

Report

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Puerto Rico in Crisis

By Ed Morales, writer, teaches at Columbia University

Editor's update: On, September 28, the Trump administration announced that it was temporarily waiving the Jones Act shipping restrictions in response to a request from Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The waiver lasted only 10 days

Hurricane Maria has created a humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico. Much of the capital city of San Juan is flooded; there is contaminated water in the streets, shortages of gasoline and water, and looming crises for senior citizens in fragile health, reports Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz. Maria destroyed what Hurricane Irma, which struck earlier in September, did not. Virtually the entire island is without electricity, and cell-phone service and other communications are severely strained. Municipalities like Guayama, Cataño, and Toa Baja have reported massive floods and unthinkable devastation. (My mother and other family members live in a remote mountain town near the rain forest, and while I know they're safe, their food, water, and medications will only last so long.) A damaged dam at Lake Guajataca, near the northwestern town of Isabela, is threatening thousands of residents in nearby areas. As we go to press, at least 50 fatalities have been reported, but thousands of citizens have lost their homes, and those figures could increase substantially when the final numbers come in. Representative Nydia Velázquez estimates that Puerto Rico will need \$10 billion for a full recovery.

The US government has declared Puerto Rico a disaster area, making it eligible for funding by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Trump administration suspended the usual matching-fund requirement (currently 25 % of the federal amount). But it denied a request from several members of Congress to lift restrictions in the 1920 Jones Act.



Canovanas, Puerto Rico, on September 26, 2017 Reuters: Carlos Garcia Rawlins

With conditions worsening, the Trump administration reacted laconically on September 25 through press spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who insisted that Tom Bossert of the Department of Homeland Security and Brock Long of FEMA needed time to conduct “a more thorough and deeper assessment of what needs there are,” to make sure “we’re actually funding the correct things.” A senior congressional aide suggested the decision would take until later in October. That evening, Trump himself tweeted that while “much of the island was destroyed,” Puerto Rico’s billions of dollars of debt “owed to Wall Street...sadly, must be dealt with.”

While immediate aid is desperately needed, the Trump administration is missing the point. It is time for Washington to abandon its austerity approach to Puerto Rico. As a result of the PROMESA bill passed by Congress last year, a Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) has been imposed to restructure the island’s \$68 billion debt, address an additional \$49 billion in pension obligations, and promote economic development. To its credit, the FOMB announced on September 21 that it would allow Governor Ricardo

Rosselló to redistribute up to \$1 billion of the territory’s budget as an emergency fund for hurricane damages. But this is the proverbial drop in the bucket for a weary populace ravaged not only by today’s bankruptcy and storms worsened by climate change, but by decades of colonial neglect.

The FOMB, or *La Junta*, as it is known in Puerto Rico, never made sense, certainly not as a way to kindle economic development. Its primary purpose is to allow the collection of debt

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by bondholders, thus preventing disruption of the municipal-bond market, a crucial area of speculation for America's financial industry. *La Junta's* austerity measures would have caused a contraction of the economy, not growth. Indeed, before the storms, islanders had already seen a deterioration in their daily lives. Hurricane Maria has moved all of this into fast-forward, and the always fallacious promise of PROMESA has become a cruel joke.

Puerto Rico is now the target not only for rapacious vulture funds trying to collect on debt, but also for exponents of Katrina-style "disaster capitalism." A recent *Washington Post* op-ed suggested that companies like Home Depot would profit immensely from a major hurricane by cornering the market on home-reconstruction materials. In fact, Ken Langone, who helped finance Home Depot for its founders, is one of President Trump's closest allies. So is the billionaire hedge-funder John Paulson, whose Hotel Vanderbilt accused of turning away island residents hoping to cool off in its air-conditioned lobby, is currently a FEMA-approved bunker. And, of course, the notoriously unreliable electrical grid, administered by a power authority \$9 billion in debt and already being primed for privatization, might not be restored for months. The power grid also affects water distribution, which depends on electric pumps. Privatization has been touted as a way to create greater efficiency, but Puerto Ricans have already experienced the negative effects of the partial privatization of the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority, which resulted in increased rates and poorer service. What's more, the goal of making utilities profitable can inhibit badly needed modernization. The island's grid must be switched from outmoded electrical lines on poles, most of which were toppled by Maria, to underground lines, but such an investment is

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Newsletter Committee:

Editor: Dale Sorensen
 Roger Stoll
 Carol Costa
 Faye Hinze
 Carolina Dutton

Production: Mark Silva

The Jones Act Should Never Apply to Puerto Rico

The Jones Act (which requires that shipping between U.S. ports be in U.S.-registered vessels) is the name of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, whose primary author was Senator Wesley Jones. The goal was to ensure the existence of a thriving US-owned commercial shipping industry, a topic that had become salient during World War I. The idea was that in case of war there should always be a big supply of American-made, American-owned, American-crewed ships that could be counted on (and, if necessary, conscripted) to supply American commerce even in hazardous conditions. The Act also offers important protections to sailors from the deplorable working conditions and wages on many foreign ships, and it is supported by Maritime Unions. Accordingly, it has long been the target of a repeal campaign by the political right, including Senator John McCain and much of Wall Street.

Nevertheless, it is an imposition of colonialism to apply the Act to Puerto Rico. The cost of living in Puerto Rico is 13% higher than on the American mainland; food on Puerto Rico costs twice what it does in Florida, and that's before the devastation of the island's agriculture by Hurricane Maria. Under the Act, shipments of goods from the island to the US mainland, and vice versa, must be conducted via American ships, making everything Puerto Ricans buy unnecessarily expensive relative to goods purchased on either the mainland or other Caribbean islands.

Permanently lifting the Jones Act's application to Puerto Rico is a powerful lever at federal disposal for reducing the cost of living on the island.

Sources: "The Jones Act is Strangling Puerto Rico," *vox.com*, Sep. 28, 2017; "Puerto Rico and the Jones Act Conundrum," *www.counterpunch.org/2017/10/23/*

not profitable, at least in the short term.

What Puerto Rico needs is the kind of massive public investment that Washington provided in the days of Franklin Roosevelt. Reacting to the deadly hurricanes that struck the island in 1928 and 1932, Roosevelt established the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, which created jobs, built schools and medical facilities, expanded the university, and enhanced the electrical infrastructure. Today's monumental debt, an outgrowth of neoliberal excess, should be resolved with some version of the plan proposed by Bernie Sanders in his 2016 campaign. The Federal Reserve should buy back the debt from bondholders and deny the vulture funds a profit, imposing the kind of severe "haircuts" that the current Title III bankruptcy proceedings are unlikely to require.

Puerto Rico has been hit by the double whammy of irresponsible policy driven by a lust for profit. The reckless speculation in bonds ignored not only the fact that its economy was failing, but that the island itself is vulnerable to extreme weather events resulting from climate change, caused by the irrational addiction to fossil fuels. Maria is the third Cat-

egory 4 storm to hit US territory in a month, a record in modern meteorological history.

Maria's terrible blow reveals how Puerto Rico could be the mirror for a dystopian American future. As a recent report by the Action Center on Race and the Economy suggests, the hardline austerity planned for Puerto Rico is a version of the strictures already imposed in Detroit's bankruptcy, and will likely be used for troubled municipalities like Chicago and states like Illinois. On the other hand, Puerto Rico's misery can be a wake-up call for the United States which, ever since the New York City fiscal crisis of the 1970s, has gradually abandoned its commitment to the common good. Terminating PROMESA and investing billions in infrastructure, health, and education, humanely assuming responsibility for over a century of colonialism, will not only save tens of thousands of lives. It can also set a precedent and help reverse the slow descent of Trump's America into political, economic, and social disaster.

Source: *The Nation* October 16, 2017

Let Venezuela Live!

By Dan Kovalik, labor and human rights law professor and guest speaker at the Task Force Annual Dinner in September.

Ed. Note: *President Nicolas Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won 17 or 23 states in the October gubernatorial elections, the National Electoral Council (CNE) confirmed. The PSUV won 54 % of the total vote, marking a significant recovery since the ruling party's landslide defeat in 2015 parliamentary elections when it garnered only 43.7% of the vote.*

As the United States government callously watches its own citizens die in Puerto Rico, with the real death toll there currently around 450, the US government and press fixate on Venezuela's gubernatorial elections which took place on October 15. As one of my friends in Venezuela said to me with much emotion, "Why do they care so much about regional elections in Venezuela? How could this be so important to them? What other country's regional elections get so much attention?" Of course, these were rhetorical questions, for we both know full well the answer: because the US government wants to destroy Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and is looking for any pretext to do so.

The US Congress has even asked the US State Department to draw up plans for a military attack against Venezuela, a country which has never done us or anyone else harm. To the contrary, Venezuela, suffering from its own economic woes and travails, has been generous in helping other countries with their natural disasters, and along with Cuba has helped hundreds of thousands of people recover their sight through Operation Miracle.

But instead of telling us of such feats of kindness the US State Department and compliant media tell us only of Venezuela's shortcomings, whether real, fake or imagined, while ignoring, for example, the police massacre of peacefully-demonstrating civilians in next-door Colombia on October 5 and the subsequent police attack on the international humanitarian mission sent to in-

vestigate this massacre on October 8.

One thing I can tell you is that, contrary to the incessant claims of the mainstream media, Venezuela does *not* have a democracy deficit, especially when compared to the US itself. Jimmy Carter famously dubbed Venezuela's election system, "the best in the world."

This system, run by its own *separate* branch of the government, the National Election Council (CNE), is the very system he was referencing and it is headed today by the very same person, Tibisay Lucena, who ran it at the time he made that statement. Ms. Lucena herself was elected to the position of CNE President.

Still, the mainstream press, US State Department and Organization of American States (OAS) were calling the vote fraudulent even before it had taken place on October 15. Of course, the US and the OAS, openly working for regime change in Venezuela, are already in the process of helping to set up a government "in exile" in Washington, DC.



Voter presents fingerprint to verify ID. Photo: Journalistas Livres

The claims of fraud are groundless and largely petty. I know this because I was one of nearly 70 election observers from all of the world in Venezuela for the October 15 elections, and our group reached very different conclusions about these elections than those being widely peddled. Thus, we witnessed numerous polling stations throughout Venezuela in which long lines of voters were able to cast their ballot freely, without coercion and in an atmosphere of calm. A number of voters approached us, and myself personally, to tell us with great emotion how proud they are of their democratic system and how much they want the world to see their democracy

in action. These voices are rarely if ever heard in the mainstream press of the US.

And we witnessed what impressed Jimmy Carter so much: a uniform, electronic voting system which guarantees one person, one vote through a biometric authentication tool which only allows the system to be activated by a voter's unique fingerprint and ID number. This system also includes a paper receipt of each electronic vote. The voting machines are even fitted with a car battery as back-up in the case of an electrical outage.

In many ways this system is much more reliable and verifiable than the different systems used in various US states. Indeed, as to the issue of verification, manual audits of printed tallies from the electronic voting machines are done as a matter of course in Venezuela to verify the vote count, and such audits have already taken place. And if the opposition is still unhappy with the results of a given election, it is free to call for a further, more comprehensive audit as it has done on other occasions.

In addition, while it is true, as some critics have noted, that 201 polling stations were moved, they were moved ahead of the elections due to the very real threat of violence which was manifested in the prior July election which claimed at least 10 lives. Moreover, these stations only accounted for 1.48% of the 13,559 polling stations throughout the country, were moved no more than 2,158 meters from their original locations and their new locations were easily found on the CNE website. Furthermore, while critics have raised objections to the fact that some candidates on the ballot were not the nominees of their party, this was due to the fact that the parties simply did not ask for a change or substitution within the specified time limit for doing so. Meanwhile, the CNE did successfully make 233 candidate substitutions which were requested within the time limit.

And while critics also have pointed to some polling places being opened in an untimely fashion, such instances were very limited and due to error rather than intention. Again, it defies reason that the international community could be focused on such

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Haitians Continue to Resist Repression

By Carol Costa, Task Force board member

Ed. Note: Article was compiled from a statement and translated press releases by Pierre Lobossiere, Haiti Action Committee

Demonstrations are increasing in frequency, size and militancy in Haiti. People in more cities and towns are getting out in the streets demanding the resignation of the occupation-imposed president Jovenel Moise and the parliament. Despite the betrayal of the general strike scheduled for last Monday September 25 and Tuesday September 26, people took to the streets in protests that were brutally attacked by the UN occupation-trained and supervised Haitian police and heavily-armed paramilitary groups similar to the *Tonton Macoutes* death squads of the Duvaliers dictatorship.

On September 26, there was a call to action from the *Fanmi Lavalas* political organization to commemorate the 26th anniversary of the September 30, 1991 bloody *coup d'etat* which overthrew a people's government and its democratically elected president Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Over 5,000 people were killed by the Haitian military and its affiliated FRAPH death squad. The forces that carried it out have been in power in Haiti since another bloody coup in February 2004. With the support of a repressive, brutal UN occupation they have created intolerable misery that the people of Haiti are rebelling against. *Fanmi Lavalas* congratulated the Haitian people for remaining vigilant, not believing the lies of a money-launderer and his associates to stop mobilization, and expressed its support of the demonstrations taking place throughout the country to overturn the *coup d'etat* government.

In a second press release *Fanmi Lavalas* denounced the brutal attack by the Haitian police against demonstrators on this September 30. It once again saluted the courage of the Haitian people both throughout the country and abroad. It congratulated the hundreds of thousands of people who took to the streets in protest on September 30 to say no to political crime, economic crime, social crime that

the *coup d'etat* government is committing against the population, keeping people in hunger, misery, poor health, unable to send their children to school, forcing people to live in conditions that human beings should not be living under. Demonstrators repeatedly demanded the resignation of the imposed president, Jovenel Moise, who was fraudulently elected in 2016. Again the police were out to assassinate demonstrators, shooting directly at people, using tear gas and liquid skin irritant against protestors.

Similar to the events of 26 years ago, witnesses reported that a vehicle with ID #1-0062 from the BOID Haitian police unit brought officers who, unprovoked, started shooting directly into the crowd. It was about 3:00 pm; the demonstration was making its way back from Petionville to Port-au-Prince. Many were injured by the gunfire. Demonstrators trying to leave the area were attacked with tear gas by another unit of the Haitian police reportedly wearing blue and cream colored uniforms.

A demonstrator was observed being savagely beaten by a BOID policeman at about 3:30 pm in the area of Pont-Morin in Port-au-Prince before being taken away in a police car. Witnesses state that this was one of many such unprovoked brutal attacks against peaceful protestors by the UN-trained and supervised Haitian police.

Many demonstrators were illegally ar-

rested. The *Fanmi Lavalas* Political Organization condemned the violence and savage repression conducted by the police against demonstrators and demanded the immediate liberation of all the people who were arrested. The Executive Committee of *Fanmi Lavalas* reiterated its support of the people by saying that the struggle will not stop. The system must be overturned. It called for general mobilization everywhere in the country in whatever form. WE WILL NOT OBEY.

Source: www.haitisolidarity.net, Sept 30, 2017



Alone we are weak,
Together we are strong,
All together we are Lavalas

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trivialities, but there are sinister intentions behind such focus, namely, the desire for a regime change like the short-lived coup which ousted President Hugo Chavez in 2002, a coup involving the kidnapping of Chavez which the US helped instigate and then quickly blessed as legitimate.

The 2002 coup is indeed instructive. First, it shows the true undemocratic intentions of both the U.S. and key sectors of the opposition forces which were behind that coup. In addition, the forces which forced the restoration of Chavez to office were the poor who live in the barrios of Caracas and beyond and are the same forces who support the ruling PSUV Party now. It is a fact that the

poor, through the PSUV, are governing Venezuela, which is the real issue galling both the US and the opposition. The US and opposition would prefer what they view as the natural state of things in which, as in the current US oligarchical system and as in Venezuela prior to the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999, the few rich govern the masses of poor and working people. Venezuela has a very different notion of what democracy should look like, one which is actually more authentically democratic, and that is why that country and its people are being put under a microscope, criticized and punished.

Source: *Huffpost*, 10/18/2017



MARIN INTERFAITH

TASK FORCE ON THE AMERICAS

P.O.Box 925, Larkspur, CA 94977 (415)924-3227 mitf@igc.org

www.TaskForceAmericas.org

Statement on Venezuela

With US President Trump threatening military intervention and a domestic Venezuelan opposition, based in the wealthy and middle class, pursuing a strategy of violent street actions and sabotage to oust the democratically elected Maduro government, the gains of the Bolivarian Revolution are being eroded and could be lost.

Worse, if the opposition succeeds, a bloodbath could ensue, which would make the post 1973 Pinochet coup in Chile look mild by comparison. The stakes are high for the Venezuelan people, but also for all progressive peoples.

The Bolivarian Revolution began with Hugo Chávez's 1998 election, a revolution which used Venezuela's oil wealth to benefit the people and which made significant inroads in reducing poverty, increasing literacy, and making health care popularly available. Venezuela sparked a progressive wave in numerous Latin American countries.

Nicolás Maduro was elected president of Venezuela in 2013 after Chávez's death. The opposition disingenuously claimed electoral fraud and refused, along with their US government partners, to recognize the election. Ever since, the opposition has engaged in economic warfare, street actions, and colluding with the US government and other outside forces to overthrow Maduro. Meanwhile the working people of Venezuela have suffered shortages of consumer goods and conditions of instability.

The Chávistas have undoubtedly made mistakes and missteps, such as a failure to correct the dysfunctional currency system and allowing some corruption. But the domestic opposition and their US government partners would not improve conditions. They are really motivated to roll back the Bolivarian Revolution's successes to meet people's needs, rather than its alleged failures.

Surely the claims by the opposition and the US government that Maduro is undemocratic ring hollow when these same forces celebrate the unelected Temer government in Brazil, which is garnering single digit popular support ratings. In fact, these were some of the very same people who perpetrated the short-lived 2002 coup against Chávez with the blessing of the US government.

Maduro, for his part, has continually called for peaceful negotiations with the opposition. The Pope has even joined the call. Yet the opposition continues to ratchet up their extra-legal destabilization efforts, backed by the US government and some regional allies such as neighboring Colombia (the largest recipient of US military assistance and the biggest human rights abuser in the hemisphere).

The chief of state in any other country would have declared martial law. Instead, Maduro took the initiative to constitutionally call a Constituent National Assembly and in doing has mobilized the Chávista base, which voted in large numbers to support this supreme governing body. Meanwhile, the already factional opposition boycotted the vote and are now in disarray.

Under international law, it is up to the people of Venezuela to solve their own problems and determine their own destiny. Our responsibility as citizens of the U.S. is to do all we can to stop our own government from interfering.

25 August, 2017

Activists Take “End-the-Blockade of Cuba” Message” to Washington, DC

By Stephen Kimber, author of “*What Lies across the Water, The Real Story of the Cuban Five*”

Ed. Note: Alicia Jrapko and Bill Hackwell are both Task Force board members

The third *Days of Action Against the Blockade*, that took place in Washington DC September 11–16, has helped “raise new awareness about the damaging impact the failed 56-year US blockade of Cuba has had on the health not only of Cubans but also of Americans,” says Alicia Jrapko, the US coordinator of the International Committee for Peace, Justice and Dignity, which organized the events.

The goal of this year’s *Days of Action* was to make US people more aware of the real impact the blockade has had on the health of vulnerable groups in both countries. Cubans, for example, can’t get critically important medicines and medical technology because US companies, including foreign-based subsidiaries, aren’t allowed to sell to Cuba. At the same time, US citizens are being denied the right to innovative, life-saving and life-prolonging medications Cuba’s pharmaceutical industry has developed, including to treat diabetes and lung cancer—again because of the blockade.

With people in the United States engaged in their own debate over the future of US health care, Jrapko explained, “we also wanted to show people there is another better approach to health. Even though Cuba is a small and poor country, the government there has made health care a basic human right for all Cubans. The system focuses on primary and preventive care so patients get treated as people and not just as procedures.”

Dr. Jesús Renó, a professor, researcher and specialist in pediatric oncology, who is also the head of pediatrics at the National Institute of Oncology and Radiology in Havana, came to Washington as a member of the Cuban delegation to outline not only the US-imposed difficulties he faces every day but also the successes of the Cuban approach to health care.

He was joined by five recent US graduates



Bill Hackwell

of Cuba’s world famous Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM)—Dr. Lucia Agudelo, Dr. Abraham Vela, Dr. Gregory Wilkinson, Dr. Mercedes Charles and Dr. David Lavender—who spoke glowingly about what they’d learned about medicine as well as about everyday life in Cuba during their seven years of training there. They are among 170 American graduates of what is now the world’s largest medical school, with over 30,000 graduates from more than 100, mostly under-developed countries. The school is unique in that students are trained for free. Their only moral obligation is to return home after graduation to work in underserved communities in their own countries.

During the week, the doctors joined US activists and friends from Sweden and Canada visiting about 40 Congressional offices to outline the damaging impact of the blockade on both countries, encourage senators and representatives to sign on to a number of pieces of current legislation designed to lessen the impact of the blockade, and push them to vote for the complete dismantling of the blockade. During a congressional briefing on health care Dr. Reno’s testimony shocked Congresswomen Barbara Lee and Karen Bass when he explained the blockade of Cuba continues to make it impossible to get spare parts for medical equipment. Lee’s response

was, “I thought we had worked out an exemption on that.”

There were nine separate events on the schedule that included speaking engagements at the University of Maryland, Howard University, American University and Georgetown University School of Medicine. There were four public meetings, two that featured the new documentary on ELAM, *Dare to Dream* and the largest being in downtown DC at the Calvary Baptist Church featuring Cuban Ambassador to the United States, José Ramón Cabañas.



Source://theinternationalcommittee.org/activists-take-end-the-blockade-message-to-washington-dc-show-solidarity-with-cuba/

COLOMBIA: Security Forces Massacre 15 Civilians

By Atticus Ballesteros, journalist

Ed. Note by Alice Loaiza: *Farmers in Colombia have been fighting for coca substitution programs for years and it was finally achieved through the peace negotiations but has subsequently been ignored by the government. This is important because it was not the usual paramilitary assassination which the government denies knowing about but the government forces that opened fire on the protests. The peasants who grow coca have no other means of survival and really want the substitution crops and programs to be in place before they give up the coca... and that was the agreement signed by the government.*

Fifteen civilians were killed and more than 50 were injured after security forces shot indiscriminately into a crowd of peaceful protesters in southwest Colombia on September 28, multiple sources have said.

Immediately following the incident, police and military officials claimed they fired in response to an attack by FARC dissidents. This claim was roundly denied by local communities and international organizations. Local reports say anti-narcotics police, at the command of Lieutenant Colonel Arlex Escobar, fired into the crowd, while an army unit on the scene tried to stop the bloodshed.

Hundreds of farmers and community members from the outlying regions of Tumaco, Nariño had gathered near Llorente to protest government efforts to destroy their coca crops when the massacre occurred. Many of the



Soldier tearing out coca plant Photo: ColombiaReports.com

civilians present at the protest are farmers of coca, the base ingredient for cocaine, which the government considers to be an illicit plant.

As part of a recent peace deal between the government and Colombia's oldest rebel group FARC, farmers who cultivate coca are supposed to have the opportunity to substitute their coca for other, legal crops through a national program. In April, over a thousand farmers around Tumaco signed an agreement with government representatives to participate in that program, offering to eliminate their coca in exchange for government investment in the community and help combating illegal armed groups that operate in the area. But the government has been slow to respond to the presence of armed narco-trafficking groups that have threatened community leaders not to abandon coca.

On September 28, security forces arrived in Llorente and began tearing up people's coca against their will and in violation of agreements they signed with the government to participate in the crop substitution program. Angered farmers immediately gathered around large coca fields, worried that their only means to a livelihood would be forcibly taken from them before they could participate in the substitution program.

When police opened fire in Llorente, farmers and security forces were in the middle of a multi-day, peaceful standoff on the coca eradication issue. Between 300 and 1,000 farmers, all of them reportedly unarmed, had gathered in a circle around security forces in a field of coca.

The Fourth Region Anti-Narcotics Company (Police), under Lt. Col. Arlex Escobar, and the Army's Pegasus Task Force, under Brigadier General Sergio Tafur, were present at the meeting. "I showed up, and we were telling [the security forces], 'Let's negotiate this, let's talk about it,'" one eye-witness stated. "And they even said, 'Yes, let's do it. Let's set up a negotiating table.'" "And in that exact moment they started shooting. Indiscriminately. They gave us everything they had. It was horrible."

According to media outlet *Las Dos Orillas*, it was an anti-narcotics police officer who first

opened fire on the crowd of civilians. A witness reported:

I saved myself by ducking down and hiding until one of the soldiers ran out of bullets. When the shooting stopped, I ran. I ran by a guy who was shot, and he asked me to help him. But I couldn't do anything, and he died. They killed him. I was able to escape only getting shot in the leg.

Another witness said, "I saw a guy, a police officer, about 50 yards from me as I ran. He shot at me and hit me in the arm."

Wilson Varona, a delegate from the Francisco Cifuentes Human Rights Monitoring Network, was also present at the time of the incident. He said, "We had surrounded [the security forces] to prevent them from pulling up our coca. That's when the anti-narcotics police started to shoot at us." "Our hands were empty. We came empty-handed, and they shot at us."

Official reports on the number of dead claim six civilians were killed and 19 injured. Other reports from credible sources on the ground say at least 15 civilians have died of injuries related to the shooting. Shortly after the incident, Colombia's defense ministry claimed security forces fired in response to "five mortar explosions" and "indiscriminate machine gun fire" from dissident members of the FARC under the command of alias "Guacho."

A host of eyewitness accounts contradict the official story, however, claiming there were no dissident members of the FARC present. At the time of publication, no police or military officials have been reported injured or killed during the incident. When asked if there were any FARC dissidents present, one witness stated emphatically, "There were none. None at all. Just us, the campesinos, the civilians, the community leaders. 'The only thing that is certain,' he added, 'is that our own police are massacring us, those of us who fight everyday to make our living.'"

President Juan Manuel Santos on Friday morning stuck to the official account provided by the Defense Ministry, offering \$50,000 for any information leading to the arrest of FARC dissident leader *Guacho*.

Citizens and social organizations have gathered in protest against the violent incident in Pasto, the capital of Nariño, and in Llorente.

Source: *ColombiaReports.com*, October 6, 2017

HONDURAS: Getting Away with Murder!

By Silvio Carillo, nephew of Berta Cáceres, he lives in the San Francisco Bay Area

Ed. Note: *So far 67 Democrats support HR 1299*

Last June investigative journalist John Gibley wrote a comprehensive and disconcerting story about the assassination of my aunt Berta Cáceres, titled “Under the Gun: An Investigation Into the Murder of Berta Cáceres.” Bertita, as she was known to her friends and family, was a vibrant Honduran woman who was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015. She was given the prize for leading the struggle against the Agua Zarca dam, which was being built illegally on indigenous land. The project is owned by Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA), a company partially controlled by the Atala family, one of Central America’s wealthiest. The Atalas have close ties to the government; in fact, dam officials were using Honduran military and police to protect it from protesters.

In the *Sierra* magazine article Gibley asks, “Will those responsible get away with murder?” Today, several months after the piece went to print, and 19 months after her murder, my family and I believe the answer is a resounding “yes.”

Why are we so pessimistic? The biggest obstacle to change is US foreign policy. Some in Congress, including several of our Northern California Democrats, want to continue supporting a corrupt government charged with human rights abuses (and with documented ties to drug traffickers) that is aggressively curbing freedom of expression, speech, and press.

On March 2, 2017, the first anniversary of Bertita’s murder, Georgia Representative Hank Johnson introduced *HR1299 the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act*. This legislation would deny the government of Honduras \$18 million in security aid until human rights violations by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice, including Berta’s killers and the masterminds behind the plot. The legislation would also deny Honduran police and military further training, which they have been using to repress peaceful dissent and commit human rights abuses.

Supporting and passing this legislation does not mean US presence will disappear from Honduras as is often argued by those against the bill. The \$18 million targeted by HR 1299 is a drop

in the bucket of the total amount of aid we provide Honduras yearly. The US also has military personnel and support staff at several facilities around Honduras.

What this legislation does is send a message to the government of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández that the US will not tolerate the systemic corruption, kleptocracy, impunity, and human rights abuses against land defenders and other rights advocates, as has been repeatedly documented by the press and NGOs. We should not support a government that Global Witness called “The Deadliest Country in the World for Environmental Activism” in a report earlier this year.

Sounds like a no-brainer, right?

I traveled to Washington seeking more support for the bill on Capitol Hill from Bay Area Democrats. I was dismayed at some of the responses I got from foreign-policy aides. “If we don’t engage we think it will be worse,” is what I heard from Representative Jared Huffman’s office. What’s worse than the assassination of a mother of four who spoke against the injustices being committed against the Lenca indigenous population and who became a hero to thousands in a place that doesn’t have heroes? What’s worse than a country whose justice system is bankrupt with an impunity rate of 95 percent? What’s worse than a corrupt president stealing money from social security for his party’s use? What’s worse than a government, police, military, and justice system that repeatedly stifles freedom of the press and criminalizes free speech?

The mere fact that I was born in the United States over four decades ago is proof that US policy in Latin America since the Cold War began is utterly flawed and that a change is needed. In the early 1970s my parents fled Honduras and Guatemala after the US supported and shored up military dictatorships, some of which have since been charged with human rights abuses based on evidence provided by the US government itself. This trend continues today, which begs the question we should all ask our congressperson:

“How many more Bertas have to die before we change our policy?”

Representative Huffman—who

was endorsed by the Sierra Club—wants to continue to support the Hernandez government, though he has signed on to letters critical of it. Representatives Matusi, Bera, Garamendi, Thompson, McNerney, and Swalwell have all remained silent on the matter for now.

After John Gibley’s story for *Sierra* went to print and was posted online, he had to update it. Berta’s daughter, 26-year-old Bertha Zúñiga Cáceres, had been elected to head the organization her mother co-founded. As she was out meeting an indigenous community that requested the organization’s help, machete-wielding men chased her and attempted to run her off the road. Luckily she escaped unharmed, though terrified. No one was ever arrested. The incident was an ominous message we already knew: no one is safe from harm.

Berta’s death doesn’t mean she is gone; we are all Bertas. Like seeds planted in an immense fertilized garden she prepared, we are ready to rise up and be heard. Let’s make sure our elected officials take notice.

Source: [//sierraclub.org/san-francisco-bay/blog/2017/10/are-bay-area-reps-helping-honduras-get-away-murder](http://sierraclub.org/san-francisco-bay/blog/2017/10/are-bay-area-reps-helping-honduras-get-away-murder)

What You Can Do:

Contact your Congressional Representative and ask them to support HR1299 the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act. (CA Reps; Barbara Lee, Mark DeSaulnier, Zoe Lofgren, Jackie Speier, Anna Esho and Ro Khanna are all co-sponsors but those listed are not.)

Jared Huffman (CA 02) Contact:
Scott.Rasmussen@mail.house.gov or 202-225-5161

John Garamendi: (CA 03) Contact:
Gabriel.Sehr@mail.house.gov or 202-225-1880

Mike Thompson (CA 05) Contact:
Jennifer.Goedke@mail.house.gov or 202-225-3311

Eric Swalwell (CA 15) Contact:
Carly.Reed@mail.house.gov or 202-225-5065

Doris Matsui: (CA 06) Contact:
Megan.Herber@mail.house.gov or 202/225-7163

Jerry McNerney (CA 09) Contact:
Jackie.Silvers@mail.house.gov or 202-225-1947

Dismantling Power: The Zapatista Indigenous Vision to Transform Mexico

The Zapatistas and National Indigenous Congress (CNI) held an assembly in May 2017 in which they announced the creation of a Consejo *Indigena del Gobierno*, CIG (Indigenous Government Council) and chose María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, a Nahua indigenous healer, as its spokesperson and presidential candidate for the 2018 elections in Mexico. She is, known affectionately as ‘Marichuy.’

Marichuy’s candidacy is based on a model of politics that is far removed from the dominant political parties in the country. Indeed, her position is part of a horizontal, communally-organized structure that relies on democratic decision-making and governance from the bottom-up. This grassroots political structure was described in a communique released by the Zapatistas and CNI in October of 2016 titled, “May the Earth Tremble at its Core.” The 57-year-old traditional Nahua doctor and mother of three from western Mexico is the first indigenous woman to run for the presidency in Mexico.

Marichuy joined the struggles related to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1996, when she was involved in the formation of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) a network of indigenous communities throughout the country. She began helping members of her community with herbal remedies when she was 20-years-old. Her skills as a healer were passed down to her from elders in the community and are based on a close relationship with the local ecosystem.

As a presidential candidate, she is not interested in winning votes but in grassroots organizing and resisting the destruction that so many communities in Mexico are facing. “Our participation is for life,” she explained at a press conference in Chiapas. “It’s to bring together our communities that have been hit hard for years and years and that, I think, right now we need to look for a way to keep on existing.” Her goal is for Mexicans to “join forces to be able to destroy this system that is generally finishing us all off.”

Source: *Benjamin Dangl, Common Dreams, July 8, 2017*

TPS for Central American and Haitian Immigrants

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is the legal status given to refugees whose home countries have suffered natural disasters or war, is squarely in the crosshairs of the Trump Administration’s war on immigrants.

TPS protects people from deportation and allows them to legally work in the US. TPS does not provide a path to residency, and usually must be renewed every 18 months.

Recently, the Department of Homeland Security only renewed TPS for Haitian immigrants for six months and told Haitians with TPS to get their travel documents in order and prepare to return to Haiti. That decision doesn’t bode well for the 200,000 Salvadoran TPS recipients whose status is up for renewal in March 2018. TPS for both 60,000 Hondurans and 50,000 Haitians expires next March as well.

An end to TPS without a path to residency or citizenship for current recipients will create devastating hardship and instability for families from Central America and Haiti in the US and the communities that they support economically.

There is a long history of TPS being used as a political tool in El Salvador. With legislative and municipal elections coming up in March 2018 in El Salvador, the Salvadoran right wing is already using the possible non-renewal of TPS for political gain. Mainstream media in El Salvador has begun stoking public fears with a message that the FMLN government will be to blame if TPS is lost.

The Task Force on the Americas and CISPES is joining TPS recipients and immigrant rights groups across the US in the fight to save TPS. There are already over 90 members of Congress who have signed a letter calling on the Trump administration to not end TPS for Central Americans and Haitians.

CONTACT your Representative to confirm that they have signed: 202/224-3121

Tell the Administration to #SaveTPS or call the White House -202/456-1111

Dream Act Needed Now

In the face of President Trump’s decision to rescind DACA and leave the lives of nearly 800,000 immigrant youth in limbo, immigrant rights groups have been calling on Congress to pass a clean Dream Act. But what does it mean for this bill to be clean?

A clean Dream Act entails a permanent solution for Dreamers *without* added immigration enforcement or criminalization such as new detention centers, more ICE raids, methods to undermine immigrants’ ability to work and pay taxes, or additional surveillance in border states.

For the sake of Dreamers’ livelihoods and safety, we need Congress to pass a clean Dream Act before this year ends, not a bill that will use undocumented youth as bargaining chips for additionally harmful immigration policies.

Source: *National Immigration Law Center, Oct 5, 2017*

California About to Become a Sanctuary State

Gov Jerry Brown has signed a bill that places sharp limits on how state and local law enforcement agencies can cooperate with federal immigrations authorities, placing California squarely and provocatively in conflict with President Trump and his calls to deport millions of undocumented immigrants. The bill, SB 54 by CA Senate President Kevin de Leon (D- Los Angeles) takes effect on Jan. 1, 2018. In broad terms, it extends local “sanctuary city” protections for immigrants living in CA without legal documentation.

The bill bans state and local agencies, excluding the CA Department of Corrections from enforcing “holds” on people in custody. It blocks the deputization of police as immigrations agents and bars state and local law enforcement agencies from inquiring into an individual’s immigrations status. Late amendments led CA police chiefs to drop their opposition to the bill and shift their positions to neutral. Republicans and the sheriffs remain the measure’s leading critics.

Source: *NPR October 5, 2017*

Frances Steadman ¡Presente!

(January 30, 1920 – October 1, 2017)

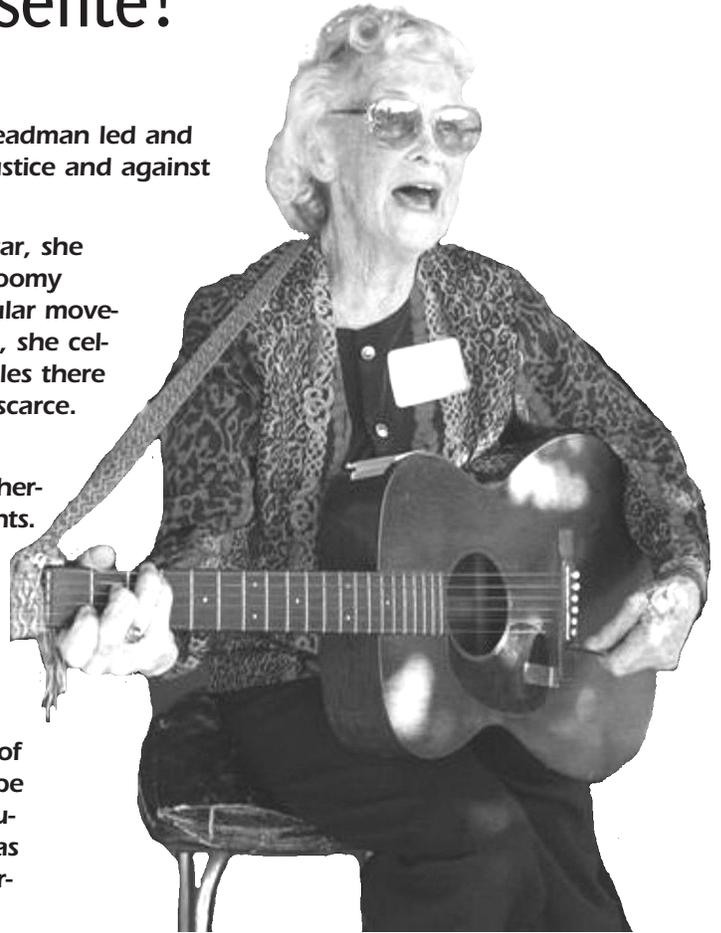
Founding Task Force on the Americas member Frances Steadman led and inspired generations of solidarity activists for peace and justice and against US imperialism.

Singing in a clear voice and accompanying herself on guitar, she brought sunshine to many a demonstration during the gloomy Reagan years of dirty US-sponsored wars against the popular movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Likewise, she celebrated the Cuban Revolution helping to bring used bicycles there after the fall of the Soviet Union when fuel sources were scarce.

A enthusiastic classroom teacher, a lover of nature, and a former Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, Frances dedicated herself to nuclear disarmament, civil rights, and immigrant rights.

Upon being inducted into the Marin Women's Hall of Fame in 1998, Frances remarked, "I'm almost embarrassed at being nominated, but I accept because I like to have the causes I work for be validated."

Frances' venerable tree of life sported 97 annual growth rings and generated many seeds to continue the mission of the Task Force on the Americas: "Proceeding from our hope for and commitment to world peace, our mission is to educate North American citizens about realities in the Americas and the role the US plays there, and to provide humanitarian aid and support for projects in those regions."



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