impressive team he assembled arrived in Mexico on March 1 with a mandate to thoroughly investigate the Ayotzinapa case and to look more broadly at the tens of thousands of enforced and other disappearances that have shaken Mexico in recent years.

The presence of the IAHRC mission puts President Peña Nieto in a bind, as do the findings of the highly respected Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team—that have worked alongside the parents for months. In public, the president must respect and even support these genuine efforts to dig for the truth. Behind the scenes however, the shadow powers of the business and security elites that keep President Peña Nieto in power can't afford to cooperate. They are not big fans of truth and justice because they have a lot to hide.

The business and security elites would rather have authorities stick with the traditional approach to politically charged cases in which investigators manipulate and destroy evidence, coerce testimony, manufacture false scenarios, and generally create enough confusion to secure doubt and impunity. That is how the murders of hundreds of students by Army units acting on presidential orders were covered up in 1968 and it continues to define how egregious official transgressions are handled today.

On February 14, Gerardo Gutiérrez Candiani, the president of Mexico's most influential business group, the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) met with the heads of Mexico's Defense Department and Navy to sign an accord expressing busi-



Caravan of Ayotzinapa family members visiting the US are hosted by the Community Media Center of Marin and the Task Force on the Americas Photo: Chelis Lopez

ness community support for the Armed Forces. More explicitly, the CCE directly interfered in the Ayotzinapa case by supporting the Army's refusal to allow Ayotzinapa parent-investigators onto military bases. During the meeting, Mr. Candiani praised the Armed Forces for doing things "that are not in the Constitution, but that are indispensable to our security as Mexicans."

Last fall, Global Exchange joined the calls of many other human rights organizations, commentators, newspaper editors and others around the world asking Mexico's authorities to break the habit of impunity and to conduct an honest and thorough investigation of the disappearances of the 43 students.

Such an investigation would evaluate whether there was any Army or Federal Police involvement during or after the coordinated attacks on the students. The attacks took place at multiple sites across the city of Iguala, over the course of several hours—in the immediate vicinity of a regional Army headquarters—on the night of September 26. Photos released three weeks ago indicate that the army definitely had contact with the students on the night of the disappearances.

Attorney General Murillo Karam, who led the official investigation (until his resignation in February), did order the arrest of more than 90 people, 22 of them Iguala Municipal Police officers identified by students. Yet, despite the large number of arrests, Murillo Karam presented a case (that he arrogantly dubbed "the historical truth") based on the

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*Ayotzinapa, continued from page 4*

testimony of just four of the detainees. These four—all purportedly members of the local Guerreros Unidos gang—have allegedly confessed to murdering the students and then incinerating all 43 of their bodies in a massive bonfire in the rain. The Argentine forensic team has steadfastly refused to corroborate the government version or certify the unverified “chain of custody” of the single bone fragment shown to have a DNA match with one of the missing students.

A confrontation looms. As the IAHRIC investigation proceeds, the government is soliciting foreign bids (for the first time since 1938) to drill for Mexican oil deep under the Gulf of Mexico. The investor class is eager to paint the Ayotzinapa movement as radical and dangerous to scare away its supporters.

Meanwhile, questions loom over the fate of tens of thousands of other missing people across Mexico. For each one of the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students there are more than 500 others who have been disappeared. Even in Iguala the 43 abducted students are not the majority of those missing.

A new group calling itself Committee of Families of Forced Disappearance in Iguala, “The Other Disappeared,” (Los Otros Desaparecidos) has organized in Iguala, and already counts more than 300 families with disappeared loved ones amongst their members. The group searches the hillsides of Guerrero every Sunday, hoping to uncover shallow and mass graves containing the remains of their loved ones. They often begin their searches where the Attorney General’s (AG) office claims to have already thoroughly explored.

John Gibler, a freelance reporter who has written a detailed account of the events of the night of the disappearances, accompanied a group of these families as they searched blazing hot hillsides for evidence of mass graves. He told me that since the families began their searches in November, they have found 52 corpses and located scores more graves that still await excavation, some in areas where the AG had supposedly already searched. They continue to search the hillsides every Sunday.

But the search for truth and justice has powerful enemies in Mexico. Just last week, Carmen Aristegui, the courageous investigative journalist, was fired after lending support to “Mexicoleaks”, a new anonymous web

portal designed to allow whistle blowers to safely provide information to a team of respected journalists. Aristegui’s reports on military abuses and presidential-level corruption have been groundbreaking.

The firing of Carmen Aristegui is a serious blow to the free press in Mexico and is being interpreted by many journalists as a harbinger of a further crackdown. It underlines why the families of the Ayotzinapa disappeared began travel to the US with the explicit goal of internationalizing support for their movement.

The Ayotzinapa families make it very clear that the disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa College are neither the first, nor the last, victims of a system that has institutionalized complicity between authorities and criminal organizations. Like the victim families of the MPJD who caravanned across the

US in 2012, the Ayotzinapa families understand that the roots of Mexico’s violence and impunity cross the northern border and are intertwined with the politics of the drug war.

In a petition directed to US officials, the families, teachers, and classmates of the disappeared students accuse the Mexican government, its military, and police of routinely violating the “human rights of its citizens through arbitrary arrest, torture, and even extrajudicial executions.” They “call upon the Congress of the US to halt all military and police assistance to Mexico until the Mexican government fully adheres to international human rights standards.”

We should heed their call.

Source: *HuffPost, Latino Voices, March 19, 2015*

## Eduardo Galeano’s Words Walk the Streets of a Continent

*By Benjamin Dangl, journalist and author*

The world lost one of its great writers April 13, 2015. Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano died at age 74 in Montevideo. He left a magical body of work behind him, and his reach is as wide as his continent.

During Argentina’s 2001-2002 economic crisis, Galeano’s words walked down the streets with a life of their own, accompanying every protest and activist meeting. Factories were occupied by workers, neighborhood assemblies rose up, and, for a time, revolutionary talk and action replaced a rotten neoliberal system. Galeano’s upside-down view of the world blew fresh dreams into the tear gas-filled air.

In the streets of La Paz, Bolivia, pirated copies of Galeano’s classic *Open Veins of Latin America* are still sold at nearly every book stall. There too, Galeano’s historical alchemy added to the fire of many movements and uprisings, where miners of the country’s open veins tossed dynamite at right-wing politicians, and the 500-year-old memory of colonialism lives on.

Up the winding mountain roads of Chiapas, past Mexican state military checkpoints, lies the autonomous Zapatista community of Oventic. One day a few years ago, Galeano’s familiar voice floated over the foggy, autonomous land, reciting children’s

stories over stereo speakers.

At a World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Galeano entered a steaming hot tent where hundreds had gathered to hear him speak about the Uruguayan water rights movement in which the people had “voted against fear” to stop privatization. What I remembered most about the talk is how much he made the crowd laugh.

And one night in Paraguay, with the smell of cow manure and pesticides lingering in the air, small farmers besieged by toxic soy crops gathered to tell stories of resistance, stories they linked to Galeano’s accounts of the looting of Latin America and struggles against greed and empire that were centuries in the making.

With the small mountain of books and articles he left behind, Galeano gives us a language of hope, a way to feel rage toward the world while also loving it, a way to understand the past while carving out a better possible future.

“She’s on the horizon,” Galeano once wrote of utopia. “I go two steps, she moves two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps ahead. No matter how much I walk, I’ll never reach her. What good is utopia? That’s what: it’s good for walking.”

Source: *Counterpunch, April 14, 2015*

## Alliance For Prosperity Plan Will Only Make Life Worse

*By Dawn Paley, writer based in Mexico and author of "Drug War Capitalism"*

When Americans began noticing a deluge of unaccompanied migrant children flooding to the US-Mexico border, the immediate US response was a stopgap. Youth were placed in shelters by the thousands, sometimes set up on military bases, which critics likened to detention centers and emergency hurricane shelters. Later, kids were placed with sponsors while their cases were processed.

Now, a longer-term response is taking shape. The Obama administration has recently jumped on board with the Alliance for Prosperity, a plan that touts development and peace for Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. It promises to address the violence that's forcing children to flee in such Biblical numbers. Vice President Joe Biden's op-ed in the New York Times last week confirmed that President Obama would ask Congress for \$1 billion to fund the Alliance for Prosperity, a name that recalls JFK's controversial Alliance for Progress. "Confronting these challenges," Biden wrote, "requires nothing less than systemic change ..."

But the essence of what the Alliance for Prosperity promises is that more of the same, more local spending on infrastructure to facilitate foreign investment, more corporate tax breaks and free trade zones and more regulatory harmonization, will allow Central America to pull itself up by its bootstraps. And, yes, that outcome is as unlikely as it sounds.

Driving the US support for the Alliance for Prosperity is the ongoing humanitarian crisis of children fleeing their home countries. Between October 2013 and October 2014, 60,000 unaccompanied minors crossed the US-Mexico border. Most of them were from Honduras, followed by Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. These arrivals marked a spike in Central American minors trying to cross the border. (The number of Mexican minors has remained relatively stable; Mexican children are deported without a court hearing and thus not detained for significant lengths of time.)

Many of the youth held in custody by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) were subjected to measures that would be considered objectionable against anyone, convicted adults or otherwise. Accusations against the CBP, in a complaint filed in June on behalf of 100 children by the American Civil Liberties

Union and other rights groups are truly grotesque. They include "denying necessary medical care to children as young as five-months-old, refusing to provide diapers for infants, confiscating and not returning legal documents and personal belongings, making racially charged insults and death threats, and strip searching and shackling children in three-point restraints during transport." The ACLU proceeded to file a class action lawsuit in October challenging the federal government's failure to provide legal representation to the youth. After reaching a peak in June of 2014, the number of unaccompanied minors arriving to the US has fallen off from more than 10,000 to a few thousand a month. This owes in large part to Mexico deporting more Central American minors. As fewer Central American kids arrived at the US border, the issue and the plight of these children slid out of view.

Enter the Alliance for Prosperity. In his op-ed, Biden wrote that the Alliance for Prosperity promotes security, good governance and economic growth in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. (The plan was authored this past fall by those countries' presidents.) The security proposal is thin on specifics, but aims to train and equip police, something the US has been doing in the region for decades. The plan trots out classic promises to increase tax collection and transparency, toward improving government. It describes a renewed effort to invest in education, a sector decimated by austerity programs, including by promising cash to students who stay in school.

But by far the most polished segment of the document details the sweetheart deals the three countries will roll out for international investors. Biden compared the Alliance to a kind of Plan Colombia for Central America. Plan Colombia was a six-year, \$9 billion experiment that used anti-drugs policy as a pretext for bettering investment conditions in Colombia, both through militarization and political reforms. In short, this is not a comparison that should necessarily inspire confidence for Central Americans.

Plan Colombia was a foreign policy innovation that created a new blueprint for US intervention on behalf of the corporate sector, disguised as an anti-drugs initiative. In fact, the success of Plan Colombia has little to nothing to do with drugs, but could be measured by examining growing levels of foreign direct in-

vestment and investor security. Biden's memory of Plan Colombia confirms my argument. Far from recalling an anti-drugs program, he lauds Plan Colombia such: "The Colombian government cleaned up its courts, vetted its police force and reformed its rules of commerce to open up its economy."

Today's measure of success is distinct from the messaging about Plan Colombia at the time. It is also distinct from what we are told today about the Merida Initiative, the first re-incarnation of Plan Colombia, this time in Mexico. In an interview in 2007, former US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Charles explained: "The aim of 'Plan Colombia' was to reduce overall cultivation in the country in the first five years by 50%. We've actually reduced it by more than 50%." Plan Colombia began in 2000, and ran through to 2006, after which US funding to Colombia began to decrease and shift towards Mexico and the Merida Initiative, beginning in 2008.

The US State Department hawked the Merida Initiative as a way to strengthen courts and improve police odds in their fight against drug traffickers. Instead, those institutions' failures and cruelties have only deepened as US largesse, to the tune of over \$2.35 billion, has fostered increased violence across the country. Meanwhile, on the metrics that matter most directly to investors and politicians, the Merida Initiative has been a success: Mexico has passed reforms in finance, education, labor and energy that have cleared the way for foreign investment. But to people living here in Mexico, the Merida Initiative has only exacerbated an already grim daily reality.

Biden's op-ed failed to mention the Merida Initiative, or its current incarnate in Central America, the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). When the Merida Initiative began, part of the funding was destined for Central America. In 2010, the Central America program was separated from the Merida Initiative, and re-packaged as CARSI. But CARSI did little to stem the violence or to reduce the tide of migrants. If anything, it did the opposite. In Honduras and Guatemala, homicide rates climbed steadily as US funding for militarization via CARSI began to flow. Remember that Honduras sent the largest number of kids to the US border, followed by Guatemala. In 2012,

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## World Bank Admits It Ignored Its Own Rules

By *Sasha Chavkin and Mike Hudson,*  
*International Consortium of*  
*Investigative Journalists*

The World Bank, created to fight poverty, has admitted that it's failed to follow its own rules for protecting the poor people swept aside by dams, roads and other big projects it bankrolls.

This conclusion, announced by the bank on March 4, amounts to a reversal of its previous efforts to downplay concerns raised by human rights activists and others working on behalf of the dispossessed—people evicted from their land, sometimes in violent ways, to make way for World Bank-financed initiatives.

It comes days after the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and The Huffington Post informed bank officials that the news outlets had found “systemic gaps” in the bank’s protections for people who lose homes or jobs because of development projects.

The World Bank, which is controlled by the United States and other member countries, had failed to respond to the news organizations’ repeated requests over the past several weeks for an interview with Jim Yong Kim, the president of the World Bank Group, the parent institution. The news outlets have been pressing the bank for months for answers to questions about how well it enforces its own “social and environmental safeguards.”

The bank said in a news release that its conclusions followed internal audits conducted over the past two years. “We took a hard look at ourselves on resettlement and what we found caused me deep concern,” Kim said in a statement.

Under its current rules for safeguards, the World Bank and its borrowers are supposed to make sure that people physically or economically displaced by a project are identified, consulted and provided new homes, jobs or other help that restores them to living conditions that are equal to or better than before.

The World Bank said that it did not know how many people its projects had uprooted, and that it did not do enough to keep track of projects that push communities off their land or cost people their livelihoods. ICIJ, HuffPost and other media partners that have examined the issue found that projects backed by the World Bank have displaced millions of people over the last decade.

The World Bank also said it is taking steps to fix the problems with its oversight of

projects that cause “involuntary resettlement.” The bank will increase the number of staffers who oversee social and environmental protections, and will build a new database to track people displaced by bank projects, the lender said in a press release.

The bank’s announcement comes in the midst of a multiyear revision of its safeguard policies, including its policy on resettlement. The bank’s guidelines set a global standard for social and environmental protections in development aid that is often followed by regional development banks and private lenders worldwide.

An initial draft of the revision, released in July 2014, was widely panned by human rights experts and civil society groups as a dramatic rollback of the bank’s standards. Critics said the proposed rules would reduce borrowers’ obligations to plan in advance for displacement and other harms to local people and the environment, and instead allow borrowers to ignore problems until the harm is already done.

Ted Downing, the president of the International Network on Displacement and Resettlement, said the bank’s statement was meant to divert attention from the larger issues at stake. “The purpose is to distract people,” Downing said. “The big question is which policies, that are being rearranged, is this staff enforcing.”

Stephanie Fried, executive director of the Ulu Foundation, an environmental group that advocates for forest communities, said the bank’s promise to do a better job of enforcing its safeguards won’t do much good if its safeguards are going to be “radically diluted.” A second draft of the safeguards revision is expected to be

released later this year.

A bank spokesman denied that the bank’s release of its action plan on Wednesday had anything to do with the questions being asked by media organizations. The bank said that its action plan on resettlement was meant to address the urgent issues identified in its reviews without the additional delay of waiting for a new policy. “We’re not going to wait until that process is through to implement this action plan,” the spokesman said. “This work needs to happen now.”

Human rights activists who have criticized the bank for its failure to live up to its own standards for years said they were taken by surprise by the sudden release of the audits, and the bank’s avowals of reform.

Natalie Fields, the executive director of the Accountability Counsel, a legal group that represents indigenous peoples in disputes with the World Bank and IFC, said the plan to address the problems seemed “slapped together.”

The reforms announced don’t include measures to hold bank staff accountable for not doing a better job of identifying and helping displaced people, she said. “It’s a positive that the bank is acknowledging problems, but in many respects this is the same old story,” Fields said. “They have come up with their own plan for how to address the issues, without consulting people who have spent years of their lives on resettlement, and without consulting with the communities themselves.”

Source: *TheWorldPost (Huffington Post), March 5, 2015*

*Prosperity, continued from page 6*

two solid years into CARSI, there were 7,172 recorded homicides in Honduras, marking the most violent year in the country’s recent history. (That is, a country with five percent of the US’s population generated 56% as many murders as the US saw that year.)

Central America has been here before. Many of the features of CARSI and previous US initiatives in Central America are recycled in the Alliance for Prosperity, albeit with a bigger budget and a more explicit focus on improving conditions for foreign investors. “Obviously the neoliberal program was not structured to reduce poverty, or to generate employment, or so that there would be no mi-

grants,” Guatemalan researcher Luis Solano wrote in an email interview. “But the public discourse was that of the famous ‘trickle down policy,’ a trickle down that never arrived except to the handful who benefited.”

Far from providing new opportunities for regular people in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, the measures proposed in the Alliance for Prosperity are likely to worsen the social and economic realities for the region’s poor majority. This is likely to lead Central Americans (adults and children alike) to continue to seek out survival heading north.

Source: *New Republic Magazine, Latin America, February 5, 2015*

## Honduran Indigenous Rights Campaigner wins Goldman Prize

By Jonathan Watts, *Guardian reporter*

The odds of survival, let alone success, could hardly be more stacked against Berta Cáceres, the Honduran indigenous rights campaigner who has been declared the winner of this year's Goldman Environmental Prize. Cáceres has won the world's leading environmental award for her campaigning against the construction of the Agua Zarca dams.

Working in the most murderous country in the world for environmental activists, the mother of four is facing down one of Central America's biggest hydropower projects, powerful landowners, a US-funded police force, and a mercenary army of private security guards. She has received threats of rape and death, been followed, and several of her supporters have been killed, yet those suspected of such wrongdoings have walked free while Cáceres has been forced into hiding and courts have twice issued warrants for her arrest.

The Goldman prize, the world's leading environmental award, is recognition for the courage she has shown in a long and effective battle to stop construction of the Agua Zarca cascade of four giant dams, in the Gualcarque river basin. The project, which is being built by local firm Desa with the backing of international engineering and finance companies, would choke the main source of irrigation and drinking water for the community.

As the coordinator of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (known by its Spanish acronym COPINH), Cáceres first led a fight against illegal loggers, then plantation owners and is now at the head of a campaign against the dams, which she says are being built without the prior consultation required by international law.

The often bloody campaign struggle has achieved notable successes. In 2013, China's Sinohydro—the largest dam builder in the world—backed out of the Agua Zarca project, saying it was concerned about “serious conflicts” and “controversial land acquisition and invasion” by its local partner. International Rivers and Friends of the Earth are calling upon a German company, Voith Hydro, to end all involvement in the scheme, which has yet to begin construction.

Cáceres scored another victory when the

World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation, also withdrew from the project, citing concerns over human rights violations. She said the award would strengthen the group's campaigns. “It is an opportunity to give higher visibility to the violence of plunder, to the conflict, and also to the denunciations and resistance,” she said in an email response to questions by the Guardian. “It is an honor and an acknowledgement of the enormous sacrifice and commitment made by COPINH and its planetary contributions.”



*Honduras' Berta Cáceres, 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize winner for South & Central America receiving her award.*

The prize coincides with a new report that identifies Honduras as the most dangerous country in the world for environmental and land activists, particularly those from indigenous groups. Between 2010 and 2014, 101 campaigners were killed in Honduras, a higher death toll relative to population than anywhere else, according to the study “How Many More?” by NGO Global Witness.

The group said Honduras was at the forefront of a disturbing rise in murders worldwide. Last year, it documented 116 killings of activists across the globe, 20% higher than in 2013. Four in ten of the victims were from indigenous communities who resisted development projects or the encroachment of farms on their territory.

“In Honduras and across the world environmental defenders are being shot dead in broad daylight, kidnapped, threatened or tried as terrorists for standing in the way of so-called ‘development,’” Billy Kyte, a campaigner at Global Witness, said in a statement. “The true au-

thors of these crimes—a powerful nexus of corporate and state interests—are escaping unpunished. Urgent action is needed to protect citizens and bring perpetrators to justice.”

Cáceres is all too familiar with the dangers. In 2013, a fellow leader of COPINH, Tomás García, was shot and killed by a Honduran soldier—whose commanders are trained in the US School of the Americas—during a demonstration against the dam at Rio Blanco. The killer was put on trial but released on the grounds that he acted in self-defense. Last October, while

Cáceres was in a meeting with Pope Francis, she said another campaigner—14-year-old Maycol Rodríguez—was tortured and murdered after his father, a leading activist, received threats. No suspects have been identified.

In part this reflects the broader violence of Honduran society, which has some of the world's worst levels of murder, organized crime, drug trafficking, gun use, inequality and corruption. But Cáceres says indigenous environmental campaigners are particularly at risk because they are up against powerful political and economic interests who have grown used to exploiting their land with impunity.

“These are centuries-old ills, a product of domination. There is a racist system in place that sustains and reproduces itself,” she says. “The political, economic and social situation in Honduras is getting worse and there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarization, of violation of human rights, of transnationalization, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to corporate capital, for it to privatize energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones.”

Police and the courts are a threat rather than protection, she says. Cáceres has been detained twice: once for illegal possession of a firearm (which she says was planted in her car during a police check) and once for allegedly conspiring to damage property (a charge she successfully denied). She has also been followed and threatened by guards from the hydropower plant. There are four times as many private security employees as police in Honduras, according to Global Witness.

Most of the killings have taken place in Bajo

*continued on page 9*

## Secret Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP)

On March 25, WikiLeaks released the “Investment Chapter” from the secret negotiations of the TPP agreement. The document adds to the previous WikiLeaks publications of the chapters for Intellectual Property Rights (November 2013) and the Environment (January 2014).

The TPP Investment Chapter, published today, is dated 20 January 2015. The document is classified and supposed to be kept secret for four years after the entry into force of the TPP agreement or, if no agreement is reached, for four years from the close of the negotiations.

Julian Assange, WikiLeaks editor said: “The TPP has developed in secret an unaccountable supranational court for multinationals to sue states. This system is a challenge to parliamentary and judicial sovereignty. Similar tribunals have already been shown to chill the adoption of sane environmental protection, public health and public transport policies.”

Current TPP negotiation member states are the United States, Japan, Mexico, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Chile, Singapore, Peru, Vietnam, New Zealand and Brunei. The TPP is the largest economic treaty in history, including countries that represent more than 40 per cent of the world’s GDP.

The Investment Chapter highlights the intent of the TPP negotiating parties, led by the US, to increase the power of global corporations by creating a supra-national court, or tribunal, where foreign firms can “sue” states and obtain taxpayer compensation for “expected future profits”. These investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) tribunals are designed to overrule the national court systems. ISDS tribunals introduce a mechanism by which multinational corporations can force governments to pay compensation if the tribunal states that a country’s laws or policies affect the company’s claimed future profits. In return, states hope that multinationals will invest more. Similar mechanisms have already been used. For example, US tobacco company Phillip Morris used one such tribunal to sue Australia (June 2011 – ongoing) for mandating plain packaging of tobacco products on public health grounds; and by the oil giant Chevron against Ecuador in an attempt to evade a multi-billion-dollar compensation ruling for polluting the environment. The threat of future lawsuits chilled environmental and other legislation in Canada after it was sued by pesticide companies in

2008/9. ISDS tribunals are often held in secret, have no appeal mechanism, do not subordinate themselves to human rights laws or the public interest, and have few means by which other affected parties can make representations.

The TPP negotiations have been ongoing in secrecy for five years and are now in their final stages. In the United States the Obama administration plans to “fast-track” the treaty through Congress without the ability of elected officials to discuss or vote on individual measures. This has met growing opposition as a result of increased public scrutiny following WikiLeaks’ earlier releases of documents from the negotiations.

The TPP is set to be the forerunner to an equally secret agreement between the US and EU, the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). Negotiations for the TTIP

*Berta Cáceres, continued from page 8*

Aguán valley, where *campesinos* trying to defend their land have been targeted by agribusiness companies, particularly since the coup of 2009 replaced the democratically-elected president, Manuel Zelaya, with Porfirio Lobo from the conservative national party. The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, a coffee magnate from the same party who is backed by big landowners, won power in 2013 with the promise of a “soldier on every corner”. Many opponents of agribusiness in Bajo Aguán have “disappeared” in a chilling echo of the right-wing death squads that operated in Latin America during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. Cáceres also heads a group dedicated to raising the cases of those who have gone missing.

After a visit to the region in December, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said there was a “a complete absence of the most basic measures to address reports of grave human rights violations in the region” and noted the possible participation of the national government in the incidents of violence. Despite these concerns, the United States continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in the country in the name of the “war on drugs” and the State Department has issued statements supporting plantation owners against what it called “squatters.”

Margaret Sekagya, a former UN special rapporteur has warned that environmental de-

were initiated by the Obama administration in January 2013. Combined, the TPP and TTIP will cover more than 60 per cent of global GDP. The third treaty of the same kind, also negotiated in secrecy is TISA, on trade in services, including the financial and health sectors. It covers 50 countries, including the US and all EU countries. WikiLeaks released the secret draft text of the TISA’s financial annex in June 2014.

All these agreements on so-called “free trade” are negotiated outside the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) framework. Conspicuously absent from the countries involved in these agreements are the BRICs countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

Source: *WikiLeaks Press Release, March 25, 2015*

fenders in Honduras are being branded by the authorities as “members of the resistance, guerrillas, terrorists, political opponents or criminals,” with dangerous ramifications.

International civic rights, anti-poverty and environmental groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Friends of the Earth, have condemned the Honduran government for the situation faced by campaigners like Cáceres.

By naming her as this year’s winner and releasing a video about her life’s work, the Goldman Prize has also added to the pressure on the country before the periodic review of Honduras’s record by the UN Human Rights Council on May 8.

Cáceres, though, says it is important to see her struggle as more than a single-country issue. Behind the killings are powerful external forces, including international capital, the influence of the United States (which has six military bases in Honduras) and a global drive to clear more forest and exploit more resources despite the growing risks of climate change.

“We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action,” she says. “The Honduran people, along with international solidarity, can get out of this unjust situation, promoting hope, rebellion and organizing ourselves for the protection of life.”

Source: *www.theguardian.com, April 20, 2015*

## Call for Obama to Retract Executive Order Against Venezuela

Ed. Note: *The Task Force on the Americas is a member of the Venezuela Strategy Group*

In an open letter addressed to President Barack Obama, over 100 US academics, activists and NGOs called on their head of state to rescind his Executive Order declaring Venezuela “an unusual and extraordinary threat to US national security”. On March 9, 2015, President Obama invoked his executive powers to decree a national emergency based on the alleged “threat” represented by Venezuela. The Executive Order also imposed sanctions on Venezuelan officials with potentially far-reaching consequences.

US citizens and NGOs are joined by leaders from over 138 countries and prestigious multilateral organizations worldwide in their demand for President Obama to rescind his measures against Venezuela. Latin American and Caribbean nations have unanimously rejected President Obama’s Executive Order against Venezuela and have firmly called for its reversal. A powerful statement issued March 26, 2015 from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) which represents all 33 countries in the region, expressed “its rejection of the Executive Order issued by the Government of the United States of America on March 9, 2015,” considering that this Executive Order should be reversed.

The United Nations G77+China group, which represents 134 countries, also issued a firm statement opposing President Obama’s Executive Order against Venezuela. “The Group of 77+China deplors these measures and reiterates its firm commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political inde-

pendence of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela...The G77+China calls on the Government of the United States to evaluate and put into practice alternatives of dialogue with the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, under principles of respect for sovereignty and self-determination. As such, we urge that the Executive Order be abolished.”

In addition to regional organizations such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) representing 12 South American states, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), representing 11 Latin American and Caribbean nations, and the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) issuing powerful condemnations of President Obama’s measures against Venezuela. One hundred British parliamentarians have also repudiated the Executive Order and called on the US government to rescind its actions against Venezuela.

More than 9 million people have signed a petition in Venezuela and online, calling on President Obama to retract his Executive Order of March 9, 2015, and to cease interference in Venezuelan affairs. Even prominent members of the Venezuelan opposition have rejected Obama’s designation of Venezuela as a threat to US national security.

In a letter to the US president by Lara state governor Henry Falcon, known for his anti-government position, he writes, “Let me express to you clearly that Venezuela can’t be considered a threat to any other nation on the planet. We have serious internal problems but we will solve them between Venezuelans.”

This overwhelming international support for Venezuela comes just days before Latin

American leaders will meet with President Obama at the Summit of the Americas in Panama City, on April 9-10. While originally the summit was staged to be a historical event where Cuba would reunite with the organization after its forced exclusion by the US over fifty years ago, now the forum will be overshadowed by Obama’s latest move against Venezuela.

Heads of State from the region have made clear that they will not stand for US government aggression against one of their neighbors. Bolivian President Evo Morales warned, “These undemocratic actions of President Barack Obama threaten the peace and security of all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean,” while Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa scoffed, “It must be a bad joke, which reminds us of the darkest hours of our region, when we received invasions and dictatorships imposed by the US...Will they understand Latin America has changed?”

Despite being the aggrieved party, President Maduro has repeatedly expressed his desire for “respectful dialogue on equal terms” with the Obama administration and has requested Ecuador, as chair of CELAC, play a key role in mediating these efforts. The upcoming Summit of the Americas may just provide the type of environment that could enable such a dialogue.

In their letter to Obama, US citizens and NGOs encourage their head of state to improve regional relations and show “our Latin America neighbors that the US can relate to them in peace and with respect for their sovereignty.”

Source: *Venezuela Strategy Group, 4/1/15*

## Nicaragua’s Grand Canal Controversy

By *Mark Burton, criminal defense attorney and Chuck Kaufman, AFGJ co-coordinator*

Nicaragua is on the verge of beginning construction of a trans-isthmus canal, a dream that goes back to the colonial era. The canal will supplement the Panama Canal and will handle the largest ships which can’t fit in Panama’s locks. Nicaragua has made a sovereign decision on how it is going to develop and it is now under attack. Just like many people in the US supported Nicaragua’s sovereign right to defend its territory in the 1980s, and to

decide who is going to be their president (President Ortega remains quite popular in his third term), solidarity activists should support the sovereign right of Nicaraguans to develop their country as they see fit.

We are sensitive to important environmental issues raised by the construction of a megaproject such as a new canal connecting the Pacific to the Caribbean. However, much of the environmental criticism seems to be coming from the United States, and some from Europe. It is more than a little ironic that North Americans, who have hardly 2%

of their original forest cover left, and produce more pollution per capita than any other country on earth, are lecturing Nicaraguans on the environment.

It is also true that quite a number of the people marching in Nicaragua against the project are from the opposition which opposes everything that the democratically-elected government of the FSLN tries to do. Opposition parties, including those of former Sandinistas, are scared to death that the FSLN will continue to increase employment and decrease poverty. They are concerned that development

*continued on page 11*

Canal, continued from page 10

spurred by the canal will increase the FSLN's popularity and further marginalize their own electoral ambitions.

Nicaragua loses 70,000 hectares of forest per year to slash and burn agriculture by people who are desperately poor and just eke out a living in the countryside, or due to large-scale agriculture and ranching interests. Better enforcement and decreasing levels of poverty, thanks to government programs, did reduce forest loss to 63,000 hectares in 2013. However, Nicaragua has long been the third poorest country, after Haiti and Honduras, in Latin America and it simply doesn't have the money to sustain Nicaragua's forests.

The Nicaraguan government can only afford to reforest 15,000 hectares per year. Presidential advisor Paul Oquist says that the only conceivable source of money for more reforestation is revenue from the canal. If the US would pay Nicaragua the \$17 billion (plus nearly 29 years of interest) that it was ordered by the World Court to pay as reparations in 1986 for the damage caused by its illegal Contra War, Nicaragua wouldn't need the canal in order to achieve sustainable development.

As Panama learned, a canal is absolutely dependent on a healthy watershed, which requires unbroken expanses of healthy forest. So construction of the canal will actually improve that important environmental health factor. The Nicaraguan government also points out correctly that poverty is the greatest destructive force on their environment and jobs created by construction and operation of the canal will reduce poverty and increase revenue.

The government of President Daniel Ortega has a proven record as one of the foremost governments in the world working to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. Last year Nicaragua passed 50% of electricity production by renewable sources, and government policies have opened the way to 90% green energy production by 2020. We only wish we had a government in the US as concerned about the environment as Nicaragua. Those who argue against the canal treat the areas that the canal will go through as if they are pristine rainforest and wetlands—this is simply not true. Anyone flying from West to East over what once were vast and impenetrable forests will see that decades of agricultural frontier advancement and illegal clear cut logging have left hollow shells of trees around nearly adjoining squares of bare earth.



The wetlands have also been highly degraded by pesticide run-off and commercial shrimp farming. As a result of public comments about the need to protect an important wetland area, canal planners added a long bridge to the plan to reduce impact. Indeed, many changes to the plan, including the route itself, have been made as a result of an ongoing environmental impact study and consultations with the communities the canal will affect. The argument by canal opponents that the process has been opaque and that people have not been consulted rings hollow and smells of political opportunism.

There are good and sincere reasons to be concerned about the environmental impact of the canal, especially pertaining to threats to water quality in Lake Cocibolca (Lake Nicaragua). The "great lake" is the largest reservoir of fresh water in Central America. The canal will cross it and the plan calls for serious dredging. Supporters of the canal point to the dredged topsoil as a resource to recover land denuded by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Whether the dredged soil will be free enough of heavy metals and other pollutants, we don't know, but neither do the canal's opponents.

However, we are suspicious that opponents of the canal are playing right into the narrative of forces that care nothing about the environment and everything about the maintenance of US hegemony over the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean basin. The canal will be a big blow to US imperialism and hegemony. Apart from making Nicaragua wealthier and more independent, it also punches a hole in the strategic value of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The TPP is an attempt by the US and transnational corporations to create dependent countries that are beholden to the United States and which also agree to isolate

China. The canal bypasses this attempt to isolate China as the large ships carrying Chinese goods will be able to trade efficiently with Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela and other countries. China is one of these countries' largest foreign trade partners. The canal will save megabarrels of oil burned because the biggest ships must travel thousands of miles around the tip of South America because they are too big for the Panama Canal.

China is now the third largest foreign investor in Latin America, (the first in Brazil) and often makes trade and aid deals on better terms and without the strings attached by the US and Europe. China has given financial, technological, and diplomatic support to the cooperative trade group, ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas) which includes Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and several Caribbean island nations.

Our job as solidarity activists is to expose and oppose US intervention in the sovereign affairs of Nicaragua, Latin America, and indeed the world. It is not our job to criticize or lecture other countries on the sovereign decisions they choose to pursue in the interest of economic and social justice. As residents of a country that cut down its own great hardwood forests and continues to poison its, and the world's water and air, we should show a bit of humility before hectoring other countries on environmental issues. Besides, we find the claims that the canal will have positive environmental impacts to be at least as persuasive as the arguments for its negative impact. In the final analysis, we argue that it is up to Nicaraguans to decide whether or not the benefits outweigh the risks.

Source: [www.liberationnews.org](http://www.liberationnews.org), Dec. 16, 2014

## COLOMBIA: US to join 'Peace Process' in Havana

By *Berta Joubert-Ceci, activist, editor, photojournalist, member Colombia peace process delegation*

Ed. Note: *Task Force members met with Colombia peace process negotiators and guarantors as part of an AFGJ delegation April 11 – 18.*

The US State Department announced on Feb. 20 that it would send a representative to the peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia-People's Army) to be held in Havana, Cuba. That same day, the Peace Delegation of FARC—which is the revolutionary opposition to the Colombian government—issued a statement salut-

ing this step and saying in part, “We consider it a necessity, given the presence and the permanent impact that the United States has in the political, economic and social life of Colombia, that the US would now be able to contribute to the establishment of social justice and true democracy, and to overcome inequality and poverty, which is the right way to open the path to peace.”

During a meeting in December 2014, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos asked of US Secretary of State John Kerry that the US “take a more direct role in and be more directly in support of the peace process.” The US chose Bernard Aronson, former assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs from 1989-93, who was involved in the peace processes in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In El

Salvador, Aronson refused to sign an order to cut US funding for death squads. In Nicaragua he is notorious for his statement: “The great myth of the 20th century is that left-wing fascism is different from right-wing fascism.”

Aronson is on the Board of Directors of the National Democratic Institute, an organization created by the US government through the infamous National Endowment for Democracy that provides funding for opposition right-wing groups in Latin America. He also has financial connections, having served as director for the investment firm Goldman Sachs and having founded his own firm, ACON Investments.

But it was Aronson himself during the Feb. 20 press conference who revealed the US role in Colombian negotiations. By saying that the US will stand by the Santos government, he already made its partisan intent clear. He reinforced that stance by declaring that it is time that the FARC forever renounce violence, without even mentioning the violence of the Colombian state. He ended his talk by referring to the riches of Colombia, saying, “The World Bank said that Colombia is the best place in Latin America to do business.”

While the US presence is important for the peace process, for the reasons stated by the FARC, it is essential to briefly review the role of US intervention in Colombia in order to clearly highlight its character.

To show how extensive the US role is, it is only necessary to mention a few facts to remind us that much of the suffering of the Colombian people was conceived of in the White House, the Pentagon and the offices of the major mining, petroleum and chemical transnational corporations, as well as the US agricultural monopolies, with the complicity of the Colombian elites and the Colombian government.

This started with the violations and massacres of banana farmers by the United Fruit Co. in 1928, when some 2,000 workers were killed. It continues to the most recent terrorist acts of Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte and Coca Cola corporations, which pay paramilitary squads to beat up and even murder their workers.

The suspected role of the CIA in the assassination of the popular political leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948 is still under investigation. At issue is the CIA's refusal to disclose

### Simon Trinidad, Essential to Peace Process

By *W. T. Whitney, Jr., political journalist (article excerpted)*

Ricardo Palmera, alias “Simon Trinidad,” is a political prisoner and more. Even as such, his sixty-year sentence and constant solitary confinement are extraordinary. Post-sentencing legal services are not always available. His mail is blocked, visitors are limited, and he is shackled when they see him. Trinidad occupies a “Supermax” cell in the United States, in Colorado. In Colombia he's an enemy of the state.

Simon Trinidad was a leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) with responsibilities for political education, financial overview, and peace negotiations. He participated with the FARC in talks with the Colombian government in 1998-2002. In Ecuador, prior to his capture in January 2004—with CIA help—he was preparing to meet with United Nations representative James Lemoyne to review the situation of FARC prisoners of war.

Opon being detained, Trinidad was moved to Colombia. Then, on December 31, 2004, he was extradited to the US. Colombia had asked US authorities to request his extradition. The US, at the time, had no outstanding charges against him and Colombian officials had to fashion allegations. Later, Colombian courts convicted Trinidad *in absentia*, and he faces jail time there.

Trinidad, although imprisoned in the US, remains a political force beyond prison walls. The FARC's negotiations with the Colombian government to end civil war there began in Cuba in November 2012. The FARC still regards Trinidad as one of its leaders, and at the outset of the talks, the guerrillas named Trinidad as one of their five accredited representatives to the negotiations. In group photos he stands with other FARC negotiators as a life-sized “cut-out” image.

The FARC has repeatedly demanded his release from prison so he can serve as a negotiator. Rumors circulated recently that Colombian officials, listening to the FARC, are asking US counterparts for Trinidad's release. His signature is essential to finalizing the peace agreement.

Source: *Counterpunch, April 7, 2015*

#### TAKE ACTION!

Please Call the White House: 1-202-456-1414, with the following message:

“Free Simon Trinidad (previously know as Ricardo Palmera). Support the Colombia Peace Process.”

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## Uruguay's Almagro Elected to Head OAS

By *Fulton Armstrong and Aaron Bell*,  
Guest bloggers, *Center for Latin  
American and Latino Studies*

Ed. Note: *Article was excerpted*

Uruguayan diplomat Luis Almagro, elected secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS) last [month], says he wants to revitalize the hemispheric organization—a herculean, if not impossible task.

Mr. Almagro was the only candidate remaining after Guatemalan Eduardo Stein and Peruvian Diego García-Sayán withdrew from the race—the former for health concerns, and the latter due to a perceived lack of support from his government. Almagro previously served as Foreign Minister under former president José Mujica and is a member of his *Movimiento de Participación Popular*, whose left-leaning sympathies led observers to wonder whether Almagro could draw sufficient backing, even running unopposed. But

Almagro received formal support from several prominent nations ahead of time, including Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and the United States, and he got 33 of 34 votes (Guyana abstained) to secure his election. In his acceptance speech, Almagro stated that he intends to rise above the role of crisis manager and facilitate “the emergence of a revitalized OAS,” but major challenges await him.

Almagro seems to have the experience and temperament to be an excellent choice for the job, and his coming from Uruguay, whose offices have credibility virtually everywhere, may serve the OAS well. But the challenges will be daunting. He faces several ongoing crises, particularly in Venezuela, and ongoing splits within the region over the OAS’s role. One tempting option would be for Almagro to try to distance himself and the organization from Washington—a difficult task at best. Not only is his headquarters several hundred meters from the White House

and the State Department, but the US government (and to a lesser extent Canada) provides substantially more funding for the OAS’s general fund and through special donations than any other member state.

Almagro’s actions will also be watched closely by US conservatives who, stung by President Obama’s move toward diplomatic relations with Cuba, are looking for a fight over Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, and even on some issues with Brazil. Whatever Almagro does, it will be with the black cloud of the OAS’s financial difficulties over him, and the possibility that failing to successfully balance all of these issues may weaken the OAS and benefit regional organizations like CELAC and UNASUR, which are smaller and less well established, but independent of North American influence.

Source: *Christian Science Monitor*,  
*April 1, 2015*

*Colombia, continued from page 12*

classified documents about that murder, which opened the door to what is known as the “Great Violence,” which has lasted until today.

Also important is the US role in the establishment of the paramilitary forces themselves, even before the founding of the FARC-EP, and the so-called LASO Plan of bombings and annihilation used against peasant resistance in Marquetalia province, which led to the founding of the FARC insurgency.

We should not forget Washington’s Plan Colombia, which began in 1999 and has resulted in an escalation of social conflict with enormous implications in terms of increasing poverty, disease, violations of human and labor rights and massacres; mass poisonings and destruction of food crops by Monsanto chemicals; and the internal displacement of millions of Colombians. It is because of this US responsibility for perpetuating the war against the Colombian people that Washington must be part of the peace process.

The talks began with exploratory meetings in 2011. They have brought hope to the Colombian people that they will finally achieve the peace that they seek, which has been so elusive. It has been a unique process with breakthroughs as well as huge obstacles and difficulties.

Up to now, the talks have achieved par-

tial agreements in the areas of agricultural development, political participation of the insurgency in Colombia’s future and a solution to the problem of illicit drugs. Currently they are discussing questions involving the victims of the conflict.

How the peace process has developed deserves a separate article. However, it is necessary to mention the active participation of several organizations and of the Colombian people themselves, including victims of the conflict, who have enriched the discussions with their contributions. Five groups of victims traveled to Havana on several occasions to intervene directly in the process.

During these years various forums were held in Colombia to provide suggestions. A subcommittee on gender was formed to ensure that the new Colombia arising out of these dialogues is a country without gender discrimination. There have been special hearings with organizations of women and the lesbian, gay, bi and trans population in Colombia. A Historical Commission on the Conflict and its Victims was established to study the causes with a view toward ending the conflict. The FARC has proposed holding a constituent assembly where the people decide the future of the implementation of the agreements.

Although the process is making gains, it still confronts powerful forces. The FARC has

demanding a bilateral ceasefire so that negotiations can be held in an atmosphere of peace. So far, the government has rejected this proposal. On Dec. 17, however, the FARC insurgency announced a unilateral and indefinite ceasefire to demonstrate its desire to achieve peace.

While in Spain, President Santos said, “We are nearing the time for starting the discussion of a bilateral ceasefire. On March 2, five active-duty generals and an admiral will go to Havana to initiate this process.”

On Oct. 24 in Havana, the FARC brought 18 new members to serve on the Technical Subcommittee on bilateral ceasefire and surrender of weapons. Their aim is “to contribute to the analysis of experiences, generate and discuss initiatives and proposals [and] give input, expedite and facilitate discussions of the plenipotentiaries of the national government and the FARC-EP, to permit the implementation of agreements leading to the end of the conflict.”

As stated, the talks are at a crucial stage when solidarity movements, particularly in the US, have an essential role to express solidarity with the insurgency and the Colombian people, expose the criminal role of the US, and pressure the White House to abandon any attempt to undermine the negotiations.

Source: *Workers World*, March 5, 2015;  
*resistencia-colombia.org*

# Venezuela Solidarity Delegation July 4 – 11 or 15, 2015

## Celebrate Venezuelan Independence Day on July 5

Venezuela is facing challenging times. In the past two years the nation has collectively faced the death of their beloved leader, Hugo Chavez; a crippling rash of violent riots orchestrated by extreme opposition elements openly seeking the overthrow of a democratically elected president; and finally, a collapse of the global price of oil—the source of 90% of Venezuelan's income. As the nation rolls up its sleeves to re-boot national production and overcome shortages of food and basic supplies complicated by economic sabotage by powerful economic cartels, the response of the Obama administration has been to declare that Venezuela is a threat to US National Security, allowing the US government to impose immediate sanctions and threatens more. The reaction within and without Venezuela has been a thunderous rejection of Obama's executive decree. Over 10 million citizens, including many members of the opposition, have signed a petition asking Obama to rescind his decree. All the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean, including UNASUR, CELAC and ALBA, have rejected a decree that threatens US/Latin America relations.

Dozens of neighboring countries have been able to develop massive social programs thanks to Venezuela's numerous subsidized oil programs. Venezuela has been a key force in the

promotion of regional collaboration, leading to numerous political, economic and social agreements among the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Venezuela has raised the standard of living for all its citizens, and created the most egalitarian society in the continent.

Maybe these are reasons why Obama perceives Venezuela as a threat. The threat that another world IS possible, not the one based on the rule of the 1%, but a world based on respect for the dignity and sovereignty of each nation and individual, the collective use of national resources to improve the quality of the lives of all citizens, and participative democracy.

**Come to Venezuela** to find out if Venezuela is a threat, an inspiration, or something in between. Join Venezuelans in celebrating their **Independence Day on July 5th** as they remind the US government that they will continue to choose the leaders and system that works for them.

Meet the people of the Bolivarian Revolution, officials of the national and communal governments, judiciary and electoral system. Meet the press. Tell them that Obama's decree does not represent you! Meet with members of the opposition. See what the media actually is saying. Is there censorship? Are people going hungry, losing social security benefits?

**Delegation fee:** is \$1000 plus required visa from a Venezuelan consulate. For additional information, contact Dale Sorensen, 415/924-3227, geodale1@earthlink.net or Teri Mattson, 415/259-9626, teri.mattson@yahoo.com.

4-Day Sanare Extension \$250 additional to visit Lisa Sullivan's retreat center and surrounding area.

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