

Report

WINTER 2016

PUBLISHED BY MARIN INTERFAITH TASK FORCE ON THE AMERICAS

ARGENTINA: The Lethal Power of President Macri

By Carlos Aznárez journalist and director of Resumen Latinamericano

In addition to being a partner of merit in the current Latin American right-wing offensive, Mauricio Macri knows very well that what a president does in the first 100 days of a newly elected government is fundamental in establishing a style as well as a theme for the rest of the way. A good example of this is the price of commodities of necessity that once they go up it is difficult for them to return to their original price. Macri's unilateral establishment of National Emergency Decrees (DNU) so soon in office is because he knows there is no possibility they will be cancelled by any decision of parliament.

Once again, as it was when Macri was the mayor of Buenos Aires, the so called "opposition party" has underestimated the power behind *macrismo* and only now, after a month of arrogant management, they are realizing how many things have changed for the worse. Primary in this is the effect that his presidency has had on important factors of the economic crisis. This obviously did not begin with Macri but he has accelerated the process based on the recipes taken from the worst pages of the manual on Neo-liberalism.

Now the list of grievances, including measures of provocation, repressive actions, and attacks on our sovereignty and culture, is so apparent that few hold on to any doubts that Macri's electoral slogans are now turning into a nightmare that has an indefinite duration.

The devaluation of the peso, that was ignored during the time of Macri the candidate, is now being implemented day by day because it was a plan of the business corporations that was already in place well in advance. Similar to what is happening in Venezuela, speculations now over the price of essential goods are bouncing

around like they were puppets. The release of the dollar, that is so essential to these unscrupulous financial sectors, has been accompanied with other initiatives like the lifting of withholdings to the agricultural/livestock oligarchy and their new pot of gold, soy produc-



Marico Macri was sworn in as President on Dec. 10, 2016 photo: EPA

tion. This has already resulted in millions of dollars in profits that comes with a debt of eternal gratitude to *macrismo*.

Similarly, other decrees are in place that calls for a review of the hiring process of public employees during the last years of the outgoing government. This measure could affect more than 60 thousand workers. It is true that all governments use employment in the capacity of the state in its own interests. Kirchner wasted no time doing the same thing but what is different now is the arrogant bulldozer approach of *macrismo* whose aim is to lay off, with dictatorial methodology, thousands of men and women who hold legal contracts. The future of these workers should be based on their knowledge and delivery of the tasks they were hired for not on political affiliation. It is paradoxical to talk about preferential placement in state jobs when the Macri government has already given them away to his family, friends, close collaborators of his own party and to the great battalion

of bureaucrats and ineffective people in all the different areas.

The new reality has been well reported by the Association of State Workers; in the first fifteen days of the new Government ten thousand people have been laid-off. In addition is the implementation of policies that purposefully demonize the public sector to justify in the short-term the dismantling of public services and shrink the State, just as Carlos Menem did in the devastating 1990's.

Already there have been 2,035 people who work in the senate who have been thrown to the street by Vice President Gabriela Michetti, a decision that featured the shameful complicity of Miguel Pichetto, the head of the Kirchner Parliamentarian group Front for the Victory. This comes on top of more than 600 workers fired from the Kirchner Cultural Center, and others at the of-

fices of the Federal Authority for Audiovisual Communication Services. A ripple effect of the

continued on page 2

INSIDE	
Venezuela's Arrests	2
Venezuela Delegation	3
Haiti Delegation	4
Venezuela Amnesty Law	5
Haiti Defiance	6
Guatemala	7
Honduran Impunity	8
Honduran Land Rights	9
US Deportations	9
Colombian Prison	10
News Briefs	11

VENEZUELA: State Food Functionaries Arrested

By *Rachael Boothroyd Rojas, reporter*

Three top officials in key Venezuelan state food corporations have been arrested for embezzling millions of bolivars - after it emerged that they had been illegally selling subsidized items to private sector restaurants, bakeries and supermarkets for huge personal profit.

On January 31, Interior Minister Gustavo González Lopez revealed that the ex-president of CVAL (Venezuelan Food Corporation), Herbert Aguilar, along with the CVAL administrative director, Barbara Figueroa, and the former president of Abastos Bicentenario, Barbara Gonzalez, will all stand trial for embezzlement and speculation.

The scam was revealed during an investigation led by the National Anti-Corruption Body, which found millions of bolivars in the residences and offices of the accused.

Forty public servants have also been detained in connection with the operation and twelve are still wanted for arrest. "All of these citizens took advantage of the Bolivarian government's food security policies, destined to guarantee food consumption for Venezuela's poorest families. They diverted food from the people to the commercial private networks... which sell these products at speculative prices as part of an economic sabotage," stated Lopez.

The price between government regulated food items and those sold on the private market is currently at an all-time high, thanks to a disastrous combination of falling national revenue, rising inflation and currency devaluation.

Although the government's food corporations and institutions are designed to protect Venezuelan families from the worst of the economic crisis, state institutions have been hit

hard by a phenomenon known as *bachaqueo* or the reselling of subsidized items at a higher price on the illegal market, causing scarcity and speculation.

The announcement is the first time that *bachaqueo* has been confirmed in the upper echelons of state institutions, and is one of the government's most significant arrests since its anti-corruption drive began in 2014. "There is no other name for them than traitors, they were taking advantage of activities that had been entrusted to them for personal gain," added Lopez on state television.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has called for a thorough investigation to whittle corruption out of state institutions. "They will fall, one by one," he stated.

Source: *Venezuelanalysis.com. February 2, 2016*

Argentina, continued from page 1

federal layoffs is also beginning to happen to hundreds of workers in the municipalities of Buenos Aires, Lanus, Quilmes, Chascomús, Coronel Vidal, Colonel Suárez, and Adolfo Alsina. In La Plata 4,500 terminated workers began a series of demonstrations that culminated this week with harsh repressive attacks by local police.

The Macrista economic team has also made it clear to union leaders that they will face a tough time in upcoming negotiations with the bosses, including the firing of employees who complain and protest any of the new terms and conditions.

The overall applied social policy of *macrismo* is transparent and in general is the same blueprint used by other repressive regimes on the continent to generate fear to those who still have jobs by showing scenes to remind them that they too could soon become one of the

new unemployed. As we can see some are accepting this without question while others with more dignity and a fighting spirit are resisting in the streets against the boss - police attacks.

Another item that *macrismo* has targeted is in the field of communication. On the one hand Macri is dissolving the AFSCA and intervening in nodal aspects of the Media Law, putting all that structure under the command of a Ministry of Communications. On the other hand Macri is giving a greater green light than usual to the concentrated media, led by Clarin, La Nacion and Infobae. These are the managers of the "new image" of a government that prides itself in exercising power without consulting, not even with their own parliamentarians.

Meanwhile in Washington the empire is smiling on Macri. The US government likes the anti-Chávez tone of the new President of Argentina, his carnal relations with Venezuela prisoners Leopoldo López and Capriles Radonsky or former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Vélez. It also celebrates Macri's complicity with Zionism when they displayed their hostility against Iran. In the eyes of the empire Macri is a good boy.

The President of Uruguay, Tabaré Vázquez, who in his previous administration was on the verge of asking Bush for military assistance in their conflict with Argentina due to the dispute of Botnia plant on the Plata River today has become a sweet colleague of Macri and promises commendable relations.

The *macrista* offensive is primarily taking

place without much institutional opposition getting in its way because the parliamentary process in Argentina moves at such an unexplained slowness. It is well known that Kirchner's Front for the Victory has a majority in the Senate and a good percentage of seats in Parliament, but beyond some statements and some feeble attempts at opposing Macri they are all but frozen and have not called for an extraordinary session of Congress. Most are too busy enjoying their warm vacations while others are shamelessly trying to find their way into the fabric of the ruling party.

Finally, there is the street. The fight has to be in the street which can determine the destiny of a country. There are many who are already resisting the Government maneuvers. Several unions and social organizations are doing so. Some are responding to the repressive agenda of the Pink House while others are more conscious and looking for a key to build a broad spectrum of forces to the left of the current regime. This coalition would have to bring in many, including thousands of young *kichneristas*, and it would have to possess the humble understanding that to fight against this right wing pro-imperialist government nobody has earned the leadership in advance. It also needs to understand that on December 10 a new era began, and the struggle against it cannot win with wishful expressions of returning to a problematic past.

Source: *Resumen Latinoamericano/the Dawn/ Jan 9, 2016*

Task Force on the Americas Report is published quarterly by the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas.

Newsletter Committee:

Editor: Dale Sorensen
Carol Costa
Teri Mattson
Colleen Rose
Leslee Coady
Roger Stoll

Production: Mark Silva

VENEZUELA: 2015 Elections – International Observers Delegation

By: Gilbert Saucedo, Esquire, (member of National Lawyers Guild, Los Angeles chapter.)

On December 6, 2015 Venezuela held parliamentary elections. Although these were not presidential elections, they received widespread international attention because these elections were perceived by many as a litmus test as to whether the Bolivarian Revolution, initiated by the late President Hugo Chavez, would continue to thrive now that Chavez is dead. Venezuela's current president, Nicolas Maduro, and his ruling party the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* ("PSUV" Venezuelan United Socialist Party) have been under constant attack by opposition political parties, representing Venezuela's wealthy elite, as well as by transnational corporations and the governments of the US and Colombia.

To put these elections in context, a brief description of these attacks is a must. The attacks have consisted mainly of an economic war to destabilize the government along with a well-orchestrated media campaign to blame the effects of the economic war on the ruling PSUV. The main weapon used to wage this economic war is scarcity. The economic elite of Venezuela with the assistance of the US have conspired to create a scarcity of basic goods in stores throughout Venezuela, such that most people have to stand in long lines for hours to buy food or water, or any number of things. The production and distribution of most products are still in the hands of private businesses, so the economic elite can manipulate the distribution of the products under their control and then blame the scarcities on mismanagement by the government.

It is not clear what the government can do to deal with this crisis. The government might have avoided this type of manipulation by the economic elite if it had taken control of the means of production and distribution of basic goods, like the Cuban government did in the early years of its revolution. What the Venezuelan government has been attempting to do is use its oil revenues, which are considerable, to try to mitigate the worst effects of this crisis by subsidizing the costs of basic necessities of life. The recent precipitous decline in oil prices, however, has severely hampered how much of that the Venezuelan government can do.

Given the huge improvements in the standard of living that the vast majority of Venezuelans have enjoyed as a result of the reforms

brought about by the Bolivarian Revolution, many of us who are concerned about human rights and social justice view the Bolivarian Revolution as an important model for other Latin American countries and developing countries around the world. Because of this, I joined a delegation of international observers to assess the fairness of Venezuela's elections and the level of democracy and effectiveness of the Bolivarian Revolution. Our delegation was organized by Teri Mattson, incoming director of the Task Force on the Americas, a non-profit that has been organizing delegations to Venezuela since 2004 (www.taskforceamericas.org), and consisted of 12 observers from the US, Canada, and Nicaragua. The delegation's activities in Venezuela were coordinated by Lisa Sullivan, a US citizen who has lived in Venezuela for the past 32 years and has extensive contacts across the political spectrum in Venezuela.

Our delegation arrived to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, on December 2, 2015, four days before the elections were to be held. Prior to the elections, we had meetings with representatives of all major political parties involved in these elections, to get their perspectives. We also met with the vice-president of Venezuela's Supreme Court, Justice Fernando Vegas Torrealba, and several intellectuals.

On December 2, we met with Ricardo Moreno, newly appointed Venezuela's Consul for the Western US, which includes California and Hawaii and is based in San Francisco. On that date, he expressed that although the press was reporting that the polls showed the opposition Meza de Unidad Democratica ("M.U.D." Democratic Unity Roundtable) party was ahead, he was confident that the PSUV would win the elections because the PSUV was better organized in mobilizing their base to get out to the polls and vote. The M.U.D., on the other hand, was very fragmented and disorganized, according to Ricardo Moreno.

On December 3, we met with several leading members of *Marea Socialista* (Socialist Tide), a relatively new political party formed by a group that splintered from the PSUV. Some of the representatives of this party who were present at this meeting were: Hector Navarro (former minister in the Chavez administration and member of Venezuelan parliament for the PSUV), Alfredo Gutierrez (former member of the Venezuelan parliament for the PSUV), Nicmer Evan (political scientist), and

Juan Garcia Vilorio. This group are *Chavistas*, who continue to support the Bolivarian Revolution, but they claim that they left the PSUV because the PSUV has gone off track and is no longer being faithful to the revolution. They argue that *Chavismo* is suffering a splintering process due to extensive corruption in the Maduro administration. They claim that their investigations indicate that from 2002 to 2012 Venezuela generated approximately \$1 trillion. Out of this trillion dollars, there is over \$250 billion which are unaccounted. *Marea Socialista* is calling for an audit of the Venezuelan treasury to spur an open debate.

Hector Navarro went even further and asserted that the lack of security measures during the Chavez administration, might have led to Chavez's death. His theory is that Chavez might have been injected with the cancer cells that killed him while submitting to flu vaccinations. He explained his theory with a series of rhetorical questions: (1) What are the probabilities that a sitting president would develop cancer? (historically, very few sitting presidents have developed cancer); (2) What are the probabilities that several sitting presidents in the same region of the world would develop cancer simultaneously? (Lula Da Silva, Lugo, Castro, and Chavez all developed cancer and were all sitting presidents of Latin American countries); and (3) What are the probabilities that all these presidents would be leftists?

On December 4, we had several meetings. In the morning we met with Maria Pilar Garcia Lionza, who is an intellectual and professor of political sciences and urban planning at the Simon Bolivar University. Later, we had lunch with Justice Fernando Vegas Torrealba, who is vice-president of Venezuela's Supreme Court. After lunch, we met with representatives of PSUV at the "Casa Amarilla," which is the venue where Venezuelan government officials receive foreign dignitaries. Later in the day, we met with Manuel Guevara, who is a retired engineer and serving as a technical director in the M.U.D. campaign. And finally, we met with two representatives of the M.U.D.: Jose Ramos Sanchez, with the *Primero Justicia* (Justice First) party; and Carlos Luna, with the *Voluntad Popular* (Popular Will) party.

To read this article in it's entirety please visit our website

HAITI: Defiant Mass Uprising to Overturn Stolen Elections

By Dave Welsh, delegate to the San Francisco Labor Council and member of a Human Rights and Labor Fact Finding Delegation to Haiti in October 2015

Ed. Note: *A run-off between the supposed top two candidates was scheduled for Jan. 24. But it was cancelled due to massive street demonstrations and clear evidence of fraud in the 2015 elections. President Martelly was forced to abandon his plan to stay in office beyond the Feb. 7 expiration of his term. Haiti's people are demanding: 1) a provisional government, based on consensus, to organize new elections; and 2) an independent verification commission to verify facts about the Aug. 9 and Oct. 25 fraudulent elections.*

In 2015, after being excluded for 11 years (since the 2004 coup), Aristide's Lavalas party was finally able to run candidates again. Dr. Maryse Narcisse ran for President of Haiti. People in poor neighborhoods all over Haiti welcomed the grassroots campaign of Dr. Narcisse with obvious joy.

But fraud effectively prevented Haiti's voters from electing candidates of their choice. Instead, Martelly's handpicked Jovenel Moise, a banana exporter and political neophyte, miraculously emerged as the top first-round vote-getter for President. The alleged runner-up, engineer Jude Celestin refused to participate in a run-off.

State violence also played a role in suppressing the vote. National police and paramilitaries fired automatic weapons into working class areas like Arcahaie and Cite Soleil in the lead-up to the August 9 and October 25 elections. Scores of people were killed, including two pregnant women and a seven year-old boy. Some were "disappeared," never to be heard from again. Later, hooded paramilitary gangs attacked marchers in Port-au-Prince with machetes, pipes, hammers, and guns, killing young election protesters as police turned a blind eye.

The 2015 elections were plagued by endless incidents of ballot stuffing, vote buying, armed coercion, naked vote rigging all the way from polling place to final tabulation. Fanmi Lavalas, long the most popular political party in Haiti, described the Oct. 25 election as "... a pre-planned fraudulent enterprise that stripped

the elections of all credibility..." in its petition to the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights. "These rigged elections of 2015 constitute ... an attack on the national sovereignty ... and a violation of the political rights of the Haitian people."

The result was a free-for-all, human rights groups say, to the benefit of Martelly's candidates and allies. Accreditations were sold and photocopied, allowing party monitors to vote in multiple polling centers. "I saw two teams enter polling stations in shifts, and I saw each team vote twice," said Édouard Paultre, an election observer for the Council on Haitian Non-State Organizations. "I am convinced the system was established to facilitate fraud." Some 900,000 accreditations were distributed, and only 1.5 million people reportedly voted nationwide, which means ruling party operatives cast a tremendous share of the ballots.

Ambassador Peter Mulrean said he saw "no evidence of massive electoral fraud." But his "see no evil" pose was contradicted by the preliminary investigation initiated by Fanmi Lavalas. The ensuing uproar forced Martelly to appoint a special verification commission, which disclosed Jan. 4 that they studied 1,771 vote tally sheets and found 92% had "serious irregularities" amounting to "massive fraud." Then on Jan. 6 thousands marched to denounce Mulrean and Martelly: "Don't steal our votes!" Ominously, while the people marched, a plane carrying top State Department operatives Thomas Shannon and Kenneth Merten touched down in Haiti. Kenneth Merten was appointed US Special Haiti Coordinator in August to deal with the election crisis. He was also on the scene as US Ambassador for the 2010-11 elections. Under orders from then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, US favorite Martelly was catapulted from 3rd place into the run-off and ultimately the Presidency. CEP chair Pierre Opont admitted last July that the US "rigged the 2010 election."

The 2015 election "cannot be decided by the street," Kenneth Merten said, pointing out the US had committed \$31 million to fund the election, plus \$2.8 million to the National Police for election "security." [Some 10,000 police and 2,500 UN troops were deployed on



Photo: Dr. Maryse Narcisse

election day.] It's clear the US Embassy does not want "the street" to decide anything.

Some key facts are worth noting:

- Dr. Maryse Narcisse, Lavalas candidate for President, initiated an investigation at the Vote Tabulation Center as part of her party's legal challenge. In attendance were election officials, observers, representatives of the ruling PHTK party and another contesting smaller party Meksepa. They examined 78 randomly selected vote tally sheets (*proces verbaux*). All present agreed that every one of the 78 tally sheets was fraudulent, without exception. The US-backed election commission (CEP) then abruptly ended the legally-mandated verification process – invalidating those 78 particular tally sheets, but failing to check the over 13,000 tally sheets still to be verified. With that, the CEP inexplicably accepted the fraudulent election "results" as legitimate.
- Deputy Antoine Rodon Bien-Aime and two other PHTK candidates made a startling revelation about UNOPS, a UN agency assigned to transport ballot boxes to the Tabulation Center. They charged that while in UN custody, the ballot boxes were switched en route with boxes of pre-filled-out ballots. Separately, a National Palace official was involved in a vehicle accident in which pre-filled-out ballots, marked for the Presidential candidate of Martelly's PHTK party, Jovenel Moise, spilled on the road.

continued on page 5

VENEZUELA: National Assembly Pushes Amnesty Law

By *Rachael Boothroyd Rojas, reporter*

On February 5, Venezuela's opposition controlled National Assembly officially accepted a proposal to pass an Amnesty and National Reconciliation Law on Thursday, which could lead to the release of tens of violent opposition protesters who are currently in jail, among others.

The controversial amnesty law was one of the opposition coalition Democratic Unity Roundtable's (MUD) principal campaign pledges ahead of last year's legislative elections on December 6, when the bloc took a two-third majority in the Venezuelan legislature.

If passed, the law could potentially set free tens of violent opposition barricaders who were arrested during the 2014 violence known as the "street barricades," in which 43 Venezuelans, mostly security personnel and civilians, lost their lives.

In particular, the proposed law states that clemency will be provided for anyone arrested in relation to specific events in Tachira, Merida and Caracas in 2014 due to their participation in the violent actions specifically, for burning public and private property, carrying out attacks on security personnel and endangering civilian lives.

Jailed politician, Leopoldo Lopez, is also

tapped to be one of the chief beneficiaries of the legislation. The lawyer-come-politician was sentenced to thirteen years and nine months in prison in 2015 for calling on his followers to participate in the violence and attempt to force the overthrow of the nationally elected government.

But the legislation also goes beyond events in 2014. Anyone sentenced to prison since January 1, 1999 for one or several of the twenty-three crimes singled out for clemency in the legislation's articles, will also be released. "The countless number of public employees of all sectors in the public administration who feel victims of persecution and harassment at work, know that they are also included in the Amnesty Law," stated MUD legislator, Delsa Solórzano.

Although MUD deputies have touted the law as a way to move past "17 years of hate and division," the government has said that the legislation will mean "impunity" for criminals. It has promised to oppose any attempt to release the protesters or Lopez. "We call on the rightwing bloc to desist from committing this crime which they are attempting to commit. To do this would be to damage the constitution, dissolve our social state of law and justice ... The institutionalization of impunity would reign

supreme," said legislator Ilenia Medina for the government affiliated Homeland for All party.

It is still uncertain whether Lopez could actually be freed via an act of clemency as the lawyer is alleged to have already benefited from an amnesty law in 2002 when former president Hugo Chavez officially pardoned those involved in an opposition coup to unseat him. The proposed legislation has now been passed to the parliament's Permanent Political Commission where, if approved, it will be returned to the National Assembly for second discussion.

Although the legislation will almost certainly be approved by the majority opposition coalition in the National Assembly, Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro has the power to block the law. In this scenario, the legislation will then be sent to the Supreme Court of Justice to decide if it violates the constitution.

The granting of amnesty to anyone convicted of human rights abuses is strictly forbidden in Venezuela's 1999 Bolivarian Constitution. Nonetheless, opposition spokespeople have assured the press that no article in the legislation will allow clemency for those convicted of human rights violations, rape or homicide.

Source: <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11849>. Feb 7, 2016

Haiti, continued from page 4

- Fifteen prominent Haitian intellectuals, outraged by "clear involvement of UN agencies in the fraud that marred the elections," wrote an Open Letter to the UN Mission stating, "the whole world is discovering, under pressure from the street... the truth of the biggest electoral fraud operation... for the last 30 years in Haiti."
- Speaking on Radio Metropole (12/17), Gerald Jean, candidate for Deputy (Congressman) for Ferrier, admitted he had paid US\$15,000 to CEP member Yvette Mengual to ensure his victory in a disputed election. He told the radio audience he was angry that despite having made his payment, he did not win the seat he'd paid for.
- The self-described Core Group consists of the US, France & Canada, whose troops invaded Haiti in the 2004 coup; Brazil,

which heads the UN military occupation of Haiti; and the EU, OAS and Spain. The Core Group accepted CEP's fraudulent election results as "legitimate."

During the Christmas holidays, the newly created special police unit BOID continued their killing spree in Lavalas strongholds of Port-au-Prince. But these death squad type actions—reminiscent of those carried out by the Duvalier dictatorship, or under the murderous Latortue regime after the 2004 coup—have not deterred the resistance.

Members of the grassroots movement marched in Port-au-Prince and all over Haiti on December 16 against the brazen attempt to steal the election. Also there were international solidarity actions widely promoted by the Haitian human rights community, bloggers, and organizations like the US-based Haiti Action Committee. Faced with December's incredible outpouring of non-stop demonstrations throughout Haiti the authorities were constrained to postpone the

run-offs that had been set for December 27 and later January 24.

Many have commented that the Haitian people, in their vast majority, are very aware of their history—proud inheritors of the Revolution of 1791-1804, when Haiti defeated the army of Napoleon, ended plantation slavery and declared independence from France. The story of the Haitian Revolution has been passed on, in the oral tradition, from generation to generation.

How does this connect with their battle in the streets today, to stop the ongoing "electoral coup d'etat"—to have their votes counted, their choices honored, and their country's sovereignty respected?

"It's on every lip," said one Lavalas activist we spoke with. "People are saying that in rejecting this stolen election, we are lighting the fires of struggle, continuing the fight for equality and sovereignty that our ancestors fought for 200 years ago."

Source: *UpsideDownWorld, February 23, 2015*

“We Will not Obey”/ “Nou Pap Obeyi” A Call for Solidarity from Haiti’s Popular Movement

Editors Note: *The statement was written as tens of thousands of Haitians have taken to the streets—braving assassination, tear gas, beatings, and police torture—demanding the annulment of the fraudulent elections that gave the lead positions in the legislative and presidential races to the hand-picked candidates of President Michel Martelly.*

The postponement of the presidential election was a dramatic and hard-won victory for the people’s movement, which had insisted that no election take place until it could be free and fair and democratic. The struggle for the right to vote and for all Haitians to participate in the political process continues.

Reflecting on the voting rights struggle led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many other courageous fighters for justice fifty years ago in the US; on the one person one vote struggle led by Mandela’s comrades in South Africa; reflecting on struggles everywhere, we came to the conclusion that a people can’t be sovereign if they don’t have the right to vote. No people can retain their dignity if their vote does not count.

As clearly stated by President Aristide: “If we don’t protect our dignity, our dignity will escape us!” That is why we struggle and ask that people the world over with a history of struggle stand in solidarity with us.

Six years after the earthquake that jolted the country, causing the death of hundreds of thousands of Haitians, we the members of Haitian organizations, in the context of reflection, take our hats off and humbly say to the people all over the planet who opened their hearts to us, “We have not forgotten your acts of solidarity.” The sharing impulse manifested by people the world over, should have helped the Haitian people to rebuild their environment, rebuild their lives. Pity! To this day, the people’s lot has not changed. Adding insult to injury, shameless characters, local slave owners, empowered by various international organizations, hijacked the reconstruction funds.

Right after the earthquake, the internationals took advantage of our momentary state of helplessness to occupy the political space. Today, the Haitian people are engaged in an all out struggle to reclaim that space and to exercise their right to vote. The very ones who hijacked the reconstruction money want to prevent the people from choosing their government, in a wide scale conspiracy to continue the looting of the country’s resources.

Subsequent to many schemes designed to remove the people from the political equation, local colonialists joined forces with international colonialists to force the people to accept choices

against their best interests. Illegitimate officials implemented urban removal plans and land grabs, assaulting both the middle-class, as well as the poorer classes, putting the country on the brink of collapse.

The people’s resistance slowed down the “terror apparatus,” preventing it from completing this program. Now they want to put more false officials at the helm of the government to continue their assault.

The blatant violence perpetrated in Ile-a-Vache, the hideous massacres perpetrated on the people of Archaie, the continuous massacre of the people of Cité Soleil because they manifest a will to vote, various acts of aggression perpetrated throughout the country, in the context of land-grab or voter suppression, convince the Haitian people that they are in a fight for their very existence.

Haiti Solidarity Delegation

The Task Force on the Americas is organizing a delegation for April 2016.

For exact dates and cost Contact:

Teri Mattson 415/259-9626 or teri.mattson@yahoo.com

We say NO, WE WILL NOT OBEY ILLEGITIMATE OFFICIALS. Self-defense is a legitimate universal law. Civil-Disobedience is an accepted universal right when a people confronts an illegal regime. The right to elect a government is universally accepted as a way for people to protect its existence. Today, confronted by the danger presented by local and international colonialists, the Haitian people have started a RESISTANCE FOR EXISTENCE movement. They ask for people to people solidarity from everywhere on the planet. The local and international colonialists plan is not an earthquake, yet it has caused far more damage to the country.

Our experience of the six years since the earthquake is no different than the experience of other small countries with natural and human resources. The internationals loot, have an orgy, while the international media turns a blind eye to lies spread by “their” ambassadors in their country’s name. The Haitian army, now being rebuilt to oppress the people, is a gift to the Haitian people by the Organization of American States (OAS). The Cholera epidemic and the blood thirsty and corrupt Haitian Police, were United Nations (UN) gifts to the Haitian people. The Media is mute, as the country nears total collapse.

We say NO, WE WILL NOT OBEY. We will not dig our own graves. We’d rather tell the truth and expose the conspiracy.

In this statement, written right before the postponement of the January 24th presidential “run-off” election, 68 grassroots organizations in Haiti issue an urgent call for solidarity with their struggle for free and fair elections, dignity and justice.

Source: www.haitisolidarity.net

TAKE ACTION!

Tell U.S. officials and your Congressional representative:

1. Stop supporting fraudulent elections in Haiti
2. Stop support for police terror in Haiti

White House 1-202-456-1111

State Department - Kenneth Merten:
(1-202-647- 9510)

haitispecialcoordinator@state.gov

Members of Congress 1-202-224-3121

GUATEMALA: Authorities Arrest SOA-Trained Officers

By Linda Cooper and James Hodge,
National Catholic Reporter

In a daring and historic move just one week before a new president takes office, Guatemalan authorities arrested 18 former high-ranking military men on January 6 for massacres and forced disappearances during the bloodiest years of the dirty war that particularly targeted indigenous populations.

Most of the arrests resulted from an investigation that exhumed the remains of 558 people—90 of them children—buried in clandestine mass graves on a military base in Cobán, formerly known as Military Zone 21. DNA testing identified victims who were killed or disappeared by the military in the 1980s. Many of the bodies were blindfolded, bound or dismembered. Guatemala Attorney General Thelma Aldana called it “one of the biggest cases of forced disappearance in Latin America.”

Records show that 12 of the 18 arrested were trained at the US Army’s School of the Americas (SOA), highlighting the sordid U.S.-support for the war, which spanned from 1960 to 1996 and claimed the lives of some 250,000, many of them women and children. The most prominent of those arrested are Gens. Benedicto Lucas García, and Gen. Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, both graduates of SOA, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. In the early 1980s, during the peak of the government’s repression, Lucas García was the army’s Chief of Staff while Callejas y Callejas was the Director of Intelligence.

The arrests came just a week before incoming president Jimmy Morales takes office on Jan. 14. Morales, a former television comedian, ran as the candidate of the National Convergence Front (FCN), a party he co-founded that’s dominated by military officers. Prosecutors are seeking to arrest Morales’ top aid, Edgar Justino Ovalle Maldonado, on similar charges of crimes against humanity and forced disappearances. Ovalle Maldonado, also an SOA graduate and a FCN co-founder who helped Morales get the FCN’s nomination, currently has immunity as a legislator. But Aldana has appealed to the Supreme Court to revoke his immunity. Maldonado was an Operations Officer at the Cobán military base in 1983, and later the commander of the base, according to Amnesty International. He is re-

ported to have claimed that the mass graves merely served as cemeteries for two towns near the base. Morales will be succeeding former President Otto Pérez Molina, another SOA graduate, who resigned last September as the result of a popular uprising over government corruption and is now facing bribery charges.

Further heightening the drama is the retrial of former military dictator Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt on charges of genocide. The proceedings began on January 11 for the SOA graduate, who was convicted of the same charge in 2013 but saw the verdict overturned on a technicality.

Another SOA graduate arrested in the Jan. 6 sweep was Col. Francisco Luis Gordillo Martínez, who helped Ríos Montt overthrow the government in 1982. He, Ríos Montt and another SOA graduate formed a junta that created secret tribunals, repealed the constitution, abolished the legislature, and escalated a “scorched earth” policy to wipe out entire villages. Records show that Gordillo Martínez was a three-time graduate of SOA, graduating from its infantry Weapons and Infantry Tactics programs in the 1960s and from its Command and General Staff College in 1974.

Another SOA graduate—Col. Ricardo Mendez Ruiz—commanded the Cobán military base where the bodies were found from 1980 to 1982, the year he became the Minister of Interior under Ríos Montt. Mendez Ruiz died Jan. 1, five days before the arrests began.

Details on the current charges against the 18 officers are sketchy, and limited to the mass graves at the Cobán base and the case of a Guatemala City teenager disappeared in 1981 by the military. But human rights investigators have long documented the human rights records of those arrested.

Lucas García took command of the counterinsurgency campaign in the Highlands in October 1981, according to anthropologist Shelton Davis, writing in *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. The campaign, Davis said, was marked by massacres, targeted killings of community leaders, and the burning of houses and fields to terrorize the Indian population into not joining the guerrillas.

Callejas y Callejas was arrested in connection with the 1981 disappearance of a Guatemala City teenager, but his tenure as chief of intelligence coincides with the slaughter of thousands of Mayan Indians, the murders of 27

professors, more than 80 union leaders and four priests, including American Fr. Stanley Rother and the failed 1980 attempt to murder Quiché Bishop Juan Gerardi. As it turned out, Gerardi was assassinated 18 years later, just two days after releasing a four-volume study showing that the military forces were responsible for 90 percent of the atrocities in the war.

Both Lucas García and Callejas y Callejas graduated twice from the SOA. Lucas García was trained in 1965 in combat intelligence while Callejas y Callejas was trained in 1962 in communications. Both men later graduated in 1970 from the school’s elite Command and General Staff College. Callejas y Callejas rose to become the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, and despite his horrific human rights record, the US State Department approved his induction in 1988 into the School of the America’s Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame induction underscored US complicity, says Roy Bourgeois, a former Maryknoll priest who founded the SOA Watch after learning that the school had trained the killers of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador 1989. In 1990, Bourgeois was arrested after throwing blood on the Hall’s gallery where the portrait of Callejas y Callejas hung alongside that of several Latin American dictators. The US intervention, he said, was extensive. “Several US administrations trained, advised, funded and armed the Guatemalan military. Many of its military and intelligence officers were on the CIA payroll.” Bourgeois and other human rights activists have hailed the Guatemalan arrests.

Grahame Russell, co-director of Rights Action, a Canadian NGO engaged in human rights work throughout Central America, called it “an extraordinarily positive step forward” in a country where military impunity has been the rule. In an interview with the Venezuelan-based TeleSUR television network, Russell praised the Guatemalan attorney general for filing a “series of war crimes charges” stemming from “the worst years of the US-backed repression and genocide.” The filing was especially significant, he said, coming “just as another military-backed president is about to assume the presidency, in this as yet very undemocratic country.” With Morales strong links to the military, Russell believes that the country will likely continue to be “dominated by the same economic elites—national and international—that were in power

continued on page 8

HONDURAS: US Congress Calls for Independent Body

By Alexander Main, Center for Economic and Policy Research

Ed. Note: *The article was edited for length*

Last summer massive protests erupted in Honduras following revelations that hundreds of millions of dollars belonging to the country's national health service had been siphoned off by officials from the ruling National Party. In Guatemala, similar protests, sparked by a similar corruption scandal, raged for much of the summer and led to the resignation and arrest of President Otto Pérez Molina. Following a far-reaching investigation by Guatemala's International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG, by its Spanish acronym), Pérez and former Guatemalan Vice President Roxana Baldetti were charged with running a vast customs corruption network and were jailed pending their respective trials.

In Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández remains firmly in place despite evidence that much of the embezzled public funds had been used for his 2013 presidential campaign. To try to placate the protesters, Hernández worked with the Organization of American States (OAS) on a joint proposal for a so-called Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH, by its Spanish acronym). But protest leaders, and most Honduran human rights organizations, have rejected Hernández' proposal, considering it far too weak to effectively take on Honduras' rampant corruption and impunity, and not sufficiently independent. Instead, they have called for the creation of a United Nations-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Honduras (or CICIH), modelled on Guatemala's CICIG.

Critics of the OAS/Hernández proposal have pointed out that, in contrast with a CICIG-like entity, the MACCIH would lack the mandate and capacity to carry out judicial investigations and prosecutions, and instead would merely offer recommendations of reforms that the government is unlikely to ever implement.

On December 4 Congressman José Serrano and 53 of his colleagues in the US House of Representatives backed these demands in a letter to US Secretary of State John Kerry, urging him to support the creation of a CICIH. In a separate statement Serrano said: "We cannot expect to fully address issues of violence and instability in Honduras when people do not feel as though they can trust their government or judicial system. It is time to establish an independent com-

mission to root out corruption and restore trust."

Indeed, the extreme levels of corruption and violent crime in Honduras are matched by appalling rates of impunity. The north eastern Honduran city of San Pedro Sula has the highest homicide rate in the world and dozens of journalists, lawyers, and activists have been killed in recent years. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has said that impunity for these and other crimes "ranges between 95 and 98 %." The country's security forces are widely recognized to be deeply infiltrated by organized crime groups and involved in extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations. The country's judiciary is considered to be weak and is largely controlled by the ruling National Party, which illegally replaced top judges with his allies in late 2012.

Perhaps most troubling of all is the fact that the Honduran administration has shown no interest in taking real measures to reform its security forces or the country's corrupt judiciary. A widely respected independent police reform commission was dissolved by the ruling party in January of 2013, and none of its proposals were taken into account. Under increasing international pressure, the Hernández government has repeatedly announced its own police reform, which appears to mostly involve a partial administrative reshuffling of Honduras' law enforcement institutions.

Despite all these problems, the US government has continued to throw its support behind Hernández and sources indicate that they back the MACCIH proposal as well despite the overwhelming opposition of Honduras human rights advocates. Many of the groups that oppose the MACCIH and support CICIH are part of the Coalition Against Impunity, which includes the Committee of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), Judges for Democracy, the Center for Women's Rights (CDM), the Commit-

Guatemala, continued from page 7

during the worst years" of the 1970s and 1980s."

Still, Bourgeois draws hope from the fact, that against all odds, Guatemalans themselves—from the prosecutors to the "courageous survivors and relatives of the disappeared"—have risked their lives to bring the perpetrators to justice. "They want the truth,

tee for the Relatives of Disappeared Migrants of El Progreso, the Freedom of Speech Committee (C-LIBRE), Jesuit Team of Reflection, Investigation and Communication (ERIC), the National Network for Honduran Women Human Rights Defenders, and many others.

In a November statement the Coalition argued that a MACCIH would be limited in its ability to attack corruption and impunity in the country. Its main purpose is to supervise and give technical support to the Public Ministry and the Justice System through the support of a group of ex-prosecutors and international jurists; preparing a diagnosis of the current situation of justice in Honduras; accompanying the implementation of the Interamerican Convention against Corruption; and the creation of a justice observatory.

And it would lack an effective mandate to strongly and decidedly attack the scandalous corruption that is corroding the public institutions of Honduras, not to mention the tremendous limitations to attack impunity and dismantle criminal structures that function parallel to the state apparatus.

The Coalition also notes that the MACCIH proposal has been developed without consultation of, or input from civil society groups other than those that have close relations with the ruling National Party.

Some US analysts have argued that a CICIG-like entity wouldn't be able to quickly address Honduras' rampant corruption and impunity. The reality is that there are no quick fixes for Honduras, and simply painting over the country's problems with ineffective measures will not improve the situation. And, as the Coalition Against Impunity has pointed out, a CICIH, rather than starting completely from scratch, would be able to benefit from a "transfer of experience" from CICIG.

Source: *CEPR.org, The Americas Blog, Dec 17, 2015*

and they want it to come out. And they are willing to die for it," he said. "They've waited some 35 years. The strategy of the military has been to keep stalling until those responsible have died off. But there will never be any justice or reconciliation until there is accountability and the perpetrators start going to prison."

Source: *http://ncronline.org/news/, Jan 11, 2016*

HONDURAS: International Court Rules in Favor of Indigenous Land Rights

By Opal Mita, Grassroots International

After two years of deliberation, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights recently issued two judgments declaring the State of Honduras responsible for the violation of collective ownership rights and the lack of judicial protection in a case brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (ICHR) in 2012. The ruling extends protection to Garifuna (Afro-descendant) and indigenous people across the country.

In keeping with the tenet of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, the Court stated that “Regarding the right to consultation and cultural identity, the Court considered that the consultation must be applied prior to any exploration project that may affect the traditional lands of the indigenous and tribal communities.”

A broad coalition of Indigenous and campesino rights organization across Honduras has been supporting the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) and their work to defend Garifuna indigenous territory through the recovery process and permanent reoccupation of land, and through the promotion of legal cases at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

After years of considering a petition from OFRANEH, in February 2013 the Human Rights Commission presented the case to the Inter-American Court detailing the Honduran government’s violation of Garifuna collective ownership rights (citing Article 21 of the American Convention on Human Rights), lack of access to a fair trial, and lack of judicial

protection in the Garifuna communities of Triunfo de la Cruz and Punta Piedra. In addition, the case notes that the Honduran government violated the Garifunas’ rights to “Free, Prior, and Informed Consent,” a main tenet of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Last August, Grassroots International had the privilege of being invited by OFRANEH to Triunfo de la Cruz to serve as international observers during the site visit from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (ICHR). Members of the Garifuna community presented moving and detailed testimonies about land rights violations that they have faced for decades that provided the basis of more than 30 legal claims of land usurpation presented to the ICHR.

Reparation measures ordered by the Court last month include, among other matters: the investigation of five assassinations of Garifuna people defending their ancestral lands; a public act of acknowledgment of international responsibility; demarcation of the land on which it has been granted collective ownership to the Punta Piedra community; collective land ownership titles, properly defined and demarcated on the plot of land known as the Triunfo de la Cruz Garifuna traditional territory; free access, use, and enjoyment of collective property and com-



Photo: Felipe Canova

Forum on Land grabbing in Latin America, La Ceiba, 2011

mons of both communities; and measures to ensure that the provisions on mining regulations do not undermine the right to consultation.

The Garifuna people currently have three more cases and several petitions at the Commission. For OFRANEH the violations of collective and human rights perpetrated by the State of Honduras demonstrate the existence of deliberate land grabs and expulsions in Garifuna territory. As Julian Eramos Castillo, Vice President of the communal authority of Triunfo de la Cruz, shared, “After the Coup we resist, and we will continue in resistance... we, Garifuna people, fight to the death. We will continue defending our ancestral territory to ensure our children never lose our culture, language and connection to land.”

Source: Grassroots International, Jan 4, 2016

Why the US is Stepping Up the Deportation of Central Americans

By Greg Grandin, author and professor of history at New York University

Want to know why the Department of Homeland Security, starting with the New Year, began stepping up midnight raids and rushing the expulsion of undocumented Central Americans and Mexicans? Washington’s ambassador to El Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte, provides at least a partial answer.

Mounting criticism in El Salvador led Aponte, on January 7 (just five days after the raids started), to hold a press conference making clear the reasons for the round-ups, which have targeted women and children and broken up families: deterrence. “It is important,” she said,

“to emphasize that there are clear and grave consequences for families and individuals that don’t comply with immigration law.” “To enter the United States without documents,” the ambassador continued, “doesn’t confer the right to stay in the country.”

Many liberals have found the policy inexplicably brutal, coming from a president who often telegraphs his humanity and sensitivity to suffering. It is, of course, the very nature of the modern state to combine spectacle and the covert, to perform justice while practicing cruelty. Still, why announce the policy just before Christmas, as the administration did? Why call such attention to an initiative that seems to enact Donald Trump’s presidential agenda, espe-

cially when the administration had already been deporting Central Americans and Mexicans at a healthy clip (nearly 90,000 to Central America alone in 2015.)

Ambassador Aponte, in her press conference, answers that it is about sending a message to Salvadorans and other Central Americans: “Stay Put.” The most generous interpretation is that the White House, as it faces a Supreme Court challenge from right-wing governed states to its authority to regulate immigration, and as it tries to advance some kind of immigration reform (though that goal seems to have fallen off the public agenda), is trying to show that it can

continued on page 10

COLOMBIA: Pressure Mounts to Shut Down US-Funded Prison

By John Ocampo, Campaign for Labor Rights, a project of Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ)

The campaign to shut down Colombia's infamous *Establecimiento Penitenciario y Carcelario de Alta y Mediana Seguridad de Valledupar* "La Tramacua" prison, located in the country's sweltering Caribbean region and often referred to as the "Guantanamo of Colombia," could be on the verge of a major breakthrough. On January 19, 2016, for the first time in its 14 years of operation, a high-level governmental commission entered the prison to investigate whether the notoriously abysmal conditions merit its closure as mandated by Colombia's Constitutional Court in a 2014 ruling. That year the high court issued an ultimatum to prison administrators: either grant prisoners access to potable water and dignified medical attention or immediately close "La Tramacua."

Built in the year 2000 with US Federal Bureau of Prisons and USAID funding, as part of the penitentiary restructuring component of

Plan Colombia, "La Tramacua" is a veritable house of horrors. Despite temperatures that regularly climb above 100° Fahrenheit, water is only available in the prison for 10 to 20 minutes a day and only on the first floor. During these few minutes, 1,448 prisoners are forced to collect as much water as possible in a desperate attempt to meet their daily needs; many prisoners resort to urinating and defecating in plastic bags because flushing excrement down the toilet requires wasting their meager supply of water. Required medical attention, including life-saving operations, is often delayed or denied to prisoners and referrals to specialists are treated as nonexistent by the authorities. The prison has no ventilation system and the use of electric fans is strictly prohibited. International visitors have observed raw sewage flowing through the kitchen, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has documented fecal contamination of the food doled out to prisoners. Instances of beatings and torture have also been documented inside "La Tramacua." Inmates who fall out of favor with the authorities owing to disciplinary problems,

or merely because they protest or demand access to medical treatment, are locked in a cell known as Villa Mosquito that, as the name indicates, is infested with insects. These hellish conditions have led to at least three suicides since 2014 and, last month, to 438 prisoners going on a weeks-long hunger strike.

Lazos de Dignidad, an organization of human rights lawyers in Colombia that has accompanied prisoners and led the fight to close "La Tramacua," participated in last week's commission visit to the penitentiary. "We, at Lazos de Dignidad, consider it shameful that in a country in which a peace process is underway, more than 1,000 persons are held in torturous conditions due to the obstinacy of the government in keeping open at all costs a penitentiary that is emblematic of a new model of prisons, imposed by the US to the detriment of the dignity and human rights of the inmate population," remarked attorney and Lazos de Dignidad member July Henriquez after the visit.

Source: *upsidedownworld.org*, Jan 29, 2016

Deportation, continued from page 9

control the nation's borders. That explanation is little consolation to the people who now live in fear of the 4 am knock on the door (one in five migrants report being deported between 10pm and 5am), to Latino businesses that face empty stores and restaurants, to those terrified of being pulled off public transportation going to work.

Guatemalans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans are being deported to the most violent places on earth. The US recently shuttered the Peace Corps in El Salvador because it was too dangerous. More than 1000 Guatemalans were deported in the first two weeks of 2016, including mothers and children.

Ambassador Aponte, repeating the administration's official line, says all deportations will be conducted according to the rule of law, that migrants with pending appeals will have their cases heard. That is a lie. The deportation regime is completely dependent on the interests of privatized detention companies, with an over-militarized and arbitrary federal bureaucracy that terrorizes those who live under its thrall, as Amy Kamp reports in *The Austin Chronicle*.

"Deterrence by deportation" does not work. Migrants don't come to the US as Ambassador

Aponte argued in her press conference, because of "lies" told by smugglers that, once here, you can't get deported. They come because their countries have been destroyed by US policy. Every single "push" factor driving the refugee crisis is or has been created by Washington and Wall Street: The transnational gangs and drug cartels that rule large swaths of Central America and Mexico are direct blowback from the Cold War (in the case of Central America) and the War on Drugs (Mexico).

Washington's relentless promotion of trade and financial liberalization and its push for biofuels and mining have destroyed regional agricultural markets and driven down wages, leading to rural dislocation. The disaster in Central America and Mexico, as I and many others (see especially Laura Carlsen at CIP Americas) have described, can be traced back to Bill Clinton's three signature Latin American initiatives: escalation of the drug war (Plan Colombia); economic liberalization (NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which paved the way for similar treaties with Central America and Colombia and will culminate in the Obama-backed Trans Pacific Partnership); and the militarization of the Mexican-US border.

In El Salvador, it was none other than Am-

bassador Aponte—today lecturing Salvadorans about the pedagogic utility of deportations—who three years ago, in 2012, threatened to withhold critical development aid unless El Salvador passed a major privatization law.

It is a job requirement of US envoys to El Salvador to be skilled in the art of the threat. And Aponte, named ambassador in 2010, is a pro. In particular, she's been tasked with making sure the former insurgent FMLN, which first won the presidency in 2009 and was reelected in 2014, reconciles itself to neoliberal reality. She's menaced the government about the need to buy corporate manufactured GMO seeds, insisting that the FMLN's seed-cooperative program violates the terms of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Martha Pskowski writes: "In 2011, the first FMLN administration began buying 88,000 *quintales* of corn seeds annually from eighteen Salvadoran cooperatives to distribute to 400,000 campesinos as part of the Family Agriculture Plan"). Last year, Aponte warned the FMLN that US aid would be withheld if it continued to publicly support Venezuela. In Salvador, at least, Aponte is the face of the vicious circle: economic liberalization; militarization; deportation.

Source: *thenation.com*, Jan. 21, 2016

Guatemala: Sexual Slavery Case

On February 1, the historic Sepur Zarco trial opened in Guatemala. The case is the first of its kind, seeking to hold accountable perpetrators of sexual violence committed against indigenous women during the country's 36-year armed conflict.

In the 1980s, on the former Sepur Zarco military base, members of the Guatemalan military engaged in a campaign of rape and forced labor of indigenous women whose husband had been captured and disappeared as a result of their land rights activities. Some of the women also lost children to starvation and disease when they fled to the mountains to try to escape the abuse. All of the women, who are now in their 70s and 80s, suffered enormous physical and emotional trauma and social isolation following their experiences. The two defendants, Lieutenant Colonel Estelmer Francisco Reyes Giron and former military commission Heriberto Valdez Asij, are charged with crimes against humanity, including sexual violence, and sexual and domestic slavery.

The Sepur Zarco case represents Guatemala's first criminal case involving sexual violence during the armed conflict as well as the first time a sexual slavery case will be heard in a national court, anywhere. The case exposes how the Guatemala military regime systematically used sexual violence as a weapon of war and a strategy for counterinsurgency. By agreeing to move forward with the trial, the Guatemalan national court recognizes sexual violence as a violation of international law. The recent recognition of crimes of sexual violence that occurred more than three decades ago highlights the connections between impunity experienced by the military during Guatemala's civil war and the present-day impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of crimes against women.

Source: *Center for Gender and Refugee Rights, Feb 4, 2016*

Colombia: FARC Rebels will Enter Politics

Colombia's FARC rebel group will enter politics and seek alliances with other parties after it signs a peace deal with the government, the top guerrilla leader said in late January, despite rebel fears they may be tar-

geted by right-wing armed groups.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, have been in talks since late 2012 with the government of President Juan Manuel Santos to end five decades of war.

"We will be in politics without arms," FARC leader Rodrigo Londono, known by his *nom de guerre* Timochenko, said in an interview with local magazine *Semana*. "We will enter a political scenario where it will be fundamental to unite the largest number of forces possible to guarantee the deal is fulfilled."

"We will put our arms to one side and take up the political struggle."

Negotiators at the Cuba-based talks have reached deals on land reform, an end to illegal drug trafficking, guerrilla participation in politics, transitional justice, efforts to find missing persons and remove land mines.

A United Nations mission will supervise rebel disarmament once an accord is signed. The war has killed more than 220,000 people and displaced millions.

Although rebel ranks support the peace talks, many fear they may be targeted by right-wing groups after a peace deal, Londono said.

Paramilitaries, sometimes with the aid of military officials, systematically assassinated 5,000 members of the left-wing Patriotic Union party in the 1980s, including two presidential candidates.

"A common question is: 'Comrade, will the same that happened to the Patriotic Union happen to us?' That is the fear," said Londono. "The FARC's political party could participate in 2018 legislative and presidential elections," he said.

All sectors of Colombian society, including fierce opponents like ex-President Alvaro Uribe, must commit to helping implement a peace deal, Londono said, adding: "Let's give Colombia a chance."

Source: *-Reuters, January 31, 2016*

US: Arms Trafficking to Mexico

Amid ongoing concerns about gun violence in the US and Mexico, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report on January 11 that highlights several bureaucratic obstacles hampering US efforts to stem the flow of illicit arms to our southern neighbor.

It criticizes a lack of effective collabora-

tion between the two US agencies with primary responsibility for combating cross-border arms trafficking: the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The GAO "identified persistent challenges in information sharing and disagreement on the agencies' respective roles in investigations" and concluded that "no mechanism currently exists to monitor whether both agencies are complying with GAO provisions."

There is some confusion in Mexico over ATF's and ICE's roles in combating firearms trafficking. Mexican law enforcement agencies consider ATF "their lead US counterpart in investigating firearms trafficking." However, it is ICE that is responsible for international trafficking operations. ICE officials in the US are also reluctant to share information with ICE officials based in Mexico because of the corruption within Mexican law enforcement agencies.

The report notes that about 70% of the firearms seized by Mexican authorities and submitted for tracing came from the US. Most of these weapons were purchased legally in US border states before being trafficked illegally to Mexico.

The GAO report also mentions the expanding cross-border trade in gun parts that can be used to make "homemade" firearms.

Arms trafficking specialist Robert Muggah of the Igarapé Institute described the report as "a wake-up call." "The US not only has a problem with enforcing the laws on the books, but its gun regulation legislation is in serious need of improvement. The evidence is clear: legally purchased US firearms and ammunition are sustaining cartel, gang and everyday criminal violence in Mexico."

Source: *InSight Crime Analysis, Jan 21, 2016*

US: TPS for Central American Immigrants

On January 25 more than 270 immigrant, labor and human rights organizations, including the Task Force on the Americas, sent a letter to President Obama asking his administration to grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a form of temporary immigration relief, to undocumented immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in light of pervasive vio-

continued on page 12

lence and environmental disasters that prevent them from safely returning to the region. The letter sets out the legal and factual rationale for the designation of TPS for these countries, often referred to collectively as the Northern Triangle.

“TPS is grounded in clear statutory authority that was established by Congress 25 years ago to respond to humanitarian crises just like the ones we are seeing in the Northern Triangle,” said Royce Murray, policy director at Heartland Alliance’s National Immigrant Justice Center. “Knowing the violence that is occurring in these countries, and how their governments have failed to keep their own citizens safe, it is unconscionable to deport anyone there at this time.”

Immigration policy attorney José Magana-Salgado of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center added: “It is incumbent on this administration to exercise this authority. To do otherwise would be to continue to deport Central Americans to their deaths.”

The letter asks the administration to employ TPS protection in addition to the US State Department’s plan to establish third-country refugee processing centers in Central America.

More than 17,500 people died in homicides in 2015 in the region, home to some 30 million

people. For the past six years, all three countries have ranked within the world’s top four for rates of femicide, while El Salvador and Guatemala have had the highest homicide rates in the world among children. A recent report by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center estimates that over 750,000 Central Americans would benefit under a TPS designation.

Source: *Press Release; immigrantjustice.org/TPSNorthernTriangleLetter*

Ecuador: Calls on Rich Nations to Pay for Environmental Damage

Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa said there can be no environmental justice without combating economic inequality and making rich countries pay their debt. Climate justice cannot be achieved until affluent countries compensate poorer countries for the damage they have caused to the environment and end mass contamination, said President Correa at the October Climate Summit in Bolivia.

He said everyone is responsible for protecting the environment, but affirmed that the bulk of responsibility lies with those

wealthy countries who contaminate the most. “A rich citizen emits 38 times more CO2 emissions than his poor counterpart,” Correa said. He added that the most important solution to global warming is environmental justice, which would require the “largest contaminators to compensate those countries most affected by climate change.” Correa concluded that environmental justice is a “political struggle,” rooted in combating global economic inequality.

The aim of the conference was to give people affected by climate change a say on the shape of future environmental policy. Social movements and representatives from more than 40 countries attended the conference in Bolivia, determined to have their say.

Activists and ordinary people were everywhere, huddled in groups, meeting wherever they could to come up with practical solutions and real plans to address the climate “crisis.” “Droughts. Fires. Floods. Landslides. Glaciers melting. Oceans turning to acid, Mother Earth is giving us a warning,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the conference. “We must listen. And we must act.”

Source: *telesurtv.net/English/news/Correa-calls-on-rich-nations, 10/12/2015*

Martin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas
P.O. Box 925
Larkspur, CA 94977
Time Value Material
Return Service Requested

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit # 14
Larkspur, CA
94977