

Report

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US Solidarity Delegation Visits Venezuela, Praises Democratic Model

By Lucas Koemer, reporter

A group of twenty US social justice activists visited Venezuela July 4–15 as part of a delegation in solidarity with the South American nation following escalating US aggression in past months.

Organized by the Task Force on the Americas (TFA), the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), School of the Americas Watch, and Alliance for Global Justice, the delegation comes in direct response to the Obama administration’s executive order this past March, branding Venezuela a “national security threat” and imposing a further round of sanctions against top officials.

“When the US sanctions happened, we knew we had to come here and in any way possible show our solidarity with the Venezuelan people and the Venezuelan government and to say to people, ‘our government’s policies do not represent us,’” explained TFA director Dale Sorensen, who has coordinated solidarity delegations to Venezuela since 2004.

Arriving in Caracas on July 4th, in order to join Venezuelans in commemorating their independence (July 5) and sovereignty, delegates met with a plethora of diverse organizations over the course of their stay, including grassroots movements and political parties, as well as government officials.

With the December 6 parliamentary elections fast approaching, the group had the opportunity to sit down with Tibisay Lucena, president of Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE), which has been celebrated internationally for its fairness and rigor.

“The democratic processes that we’ve been able to observe as an organization and in our individual capacities have been an inspirational model that even former US president Jimmy Carter has said the world should follow,” affirmed NLG president-elect Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan, who has traveled to Venezuela several times as an electoral observer.

Nonetheless, the delegates arrived in the midst of new efforts on the part of the Venezuelan opposition to delegitimize the country’s electoral process, pinning recognition of the December 6 outcome on the presence of Organization of American States (OAS) and EU observers.

For Bannan, this call for observation by “political bodies” such as the OAS and the EU in lieu of the CELAC or UNASUR represents a “political request that has nothing to do with a sense of trust or distrust in the electoral system,” especially given that the OAS has been widely criticized for its pro-US bias in judging election outcomes.

While most of the group returned to the US after 10 days, for many delegates, the work is ongoing. According to Judy Somberg, co-chair of the NLG task force on the Americas, delegates have a responsibility to “go back and educate people in the US who have very little access to good press and widely available information about what’s going on in Venezuela, as well as to continue to build people-to-people solidarity with Venezuelans.”

These solidarity efforts are not only indispensable in supporting the Bolivarian Revolution, but also play a crucial role inside the US, serving to “increase people’s understanding of our economic and social human rights and how nonexistent they are in the United States,” says Susan Scott, former head of the NLG International Committee. In Venezuela, she went on to note, even the most marginalized have access to economic and social rights that people in the US lack.

Overall, delegates remarked that their experience in Venezuela clashed sharply with the near apocalyptic image projected by much of



Members of US Solidarity delegation. Photo: David Mandel

the international corporate media.

“Despite the constant onslaught of negative media that portrays Venezuela as a closed state dictatorship defined by scarcity, repression, and extreme insecurity, that has not been our experience, quite the opposite, and I think that there are a lot of people who are interested in coming to see for themselves the alternative reality that is this country,” concluded Bannan.

Source: <http://venezuelanalsys.com/news/11441>, July 13, 2015

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Cuba-US: Democracy and Restoration of Diplomatic Relations

By Arnold August, Canadian journalist and author

Ed. Note: *article edited for length*

The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US and the opening of embassies in Havana and Washington, DC are a victory for Cuba. Negotiations between the two countries had been taking place secretly for 18 months before being made public on December 17, 2014. On July 1, 2015, the agreement was sealed through the announcement of a formal opening date of July 20 for the embassies. It is important to note that over the course of this two-year process, Cuba has not given up its principles. Two primary examples of Cuba's sticking to its precepts pertain to the contentious issues of democracy/human rights and of Venezuela.

In the first instance, the two neighbors agreed democracy/human rights should be part of the discussion. Cuba has long declared that it is willing to put it on the table but only insofar as the issue of democracy and human rights in the US is also open for debate, and on the condition that Cuba's right to discuss this with the US as a sovereign independent country be recognized, on the basis of mutual respect and equality. This portion of the agreement was actually a demand by Cuba with a view to ending the long impasse of more than five decades since the US cut off diplomatic relations. One session of talks on this subject of democracy/human rights between the two parties took place between December 17 and July 1. Cuba did not give up any of its principles and is continuing on its own path to bring about changes according to its own needs and evaluations.

Cuba's second potential challenge in upholding its principles has proven to be one of

the most contentious issues in Latin America and the Caribbean: the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and the legitimacy of President Nicolás Maduro. During the heat of the negotiations from December 2014 to July 1, 2015 between Cuba and the US, the US imposed sanctions on seven Venezuelan government officials. Cuba nonetheless continued to support the Venezuelan government and to reject US attempts for regime change in Venezuela. Cuba did not abandon its principle of internationalist solidarity, which has become one of its hallmarks.

The July 20 date means diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies, but nothing more. It represents a first phase that



On July 20, the Cuban flag was raised at the Cuban Embassy in Washington.

has the potential to lead toward the long path of normalizing of relations. There remain many issues to be settled as part of normalization, such as lifting the blockade, returning Guantanamo to Cuba, ending discriminatory legislation on immigration and putting an end to US internal subversion and destabilization in Cuba in the name of democracy and human rights.

Another dispute is: how US democracy promotion in Cuba relates to the blockade. Among other pieces of legislation, the two principal Congressional building blocks underlying the blockade consist of the 1992 Torricelli Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. The former, whose real title is the Cuban Democracy Act, stipulates: "Assistance to support democracy in Cuba. The United States Government may provide assistance, through appropriate nongovernmental organizations, for the support of individuals and organizations to promote nonviolent democratic change in Cuba." The second legal

framework is the 1996 legislation, whose full title is the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act. Section 109 is entitled "Authorization of support for democratic and human rights groups and international observers." It stipulates that:

"The President is authorized to furnish assistance and provide other support for individuals and independent nongovernmental organizations to support democracy-building efforts for Cuba, including the following:

- (1) Published and informational matter, such as books, videos, and cassettes, on transitions to democracy, human rights, and market economies, to be made available to independent democratic groups in Cuba.
- (2) Humanitarian assistance to victims of political repression, and their families.
- (3) Support for democratic and human rights groups in Cuba

Based on this legislation, in June 2015, the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill proposed by the House of Representatives for 2016 includes funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Regarding Cuba, "the Committee recommendation includes \$30 million (an increase compared to 2015) for programs to promote democracy and strengthen civil society in Cuba, of which not less than \$8 million shall be for NED." The rest of this \$30 million is earmarked for other organizations such as USAID. The funding is clearly indicated as being part of blockade legislation: "The Committee directs that funds shall only be used for programs and activities ... of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996 and ... the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) of 1992, and shall not be used for business promotion, economic reform, entrepreneurship or any other assistance that is not democracy-building."

The recently released Congressional Budget Justification Foreign Operations, Appendix 3 for Fiscal Year 2016 spells out the objective of democracy promotion for Cuba since December 17, 2014: "The President noted during his December 17, 2014 policy speech that the promotion of demo-

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Puerto Rican Activist Oscar Rivera Deserves Freedom

By *Albor Ruiz, journalist*

Oscar López Rivera, a 72-year-old Puerto Rican who on May 29 marked 34 years in US federal prisons, 13 of them in solitary confinement. His crime? Fighting for independence for his homeland.

A growing number of people of every political persuasion and many different nationalities believe it is high time for him to be freed—and are actively seeking his release.

On May 30, López Rivera's only daughter, Clarisa López Ramos, 44, joined thousands of New Yorkers who, under the banner "One voice for Oscar," marched through the streets of Harlem demanding his release.

"Oscar long ago paid his debt to society. He is not a terrorist and he didn't harm anyone. After 34 years, it is long past the time to release Oscar and allow him to return to his home, his family and community," said Rep

Lydia Valazquez (D-NY), who address the marchers. Rep. José Serrano (D-NY), City Council Speaker Melissa Mark Viverito, and state Sen. Adriano Espaillat (D-Manhattan) also raised their voices to ask for López Rivera's freedom.

A Vietnam veteran who earned a Bronze Star for his bravery, López Rivera lived most of his life in Chicago, where he was a housing activist and established the first latino cultural center.

He was not accused of harming any person, only of "seditious conspiracy"—the same shapeless and gelatinous charge foisted on Nelson Mandela—related to his connection to FALN, a Puerto Rican nationalist group. He was not charged with participating in any of the bombings attributed to the FALN in the 1970s and 1980s.

"Oscar López is an obvious example of a

political prisoner in the United States. If the President wanted to pardon him today, he can do it," said López Rivera's attorney, Jan Susler, in a recent interview with CNN. "He has been punished for his bravery. He's serving a 70-year sentence but he never killed anybody. There is no blood on his hands."

Yes, hard as it may be to believe, one of the oldest political prisoners in the world is not in a foreign country but in Indiana, an injustice that President Obama can begin to right by freeing him.

Puerto Ricans of all ideologies, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, world leaders, who include five Nobel laureates, and even the governor of Puerto Rico have asked Obama to grant clemency to López Rivera.

Source: *New York Daily News, June 8, 2015*

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cratic principles and human rights remains the core goal of US assistance to Cuba. The United States will continue robust democracy assistance to Cuba to support civil society and greater human rights for the Cuban people.... The US continues to provide support for democracy and human rights in challenging operating environments, including Cuba and Venezuela."

The single most important point about democracy in Cuba is that its approach is entirely up to the Cuban people and its government. It is Cuba's sovereign right as an independent nation to take the path it desires. No other country may dictate the type of democracy that should exist in Cuba.

The US, for its part, has its own brand of democracy. Cuba does not have a program to undermine and subvert the status quo in the US, even though Cuba's views on the political and economic system in the US are public and well known. The fact that Cuba is a small Third World country does not grant the right to any powerful nation in the North to impose its system. This, in fact, is the bottom line of US democracy promotion.

Cuban democracy and US democracy are two different political systems. Each one embeds its own respective values and traditions. They cannot be compared, as they are based on different perspectives.

Are changes ever brought about in the Cuban political system? Yes, but not in the direction that US official policy would like. For example, from 1959 to 1974-76, Cuba exercised political power in the absence of elections and a constitution. However, during this period, participation in the Cuban political process was at its peak; today, many Cubans remain nostalgic about that time. In 1974-76, Cubans participated in drafting a constitution, voting upon it in a referendum and initiating elections. In 1992, reforms were made to the political and electoral system. Now there is talk about a new electoral law and other political changes. These new efforts are in response to Cuban analysis and needs, and not to those of the US. In other words, despite its weaknesses, Cuba is a democracy in motion.

US democracy promotion in Cuba will continue even after July 20. Does this mean that the establishment of diplomatic relations and embassies remains an important victory for Cuba? In my view, yes. Before July 20, there was no official convenient channel with the US for Cuba to register its opposition to these programs. Now that diplomatic relations have been established with embassies in both countries, Cuba can put its cards on the table with their US counterparts in Havana and Washington and state its case face to face with facts and proof.

The situation has improved in another way. Since December 17, 2014, Cuba has taken center stage on the international political scene under the leadership of President Raúl Castro. While there are many interpretations of this December 17 event, what basically comes across is that "Cuba was right" all along, for more than five decades. Its heroic resistance in the face of the Empire paid off. Before December 17, 2014, Cuba was marginalized in international politics. Cuba's voice has now stretched not only to the US and Europe, but to the whole world. It can no longer be viewed contemptuously. Going forward, as issues arise, the world will have to take notice of what the Cuban government says with regard to the subversive and destabilizing effects of US democracy promotion programs. Cuba-US relations will factor in mainstream international public opinion.

Source: *Global Research, July 18, 2015*

Call your Reps to support: HR 665 Freedom to Travel to Cuba act of 2015

Ask Senators to support: S.491 Lift the Trade Embargo on Cuba and

**S.299 Freedom to Travel to Cuba act of 2015
The Capital switchboard: 202-224-3121**

Haiti Information Project

From Kevin Pina, Senior Producer, Flashpoints Pacifica radio

Haiti now faces a historical juncture with three rounds of new elections scheduled from August through October 2015. The election timetable is as follows:

- Partial Legislative Elections: (20 Senators and 118 deputies) Sunday, August 9, 2015: 1st round
- 2nd round of Legislative Elections/1st round of presidential elections and local elections: Sunday, October 25, 2015
- If no candidate wins 2nd rounds will be held: Sunday, December 27, 2015

Please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the Haiti Information Project (HIP) and their efforts to provide news and analysis of Haiti's next elections. HIP is a collaboration between US and Haitian journalists and is one of the few sources of alternative news and information from the perspective of grassroots communities in Haiti as they struggle for local and national sovereignty. HIP regularly informs the reporting of nationally syndicated news radio shows such as Flashpoints on Pacifica radio and Sojourner Truth at KPFK in Los Angeles. It also provides regular updates and analysis of events in Haiti through the HIP blog and the HIP Twitter account with nearly 5,000 followers. You can make a tax-deductible donation to these efforts through our fiscal sponsor, the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas: www.taskforceamericas.org, Donate. Simply designate the amount you'd like to give at the top of the form and under Program, check other and type in HIP to make sure our program receives the funds.

In addition to providing news and analysis, HIP reporters on the ground in Haiti also contribute historically valuable video footage. As you may already know, my past documentary films on Haiti have focused on the context of elections in 1990 and 2000. *Haiti: Harvest of Hope* traces the history of elections and social movements in Haiti that ultimately led to a Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, being elected in 1990. *Haiti: We Must Kill the Bandits* has as its center the 2000 elections where the Lavalas party won most of the local and national contests culminating in the re-election of Aristide for a second term that same year. Both of these widely viewed documentaries cover the aftermath of these elections with Aristide overthrown in a brutal military coup in 1991 and then being ousted and forced on a plane by US Marines in 2004. Aristide's party, Fanmi Lavalas, had been excluded from all elections following the second coup of 2004 and is only now re-emerging to participate in Haiti's democratic process. Footage from HIP reporters on the ground in Haiti will also allow HIP to produce another documentary updating and telling the real story behind mainstream news headlines. ●

HAITI: USAID Funded Group that Supports Michel Martelly

By Jake Johnston, research assistant

Ed. Note: *article edited for length*

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) gave nearly \$100,000 to a Haitian political movement with close ties to President Michel Martelly in the country's 2010 elections, documents obtained by Al Jazeera show. The money was allocated shortly after Washington helped overturn the election results to thrust Martelly into power.

On the afternoon of Haiti's Nov. 28, 2010, elections, 12 of 18 presidential candidates took the stage at the glamorous Karibe Hotel, high up in the mountains that surround the capital. The elections were a fraudulent mess, they told the gathered press, and that the only way out was to cancel the poll and start over. Chaos soon engulfed Port-au-Prince and other cities, as thousands of young Haitians, many clad in the pink synonymous with Michel "Sweet Micky" Martelly, took to the streets to simultaneously denounce electoral fraud and herald the victory of their candidate, many days before any official results would be announced.

In the midst of the mayhem, key international actors mobilized. At an emergency meeting at the home of the head of the UN peacekeeping mission, Edmond Mulet approached the front-runners, including Martelly, telling them they had secured a spot in the second round and to cease calls for the election's cancellation. Days later, when the electoral council announced preliminary results that did not have Martelly advancing to the runoff, the streets were once again taken over by largely pro-Martelly protesters. The US Embassy released a statement questioning the announced results, fueling the demonstrations in Port-au-Prince.

The pressure of these pro-Martelly demonstrators, on the day of the elections and during the following weeks, was a key factor in convincing the US and other international actors to intervene in Haiti's elections and force the electoral authority to change the results of the first round, so as to ensure that Martelly remained on the ballot.

According to numerous firsthand accounts, Mouvement Tèt Kale (MTK), a political organization with close ties to Martelly, was active in these street mobilizations. Now documents through Freedom of Information Act requests reveal that the US government later provided nearly \$100,000 in support to MTK, through USAID.

The arm of USAID that funded MTK can provide support to political groups, as long as that support is provided to all political parties equally and does not influence election outcomes.

The second round of that election, held in March 2011, was the last election held in Haiti. Mayors across the entire country saw their terms expire in 2012 and were replaced by political appointees and in that year a third of the Senate reached the end of their terms; without new elections, this severely hampered the Senate's ability to reach a quorum and legislate. On Jan. 12, 2015, the terms of the entire Chamber of Deputies and another third of the Senate came to an end, leaving Martelly to govern by decree.

Source: *CEPR Haiti Relief and Reconstruction blog, July 15, 2015*

HONDURAS: Washington Complicit in Corruption Scandal

By Lauren Carasik clinical professor of law

Ed Note: Participants in the recent anti-corruption protests now include members of the middle-class, some of whom supported the 2009 coup.

As the corruption scandal dogging Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández continues to gather steam, the Obama administration has been notably silent about problems plaguing its ally. This is unsurprising, since the current maelstrom is President Barack Obama and Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's legacy in post-coup Honduras.

The Honduran government's crisis of legitimacy occurs amid a White House push for a \$1 billion aid package to the region. The Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity for the Northern Triangle, championed by Vice President Joe Biden, aims to provide funding for security, development and strengthening institutions. But critics have long equated increasing funding for a government whose militarization and corruption have spawned a human rights crisis to using gas to try to put out a fire.

Honduran opposition parties allege that the right-wing National Party received \$90 million of an estimated \$300 million stolen from the IHSS, the Honduran Social Security Institute. The money, they claim, funded Hernández's costly 2013 presidential campaign against Xiomara Castro, wife of former President Mel Zelaya. The funds were apparently siphoned off through fake businesses, some of which wrote checks to the party, and jacked up prices to fund kickbacks. The entire 18-person board of the IHSS is under investigation—all are members of the National party. Meanwhile, several National Party officials filed a suit against Salvador Nasralla, head of the Anti-Corruption party, claiming his allegations of misappropriated funds are defamatory. Underscoring the uphill battle in ferreting out corruption, Roberto Ramirez Aldana, the prosecutor assigned to the case, fled the country in the wake of credible death threats, hampering the investigation. David Romero, the journalist who exposed the scandal, has also received death threats. Impunity and silence are enforced by threats and violence in post-coup Honduras.

On June 3, Hernández conceded that the National Party had accepted 10 checks totaling \$150,000 of the ill-gotten funds two years ago.

But the president distanced himself from the misconduct, saying he bore no personal responsibility, and that neither he nor his party was aware of the funds' tainted origins. He urged the prompt return of the money. The strategic admission that his party inadvertently received a small amount seemed aimed at minimizing and deflecting the real scope of the corruption and how Hernández benefitted from it. Indeed, as University of California historian Dana Frank notes, "It is widely assumed that Hernández owes his electoral victory in part to these stolen funds." Aside from the corrosive effect of graft, the emptied coffers have led to untold suffering in a country already afflicted by endemic poverty and a weak healthcare system.

The scandal follows other flagrant assaults on democracy and the rule of law, including the removal of Supreme Court justices in 2012 when Hernández was president of Congress, the militarization of policing and a dire human rights crisis. Yet the National Party has little to fear from the turmoil and little incentive to implement meaningful structural reforms, since it effectively controls the country, not to mention it can count on Washington's complicity. While it does not hold the majority of the congressional seats, it controls the legislature's procedures, as well as the nation's highest court, top prosecutor and state security forces who have been implicated in human rights abuses.

Protesters galvanized through social media have been leading torch-lit marches demanding the president's resignation. To no one's surprise, Hernández indicated he has no intention

of stepping down. And since last month the Supreme Court confirmed that the Constitutional ban on seeking a second term was invalid, in a process rife with suspicious irregularities, Hernández is now free to run for re-election. Paradoxically, the justification for the 2009 coup ousting former President Mel Zelaya—that both President Obama and then Secretary of State Clinton refused to condemn—was over allegations that he intended to alter the Constitution to allow his re-election.

Washington has a shameful history of supporting Central American governments that are friendly to its economic and geopolitical interests, without regard to their conduct at home or its own role in the mayhem they create. The legacy of those policies endures today in the poverty and violence that fuels the child refugee crisis that stirred the Obama administration's heightened concern for the region. Corruption is too deeply entrenched in Honduras to entrust its ouster to the very actors that benefit from its largesse.

Until Honduras is willing to accept outside assistance to bolster the rule of law, US citizens should question whether any funds from Washington directed to help the nation's long-suffering people will reach its intended beneficiaries, or simply make matters worse. Before the Obama administration provides aid that would perpetuate the misery in Honduras, Washington should confront and denounce the militarization and corruption that underlies it—and reckon with its own history of supporting it.

Source: *TeleSurtv/net/ June 5, 2015*

NICARAGUA: Progress in UN Millennium Goals

Nicaragua is one of the 10 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that have achieved the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of reducing the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by half. This is according to the final report on the UNMDGs released last week by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. The report noted that the effort over 15 years to achieve eight objectives had achieved considerable success around the world with even the poorest countries achieving progress in reducing poverty.

With 39% of the seats in the National Assembly occupied by women and 57% of other high-level posts occupied by women, Nicaragua

achieved the goal of politically empowering women. Nicaragua has reduced maternal deaths from 160 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 40 in 2014, thus fulfilling the goal of reducing those deaths by three-quarters.

While Nicaragua has reduced the number of people with insufficient food from 2.3 million in 1990 to 1.19 million in 2014, still the highest in Central America.

The Food and Agriculture Organization has reported that Nicaragua also has made progress in reducing malnutrition in children under five with only 5.7% suffering from

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EL SALVADOR: Interview with Oscar Romero's Secretary

Translated by Theresa and Francisco Mejia, rewritten by Carol Moeller Costa

Ed. Note: *On May 23, 2015 the Catholic Church officially beatified Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez, the famous Archbishop of El Salvador. The following is a summary of an interview by Telesur reporter Jorge Gestoso of the former personal secretary of Monsignor Romero, Monsignor Jesus Delgado.*

Mr. Gestoso began by mentioning Monsignor Delgado's own words: "The clergy didn't like Monsignor Romero at all", and Monsignor Delgado recalled how Archbishop Romero approached him: "Father Jesus, help me; the clergy does not love me. Help me to become closer to the clergy." When he became Archbishop of El Salvador in 1977, Monsignor Romero was known as a priest of the old school, politically to the right and traditional in ecclesiastic terms. During the ceremony, Romero spoke very beautifully but "nobody applauded; it seemed like a tomb." It was then that he asked Monsignor Delgado to be his secretary and to help him by holding many classes on the bible for the priests. The Second Vatican Council was dictating that the bible be analyzed more, not only canon law, and that was precisely Monsignor Delgado's specialty. From that moment until Archbishop Romero's death, Father Delgado accompanied him in his mission.

Monsignor Romero had to confront radical change and do it very rapidly. He had to go from a conservative doctrine to a doctrine touching the real world, a social doctrine. As firsthand witness to the suffering of the landless poor his thinking was changing. Then his close friend, the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was assassinated. Romero was extremely affected by his death and became a fierce critic of the US-backed military regime that seized power in 1979.

When the government was trying to expel a group of liberal-leaning priests Monsignor Delgado accompanied Archbishop Romero to visit the President of El Salvador, Arturo Armando Molina. Romero and Molina had a friendship and Molina called himself "the spiritual son of Monsignor Romero." The archbishop insisted to the president that the priests were needed in the country and that

they should not be expelled. Nevertheless, that night the president told the press that that he and Romero had agreed to their expulsion. Romero felt betrayed and thus began his homilies in which he analyzed the reality of the country during the current week, giving advice and announcing or denouncing as a prophet. Romero would no longer speak directly to the president but told Molina that he, too, must listen to what was said from his pulpit. Those who used to be his friends on the right were now turning against him, even threatening to kill him, although he did not believe that they really would.

Archbishop Romero was very concerned about the many young people who were leaving the classroom and going into the mountains to be revolutionaries. He used his homilies to speak to them as well and to tell them to not take up arms, that violence is not the solution. The right misunderstood this and believed that he was directing the revolution.

Monsignor Romero was a great admirer of Pope Paul VI and embraced his grand pastoral campaign which has the name "The Civilization of Love". He was deep into the humanism of Paul VI but he had a difficult time with Pope John Paul II. When they met, the Pope almost touched Romero's nose with his finger and said, "Careful with communism". Romero answered, "Yes your Holiness, I know that in Poland the communism is hard line communism, but in Latin America, no. In Latin America it is enough that I talk about the social doctrine of the church to be labeled a communist."

When asked who killed Monsignor Romero, Monsignor Delgado answered that historically it was the problem of wealth and the confiscation of land from the people. Monsignor Romero was asking for a better understanding and to improve the conditions of the poor people, so they killed him. Major D'Aubuisson would be the military coordinator of the murder and the specific assassin was a Cuban-exile sniper from Miami.

Monsignor Romero was killed the day after his famous homily when he said, "I beseech, I beg you, I command you in the name of God: cease the repression and when commanded to kill somebody, obey the voice of God that says thou shalt not kill." He was not afraid to die. He had already given his life to

God, and for the poor and for a civilization of love. On the day of the assassination Monsignor Delgado almost substituted for Monsignor Romero, in which case he could have been the one assassinated.

Monsignor Delgado said he believes that the beatification has taken so long to happen because of the pressure from the wealthy on the ecclesiastics. The rich support the Catholic Church with their money and the Church has its hands tied to a certain extent. The Vatican must respect all letters coming from the rich even those that are filled with lies. One Latin American cardinal, Lopez Trujillo, worked especially hard to stop the process. Now it is the Pope who has finally pulled it back on track.

And El Salvador today? In El Salvador today democracy has progressed, formal democracy, but the violence remains. There is still great poverty and inequality. A close relationship in fraternity, equality and freedom must exist. "All these values are written on our banner but we do not have them yet."

Source: *www.teleSURtv.net, May 22, 2015*

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chronic and severe malnutrition.

A series of government programs have contributed to these improvements. The school meal program, which reaches a million children each day, has helped reduce childhood malnutrition. The construction of maternity wait homes (*casas maternas*) in towns throughout Nicaragua where rural women with problem pregnancies can stay before giving birth in a hospital have contributed to lowering the maternal death rate.

Zero Hunger, which provides farm animals, seeds, and tools to poor farming families, has increased family food consumption. Zero Usury and CRISSOL provide financing for small farms and businesses, increasing family income. The government also encourages small farmers and producers to join together in cooperatives and is expanding technical education programs in rural areas, both of which can increase family incomes over the medium to long term.

Sources: *Informe Pastran, July 8; Nicaragua News, July 9, 2015*

VENEZUELA: The Economic War

By Roger Stoll member of recent Task Force delegation to Venezuela

Venezuela is under a concerted economic attack by internal opposition elites and the US. The attack touches every Venezuelan without exception. It is distinct from other kinds of attacks: the 2002 coup and subsequent coup attempts; paramilitary assaults and killings during *La Salida* and *La Guarimba* and against peasants reclaiming farm land; and the efforts of the US and its obedient “human rights” organizations to smear, demonize and isolate Venezuela and its government.

Bolivarians aptly dub this attack *The Economic War*. It consists of financial and commercial crime, sabotage, smuggling and black marketeering, intended to undermine, compromise, corrupt, destabilize and remove the Bolivarian government through elections or a coup. Similar economic attacks were used against Chile before the 1973 coup and against Venezuela at the time of the 2002 coup. (After the 2002 coup the opposition staged the oil lockout, an economic attack that cost the Venezuelan economy US \$13.3 billion.)

When the Bolivarian movement came into government with the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998, it set out to capture some of Venezuela’s vast oil revenue that had gone to Venezuelan elites and transnationals, and to use it instead for the people: food, housing, health care, literacy, secondary and higher education, and advances in all the cultural and material necessities of life.

The Bolivarian movement has been extremely successful, and continues to prioritize social needs and wages despite the drop in oil revenues. In past decades poverty had been as high as 80%, now it’s about 25–30%. Extreme poverty has dipped below 6%, a fraction of what it was, and unemployment has been kept low (6–8%) despite the global recession. Illiteracy has been eliminated. Social indicators have risen sharply. And Venezuela now has the second highest college attendance rate in Latin America. All this was managed through the work of various government ministries and the institutions called missions (*misiones*) which address social needs like healthcare and housing. Local institutions called communal

councils (*consejos comunales*) also played a part. These institutions may use government funds for a variety of projects, including local infrastructure, food distribution and cooperative manufacturing enterprises. In direct reaction to this success, opposition and imperial forces now wage an economic war against the people of Venezuela, their political movement and their government.

The economic war exploits special vulnerabilities of the country’s economy. Venezuela is an oil exporting and commodity importing country: 95% of its total export is oil, while more than half of its food is imported. Last year oil sold in the international market at US \$100 a barrel, now the price is half that. Venezuela’s foreign exchange earnings were US \$65 billion last year; this year they’re expected to be half that, cutting into state revenues.

Nearly all Venezuela’s importers and distributors are private capitalists, which means the country’s import dependence is a problem for the Bolivarian project. Barring expropriation, the government has few options but to subsidize private imports and control prices to make staple goods available and affordable to all. These include rice, beans, corn flour, soap, toilet paper, sugar, coffee and countless other items.

Thus one attack in the economic war is hoarding by warehouses to create artificial shortages of basic goods in the shops. The shortages cause long lines and panic buying whenever the goods do become available. The government has successfully prosecuted some for illegal hoarding, but it persists.

The economy is further disrupted when hoarders illegally sell their goods abroad in Colombia, Brazil, Guyana or Caribbean island nations, or in the domestic black market. Artificial shortages also draw in individual speculators who buy up subsidized products for resale in the black market, where Venezuelans who can afford it will pay many times the controlled price to avoid waiting in lines.

Gasoline smuggling is also highly lucrative, since gas in Venezuela is about the cheapest in the world. You can smuggle it in your car’s tank or in gas cans, cross the border to Colombia or Brazil, and resell it

for many, many times what you paid. Losses to the country are equivalent to 100,000 barrels of oil a day, for an annual financial loss of US \$5 billion. Government efforts to control smuggling at the border have not put a stop to it.

Fraudulent currency exchanges exploit the multiple exchange rates in country. These multiple rates exist in part because essential imported goods are subsidized by the government by keeping the bolivars used for imports strong against the dollar. (Only two rates are considered here. Two additional rates exist for limited use, including one introduced just this year, which is somewhat closer to the black market rate, in an attempt to reduce capital flight.)

For all imported goods deemed “essential” (70% of imports) the exchange rate is 6.3 bolivars per dollar making the most common note, 100 bolivars, worth about US \$16. But the black market rate for dollars is over 600 bolivars per US dollar, making the same 100 bolivar note worth only US 17 cents.

One way to (illegally) profit from the difference in exchange rates is through fictitious imports. Here’s how it works. Importers have to buy US dollars to pay for goods they’ve contracted to import from abroad, so the government sells importers dollars at 6.3 bolivars per dollar. But after buying the dollars, the importers might import only half the contracted goods, or nothing at all. They then sell their leftover dollars on the black market at the rate of 600 bolivars per dollar, for an astronomical return of 95 times the original investment.

Another way many ordinary Venezuelans can profit on the spread between the 6.3 official rate and the black market rate is through the government travel allowance. If you are travelling say, to Miami, Florida for five days the government will sell you US \$500 dollars at the 6.3 bolivar per dollar rate. If in Miami you hang out with relatives so you can spend as little cash as possible, you can then return home and change your dollars on the black market at the 600 bolivar per dollar rate. Again, a return of 95 times the original amount.

There are other economic attacks to note. Inflation is around 70%, a result of the oil price drop and the criminality described

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COLOMBIA: As Oil Money Flowed, Clinton Changed her Position

By Deirdre Fulton, staff writer *Common Dreams*

A new investigative look at the ties between big business interests in Colombia, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and her family's charitable foundation is raising troubling questions about the role that corporate trade deals and big oil may have played in softening the powerful Democrat's position on human rights in the South American country.

During her time heading the State Department, presumptive 2016 presidential nominee Clinton stayed silent on reports of violence and threats against labor activists in Colombia, even as her family's "global philanthropic empire" was developing, and benefiting from private business ties with a major oil corporation accused of worker-intimidation in the country, according to new reporting published April 8 by *International Business Times*.

In addition, the *IBT* investigation shows that after millions of dollars were pledged by the oil company to the Clinton Foundation, Clinton reversed her position on a US-Colombia trade pact she had previously opposed on the grounds that it was bad for labor rights.

As *IBT* journalists Matthew Cunningham-Cook, Andrew Perez, and David Sirota report:

At the same time that Clinton's State Department was lauding Colombia's human rights record, her family was forging a financial relationship with Pacific Rubiales, the sprawling Canadian petroleum company at the center of Colombia's labor strife. The Clintons were also developing commercial ties with the oil giant's founder Canadian financier Frank Giustra, who now occupies a seat on the board of the Clinton Foundation, the family's global philanthropic empire.

"The details of these financial dealings remain murky," the article states, "but this much is clear: After millions of dollars were pledged by the oil company to the Clinton Foundation—supplemented by millions more from Giustra himself—Secretary Clinton abruptly changed her position on the controversial US-Colombia trade pact."

What's more, an *IBT* review of public State Department documents shows that "as the Giustra-Clinton foundation relationship deepened, Hillary Clinton and the State Department never criticized or

took action against the Colombian government for alleged violations of labor rights at Pacific Rubiales."

Quite the opposite, in fact: "Instead, Clinton's State Department issued certifications in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, declaring that Colombia has been complying with human rights standards that are required under federal law for continued US military aid to the country."

As Clinton courts American labor unions seeking support for her presidential campaign, the authors note, "her reversal on the Colombia trade pact and her subsequent move to bless Colombia's human rights record complicate her efforts to present herself as a champion of workers' rights."

Just this week, justifying its opposition to the looming Trans-Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the AFL-CIO pointed out that four years after the US and Colombia signed the Labor Action Plan (LAP) to address entrenched labor rights violations—pushed by Clinton's State Department in

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above. Inflation-depreciation of the bolivar is also promoted by the website *Dollar Today*, a Miami-based anti-Chavista website that talks down the bolivar and regularly quotes the Venezuela black market exchange rate.

There are the US sanctions and trade restrictions. And multinationals have brought dozens of suits over Venezuela's compensation numbers for legally executed oil industry nationalizations. Even the drop in oil prices, some suggest, resulted from collusion between the US and Saudi Arabia and was intended to hurt both Venezuela and Russia. All this produces capital flight, emigration of skilled and professional labor, and very high interest rates on Venezuela bonds, making it expensive for the government to borrow money.

But the Bolivarian government refuses to put these economic burdens on the backs of the people, repeatedly raising the minimum wage and continuing to fund the social programs run by the *misiones*. One scholar notes that in Venezuela "social rights are not dependent on economic growth and sustaining

order to diffuse unions' criticism of the Colombia trade agreement—Colombian workers have suffered over 1,933 threats and acts of violence against unionists. These include 105 alleged assassinations of union activists and 1,337 death threats.

Noting that that there has been virtually no progress over the past year in compliance with the LAP, the labor organization declared: "As the US government negotiates broad trade agreements with Europe and the Pacific Rim, it must look back at the LAP's continued failure in protecting workers' rights in Colombia, and not commit the same mistakes. It must ensure that these agreements deliver on the promises made for over twenty years about the broader benefits of expanding trade. Investors and companies have received these benefits. Workers in the US and countries that are our trading partners have not. We deserve it."

Pointing to remarks she delivered in Hong Kong in 2011, *IBT* notes that Clinton has previously "championed" the TPP.

Source: *Common Dreams*, April 9, 2015

of the missions is nonnegotiable; in Europe, all is subject to transnational capital's demands." Nevertheless the shortages have left a significant percentage of Venezuelans on the edge of food security, and recently there has been looting and violence.

Perhaps most damaging may be the political effects of the economic war. It discredits the state's ability to provide goods and services. It subverts the legitimacy of the state and its laws by promoting criminal profiteering. It calls into doubt the Bolivarian promise to build "21st century socialism." It promotes an individualist or exclusively family-centric ethic through fear of shortages and short-term material insecurity, destroying social and class solidarity.

Yet many Venezuelans have found ways to weather the storm. Especially in rural communities, some *consejos comunales* coordinate food distribution and other services to avoid the lines and shortages at the shops. If the Bolivarians triumph, it will be through their organizing and solidarity, built through decades of struggle capped by a decade and a half of great social and political progress in Bolivarian Venezuela. ●

ECUADOR: Correa Denounces Coup Plot Amid Protests

As opponents of Ecuador's President Rafael Correa made calls on social media for a military coup, a caravan of vehicles by right-wing protestors descended on the highway leading to Quito's international airport on June 14 in a bid to block Correa from being able to safely return to the country.

Social media posts called on those opposed to Correa's democratically-elected government to flood the highway and try to take the airport. Pro-opposition newspaper *El Comercio* said more than 200 cars participated in the convoy.

Also, a widely shared image calling for protests in front of the offices of the ruling PAIS Alliance said: "A call to the armed forces of Ecuador, be vigilant to defend peace, democracy, the homeland, liberty, and justice for Ecuadorean people."

However, according to the 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution, the country's armed forces are no longer responsible for maintaining constitutional order. Instead their role is described in Article 158 as: "The fundamental mission of the Armed Forces is the defense of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Speaking on his weekly TV program on June 13, Correa said of often-violent opposition protests outside the PAIS Alliance headquarters were part of a coup attempt by wealthy elites opposed to his government's

pro-poor measures.

Correa, who was re-elected in 2013 in a landslide with 57% of the vote, said the opposition had everything ready for their plot against the government, and they had the money and logistics prepared. The Ecuadorean leader called on Ecuador's people to remain strong and firm in light of the right-wing attacks. "They wanted to wear us down by 2016 ...

but here, nobody gets tired, we're stronger than ever," he said.

Since June 8, privileged sectors in the country, led by right-wing politicians, have been protesting a set of government bills which look to raise the inheritance and capital gains taxes on the top 2% of Ecuadoreans.

Although the protests were initially against citizens having to pay a very small tax on large inheritances, the right-wing protesters are now openly called for the ousting of the elected government.

The protests have been countered by government supporters, who have outnumbered the opposition protestors but have been met with violence from the right-wing demonstrators. Large numbers of police were deployed



Pro-government and opposition demonstrators separated by police in Quito, June 10.
Photo: TeleSurTV.com

each night to prevent violence or injuries.

The June 14 protest convoy along the Ruta Viva highway forms part of what opposition activists billed as Black Sunday, where they called on Ecuadoreans to wear black and wave black flags. However, there were few signs of the public embracing the call-out.

The Ruta Viva, one of the Correa government's feature infrastructure projects, runs through the affluent Quito suburbs of Cumbaya and Tumbaco, home to many of the protesters. The highway facilitates travel between the capital, the suburbs and the new international airport also built under the Correa government.

Source: *TeleSUR English, June 15, 2015*

BOLIVIA: Environmental Record Distorted

By *Frederico Fuentes* editor

Ed. Note: *Article edited for length*

When Bolivian President Evo Morales announced in May that his government was allowing oil and gas drilling in national parks, mainstream and progressive media outlets alike were quick to condemn his supposed hypocrisy on environmental issues.

Writing for the Associated Press, Frank Bajak argued that although known internationally for his outspoken campaigning on climate change, at home Morales faces constant criticism from conservationists, "who say he puts extraction ahead of clean water and forests." Bajak said this contradiction was a result of Morales' strategy of developing extractive industries as a means for reducing poverty, irrespective of the environmental cost.

Along a similar vein, Emily Achtenberg wrote on the NACLA website that Morales' announcement highlighted a central contradiction his government faces: having relied on oil and gas to finance successful redistributive programs, his government now finds itself at odds with indigenous, environmental, and other civil society organizations who argue that extractivism destroys nature and communities....

Oddly however, none of these media outlets have devoted a single article to how the Bolivian government has presided over what is arguably one of the most remarkable environmental achievements in recent years.

For many years, Bolivia has come under heavy fire for having one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. What's more, Morales has earned the ire of many environmental

NGOs due to his government's stance of opposing "carbon offset" schemes that seek to pay communities (and NGOs) in the global South to protect forests as a means to compensate for pollution emitted by companies abroad.

Few however have paid attention to figures from both the governmental Forests and Land Authority (ABT) and the independent World Resources Institute that indicate the Morales government has overseen an astonishing 64% reduction in the deforestation rate between 2010 and 2013 (Figures for 2014 are not yet available).

The impact of this goes beyond the issue of protecting forests. Firstly, deforestation is perhaps the most important contributing factor to a variety of environmental problems in Bolivia today, such as decreasing water and food supplies and a reduction in biodiversity.

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VENEZUELA: “Political Prisoner” Leopoldo López

By Greg Grandin, professor and author

Ed Note: *Article was edited*

Roberto Lovato has just published a great investigative essay in *Foreign Policy* on Leopoldo López, the jailed darling of Venezuela’s opposition. López is celebrated in the US press as a cross between Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He is handsome, like King, and, like Gandhi, occasionally shirtless. *Newsweek* blushes over López’s “twinkling chocolate-colored eyes and high cheekbones.” He is, apparently, a “revolutionary who has it all”: an “attractive and supportive wife, two children who get along with each other and impossibly adorable Labrador puppies.” Everything except a revolution.

Drawing on WikiLeaked cables, Lovato reveals how López over the years has been handled by the US embassy in Caracas. (Roberto told me that 15 minutes after a colleague of his posted the FP article on social media, someone from the US embassy e-mailed and said, “You should really come to me when it comes to Venezuela.”) Despite this support, though, López remains a divisive figure within Venezuela, and Lovato’s piece helps explain why the opposition can’t get its act together, despite opportunities offered by serious economic problems and rampant corruption.

A few years ago, not long after Hugo Chávez’s March 2013 death and the razor-thin election of Chávez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, López was at the center of a middle-class putsch attempt, leading to protests resulting in numerous deaths. It was as if all the rich, white gentry from LA’s Beverly Park started building barricades and stringing steel wire from lamppost to lamppost to decapitate motorcycle taxi drivers (as what happened to Venezuelan Elvis Durán), with the US media reporting on events as if it were Selma 1965.

Following these protests, López was arrested “on charges of arson, public incitement, and conspiracy.” His arrest got international attention, but, Lovato writes, “López’s trial has proceeded largely without fanfare.... López’s court dates in Caracas have generally attracted only small groups of supporters outside the courthouse, led by Lilian Tintori, López’s wife. Other key opposition leaders have stayed away, though they routinely voice support for López’s release. A recent campaign by his party, *Voluntad Popular*, to convene an assembly to rewrite the constitution and reorganize the gov-

ernment attracted criticism, with the leader of a rival opposition party calling for ‘responsibility and maturity’ and one opposition governor calling for an end to ‘anarchy or guarimbas,’ the street barricades that were the preferred tactic of López’s youthful followers.”

López’s claim to lead the Venezuelan opposition rests on his insistence that he had nothing to do with the failed April 2002 coup against Chávez. But Lovato nicely shows this insistence to be a lie. Then mayor of a rich Caracas municipality, López was everywhere those April days, rallying crowds, appearing on TV. His “most controversial episode,” as Lovato describes it, was leading a crowd to surround the house where a Chávez minister was laying low, picking up a megaphone to charge the minister with murder: “Justice will be imposed,” López said. López’s anti-Chavistas beat the minister in the street and then kidnapped him. López, in other words, is a thug.

After the 2002 coup was reversed, López was arrested for carrying out an illegal detention. But he was released when Chávez’s government issued a broad amnesty for those who tried to overthrow it. For years, Chavismo had been remarkably tolerant of its most extreme enemies, absorbing many opponents in what had been a flexible (albeit often corrupt and enriching) coalition. This had the effect of inculcating the idea among irreconcilables like López that they were absolutely immune, that there was no plot they could hatch, no attempt to lure sectors of the military to revolt, that wouldn’t be forgiven.

Two years ago, Maduro barely won the presidency in the wake of Chávez’s death. Coming so close to winning has had a dangerously regressive effect on the opposition. It took the Venezuelan oligarchy and old political elites about seven years to finally, grudgingly

accept the legitimacy of Hugo Chávez, and only after they nearly destroyed the country with paralyzing strikes, coup plots and other actions meant to destabilize and disrupt.

But now the opposition, giddy by its unexpectedly strong performance in 2013, sensing weakness on the part of Maduro, and believing the restoration of their class and race privilege is in sight, is once again hurtling toward the precipice.... In other words, we are witnessing the beginning of a whole new cycle of polarization, in which the opposition returns to its maximalist program of antagonism. There are reports that after opposition candidate Capriles’ loss, he made an incendiary speech, following which rampaging supporters left four Chavistas dead. You would never know it from reading Human Rights Watch’s coverage, but the primary victims of political violence in Venezuela over the last 14 years have in fact been supporters of Chávez, including peasants trying to make good on land reform.

In turn, Maduro, denied the time and stability to work on pressing matters of public administration, has been forced to respond, to take measures to try to once again socialize the oligarchy, its political agents and representatives in the media, measures which (however mild compared to, say, Colombia or Honduras) are denounced by Washington, Human Rights Watch and the mainstream media.

López and his co-conspirators are in jail or in exile. The justice system is rigged against them (though no more so than the lack of due process faced by those accused of threatening the national security of the US.) But Lovato’s excellent reporting makes clear they are far from the democrats portrayed in the US

Source: *The Nation*, July 29, 2015; also, “*The Making of Leopoldo Lopez*”: www.foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/27

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Secondly, given the impact deforestation has on the country’s carbon emissions, this significant reduction in deforestation may have made a massive contribution to Bolivia’s war on climate change.

Citing figures from the World Resource Institute, former Bolivian climate change negotiator turned government critic Pablo Solon wrote, “if deforestation has fallen by nearly two-thirds, greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation

will have dropped from 8.5 tons to 3 tons of CO2 per capita... representing a 37% decrease in greenhouse gas emissions with regards to 2010... and much more if we take 2001 as our base year.” That this downward trend began in 2010 is no coincidence.

This was the period when the government effectively came out against carbon offset schemes (which it equated with the privatization

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COLOMBIA: Exporting Abusive Drug War

The US is paying Colombia to train security forces in Central America, without tracking whether this is doing good or causing harm. It's time for authorities to start asking hard questions about what lessons Colombia's military is exporting abroad.

By the Colombian government's count, its security forces may have killed at least 4,475 civilians. More than 5,000 state agents have been implicated. According to the United States government, the Colombian military continued to kill civilians through 2014.

Yet, documents from the US Department of State and Department of Defense show the United States expanded funding this year for a program that pays the Andean nation to export its drug war and human rights "know-how" to new territories, despite the grave human rights concerns this fairly invisible strategy presents.

Since 2007, and more intensively since 2011, the United States has paid for Colombian security forces to train military and police in Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and even West Africa, in counternarcotics tactics

Source: *In Sight Crime*, July 19, 2015

GUATEMALA: Demands for Resignation

Beginning in mid-May thousands of protesters demanding an end to corruption and the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina have gathered on Saturdays in front of the National Palace. Most of the protesters are young and middle-class, including students,

businessmen, priests and homemakers; and they organized the leaderless demonstrations through social media. Analysts call it an unprecedented mass mobilization cutting across socio-economic, political and class lines.

The protesters are angered by recent revelations of multimillion-dollar corruption scandals that involved the private secretary of the vice-president Roxana Baldetti that involved a customs agency graft scheme in which officials allegedly took kickbacks from businesses to lower duties on imports. Juan Carlos Monzón Rojas, her private secretary, is accused of being the ringleader and is a fugitive. Baldetti resigned as vice-president and her bank accounts have been frozen and she is banned from traveling abroad.

Weeks later the nation was rocked by a second scandal at the Social Security Institute, where officials awarded a \$15 million contract to an unlicensed company for kidney treatments, at least 13 patients died as a result.

Pérez Molina had not been implicated in any wrongdoing and insists he will serve out his term but the protesters blame him anyway. The US Embassy has maintained a close relationship with the embattled president and Ambassador Todd Robinson appeared next to Molina in the presidential palace to announce the US government's decision to "help" oversee reforms of Guatemala's tax collection agency.

Source: *The Guardian*, June 12, 2015

MEXICO: Call to Suspend Plan Merida

In June, an SOA Watch delegation to Mexico called for defunding the Merida Initia-

tive after meeting with Mexican social movements and human rights organizations in Mexico City, Guerrero and Chiapas. In Mexico City they met with journalists and experts to discuss a range of topics including the effects of militarization on Mexican civil society. They visited political prisoner Nestora Salgado a leader of the community police in Olinala, Guerrero. In Guerrero, they met with community police and the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center and the parents of the 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa. In Chiapas they met with human rights defenders and visited the Zapatista autonomous community of Morelia.

Arturo Viscarra, an immigration lawyer and Advocacy Coordinator for SOA Watch, in an interview, talked about the importance of building people power against militarization. Plan Merida supports governments forces responsible for crimes like Ayotzinapa and the violation of Central American migrant rights. "It is our taxes that pay for these violations of human rights and mass disappearances."

Viscarra stated, "The US has provided more than \$3 billion to the Mexican government since 2008, most under the Merida Initiative. These funds have been used to deepen and expand militarization that has caused torture, forced disappearances and displaced communities under the pretext of the war on drugs."

Activist Irene Cambias talked about the Programa Frontera Sur, a program launched by Pres. Enrique Peña Nieto last year that increased deportations and military police presence and abuses on Mexico's southern border, a direct result of the US pressure to harden Mexico's southern border under Plan Merida.

Source: *SOA Watch*, July 15, 2015

Bolivia, continued from page 10

of forests and the conversion of indigenous people into park rangers) and began implementing an alternative policy based on striking a balance between the needs of people and the environment.

To this end, the government implemented a string of measures such as the establishment of a new state body dedicated to the protection of forest areas (ABT), a dramatic increase in fines for illegal logging, increased planning and collaboration with local farmers regarding the expansion of agriculture, and the handing over of large portions of forest lands to be managed by local indigenous peoples.

Far from a development-at-all-cost strategy, the Morales government has consistently sought to strengthen state-building capacities, regulate and restrict capitalist forces and promote peoples' participation, all while pursuing the ambitious task of breaking the economy's dependency on extractivism. This strategy has consistently counted on the support of the majority of the country's powerful indigenous, peasant and working-class organizations.

All this begs the question: why have media outlets, seemingly so concerned about Bolivia's environment, failed to investigate what might be the steepest reduction in greenhouse gas emission per capita of any country in the world?

Misrepresenting the Morales government's environmental track record is in many cases part of a conscious attempt to delegitimize and undermine Morales' position as a leading spokesperson in the fight against climate change.

It is because they disagree with his radical discourse that blames capitalism for the climate crisis we face today. For others, in particular Morales' NGO critics, it is because they disagree with the policies pursued by the Bolivian government. They believe Morales should instead implement policies they have designed (such as carbon offset schemes.)

Source: *Boliviaring.org*, July 23, 2015

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We are honored to have as our guest speaker,
here from Washington DC:

Chargé d'affaires

Maximilien Sánchez Arvelaiz

Maximilien Sánchez Arveláiz is serving as Chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States in July 2014 after being appointed Ambassador in February the same year. He also served as Presidential Commissioner of President Nicolás Maduro Moros in International Relations (2013-2014), Ambassador to the Federative Republic of Brazil (2010-2013), and Minister Counselor of the Venezuelan Mission to the United Nations, New York (2006-2007).

A lawyer with a Master's Degree in Latin American Political Science, he completed university and post-graduate studies in France and England at the University Pantheon Assas in Paris and the University of London, respectively.

He Joined President Hugo Chávez's government as a consultant in Foreign Affairs (2001) and was appointed as Senior Adviser to the Office of the Presidency for two periods (2004-2006) and (2007-2010).



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