

# Report

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## Venezuela Reelects Maduro - Defying the US Empire



Maduro supporter, Photo: Roger Harris

**By Roger D. Harris, Task Force board member**

*Ed. Note: Roger Harris was an election observer in Venezuela for both of Maduro's elections, most recently on a Venezuela Analysis/Intrepid News Fund delegation.*

The hall went silent at the National Electoral Council (CNE) on the evening of May 20<sup>th</sup> as the five poker-faced officials filed in. Over 300 of us election observers from over 30 countries were seated in anticipation. The CNE president announced the results of this high-stakes election: the Venezuelan people had reelected Nicolás Maduro.

A US-backed political tide of reaction that had swept away other previously left-leaning Latin American governments (often by extra-parliamentary means) in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Honduras had been bucked.

The US and the rightwing opposition in Venezuela had demanded an election

boycott and Maduro's resignation. Defying them, the popular classes voted as a form of resistance in what they proudly told us was a "celebration of democracy." Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution was again affirmed as was Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro.

Hugo Chávez had spearheaded a movement that turned Venezuela from an epigone of Washington to an independent force opposing US global hegemony, placing a renewed focus on the socialist project. The Bolivarian Revolution reclaimed Venezuela's history and forged a new national identity. Venezuelan society became more inclusive for the poor, especially women, people of color, and youth.

Maduro inherited all this and more: a dysfunctional currency system, deeply engrained corruption, an entrenched criminal element, and a petro-economy dependent on the international market. He also inherited the eternal enmity of Washington, bent on nothing short of regime change.

When Chávez died in office in 2013, many Venezuelans grieved deeply. Ma-

duro won a snap election in a nation still reeling from Chávez's passing just five weeks previously.

Chávez was bigger than life when he was alive. In death Chávez emerged even larger. Even for a 6' 3" former bus driver and union leader, these were very big shoes for Maduro to fill. In working class neighborhoods, the slogan of the 2013 election was *Yo Soy Chávez* (I am Chávez). Maduro had been Chávez's then vice president and designated successor. But talking to Venezuelans back then, Maduro was an unknown quantity. They had, as many expressed, lost a father. They did not know the son, as Maduro himself characterized his relationship to his mentor.

The death of Chávez was a traumatic moment for the Venezuelan people, and an opportunity not to be missed by the US Empire and its acolytes to roll back the Bolivarian Revolution. Feet held to the fire, Maduro never had a grace period. Nor did Maduro ever waver or show fear.

The losing opposition candidate in 2013, Henrique Capriles, declared the

*continued on page 2*

### CONTENTS

Cuba	3
Assange	4
Chiapas	5
Nicaragua	6
Brazil	7
Honduras	8
Puerto Rico	9
Immigrant Children	9
Robert Parry	10
Act on Mexico	12
TFA Annual Dinner	12

Venezuela, continued from page 1

election a fraud and called upon the Venezuelan people to “express their rage.” What ensued was the opposition - incited violence (*guarimbas*) of 2013, 2014, and 2017. Mainly confined to middle class opposition neighborhoods, over one hundred people have perished along with billions of dollars of public property destroyed. Capriles’ sore loser reaction was entirely predictable. Every politically engaged Venezuelan that we met in 2013 knew that this election would be declared fraudulent by the opposition and the US if Maduro won. The game plan for the US and its funded opposition is: declare elections that are lost but close as fraudulent, boycott elections that they don’t have a chance of winning, and initiate street violence.

Big business in Venezuela has created selective shortages in consumer goods as part of what has become known as the “economic war.” While liquor stores are fully stocked, according to a young woman from the state of Táchira bordering Colombia, items such as feminine hygiene products and diapers are scarce, targeting the grassroots *chavista* leadership, which is mainly female.

The US declared Venezuela an “extraordinary national security threat” in 2015 and has since piled on ever increasing economic sanctions. And since Maduro’s accession to the Venezuelan presidency, international petroleum prices plummeted, adding another body blow to the country’s economy. Revenues from petroleum sales fund the vast social programs of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Under normal conditions, Maduro’s prospects for reelection would have looked dismal with hyper-inflation, negative GDP growth, and critical shortages. The US and its allies were trying to invoke the charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) to justify military intervention based on a “humanitarian crisis.”

While hardship today in Venezuela is undeniable, it does not rise to a level of

most of all relying on the strength of the *chavista* base.

The US and the main opposition coalition, MUD, demanded Maduro call off elections and resign. The MUD further discredited itself, calling for yet more punishing US sanctions on their own people. Echoing the US, they even spoke of a coup, all in the name of “restoring democracy.”

Henri Falcón broke ranks with the MUD and ran. His main program was to replace the Venezuelan currency with the US dollar, which would prevent the government from using fiscal means to manage the national economy. He also advocated taking massive loans from the IMF. The *chavistas* characterized his program as selling out Venezuela to foreigners.

Only 46% of the eligible voters cast ballots on May 20. Nevertheless, Maduro received a larger percentage of the eligible vote in Venezuela than did Obama in 2012 or Trump in 2016 in US presidential elections.

Besides the opposition boycott, people sympathetic to the Bolivarian Revolution, such as a Caracas taxi driver we spoke with, were not motivated to vote in an election that they saw as not tightly contested.

Sweeping the contest with 68% of the vote, Maduro emerged as his own person from under the shadow of Chávez. Maduro had now forged deep personal ties with his supporters, who triumphantly chanted “*vamos Nico*” (“go Nico,” with Nico being the nickname for Nicolás).

Maduro won on a playing field tilted against him. But will his movement succeed in righting the economy as he promised on a playing field tilted even more precipitously against his government? Already Trump has imposed new illegal sanctions designed to prevent recovery, further punishing the Venezuelan people for voting the wrong way.

The young *chavista* mayor of the coastal city of Vargas is optimistic. Pointing to the ramshackle shanties of the poor on the hill above us, he told us “I am from there and we are the Venezuelan people.”

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, May 29, 2018



Maduro campaigning in Caracas

humanitarian crisis. That’s the fake news. We could see well-stocked stores and lively commerce.

The real news is that even though Venezuela has the funds to buy vital medicines and food stuffs, such efforts are being blocked by illegal sanctions. The enemies of Venezuela are trying to make fake news true by hypocritically condemning the very conditions they are exacerbating.

The rightwing opposition, despite assistance from the US, has won only two of 24 major elections since 1998, which is its basis for calling a “dictatorship” what former US President Carter called the best electoral system in the world.

Meanwhile the Maduro government has proven resilient in responding to the challenges, while still maintaining and even extending core social programs such as building two million housing units for the poor. Measures taken include creating a cryptocurrency, revaluing the regular currency, distributing food through the CLAP program, diplomatically forging closer relations with China and Russia, and

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## Transition in Cuba Means a Continuation of the Revolution



*Havana, May Day, 2018, “Years of Principles, Unity and History”*

**By Alicia Jrapko and Bill Hackwell,  
Task Force board members**

In the darkness, with the moon still high over the statue of José Martí in the Plaza of the Revolution, a million Cubans and internationalist friends began gathering in the Avenida Paseo to march in solidarity with the workers and oppressed of the world. But this year the energy and strength of the demonstration took on additional meaning for the Cuban people as it reflected overwhelming support for the transition of a new generation of elected leaders who are committed to the continuation of the socialist principles of the Cuban Revolution. It wasn't just in Havana either; in Santiago de Cuba, Granma, Holguín, Ciego de Ávila, Cienfuegos and all the other cities people marched in large numbers with pride for what Cuba stands for and its example to the world.

Contingents this year featured institutions that make up the fabric of civil society including the ministry of education, the ministry of health and various hospitals, schools, medical research groups, cultural societies, national industries and the Latin American School of Medicine that has trained 28,500 doctors from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the United States mostly for free. While there was

little coverage in the corporate media about this display of unity and sense of purpose, what reportage there was insinuated that the people were marching on the orders of the Communist Party. Fernando Gonzalez, one of the “Cuban 5” and currently the President of the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), said that the continuous media lies about Cuba are because to recognize the truth about Cuba would be to admit their own defeat. “Nobody can force a million

Cubans to get up at four in the morning, wait until 7:30 and then march enthusiastically in support of the Cuban Revolution.”

On April 19 the Ninth Legislature of the Cuban National Assembly of People's Power, by a vast majority, elected Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez the new president of Cuba culminating a long democratic process that began in the base of Cuban society during the first round of parliamentary elections in October 2017. From those results candidates were nominated on January 21 for the provincial and national assemblies followed by the vote for those positions on March 11 when 83% of the eligible voters cast their secret ballots. Unlike in the United States where over four billion dollars were squandered on the 2016 presidential elections, no money can be spent on campaigning and candidates for municipal government can only promote themselves by placing a small biography and photo of themselves in their precinct office. To ensure the representative character of the Assembly half of the delegates come from the elections at the community base and the other half from mass organizations including the Federation of Cuban Women, the Confederation of Cuban Workers, the National Association of Small Farmers,

*continued on page 4*



*Mercedes Lopez Acea, President Miguel Diaz Canel and Raul Castro*

## Urgent Call to Support Julian Assange!

Julian Assange is under increasing threat. There are ominous signs the Ecuadoran government may facilitate Assange's removal from their London UK Embassy which could lead to his extradition to the US. Just 47 years old, Assange is in failing physical health after nearly six years confined to a room without fresh air or sunlight.

Former Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa took the courageous stand to protect the Wikileaks founder from extradition to the US. Under President Lenin Moreno, inaugurated in Spring 2017, Ecuador has resumed military and security collaboration with the US and Assange is reportedly "in imminent danger of being forced to leave the Ecuadorian Embassy in London."

Starting March 27, the Ecuadoran Embassy in London escalated the psychological pressure on Assange by preventing him from communicating with friends, family or colleagues in person or electronically. His small room is now being electronically jammed and he is only allowed lawyer visits and food deliveries.

The criminal charges filed by a Swedish prosecutor have been dropped. The threat is extradition to the US where some Washington politicians have publicly called for his execution. In February 2016 the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention condemned Assange's persecution as a form of "arbitrary detention" and called for his release.

Julian Assange and Wikileaks are under attack because they exposed inconvenient truths. In 2010 Wikileaks published video showing US military forces killing Iraqi civilians and journalists. Then Wikileaks published "cablegate" confirming US governmental interference and subterfuge against Latin American countries. In 2016, Assange and Wikileaks published emails from the Democratic National Committee revealing bias and violations of the democratic process at the highest levels. In 2017, Wikileaks exposed CIA tools and techniques used to implicate targeted innocent parties.

Instead of acknowledging the crimes and misdeeds, the US political, military and security establishment have condemned the messenger. US Attorney General Sessions says Assange's arrest is a "priority." The new US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said Assange and Wikileaks are "hostile non-state actors." The Democratic Party establishment has filed a lawsuit against Wikileaks for publishing authentic but embarrassing emails.

We believe Wikileaks and Julian Assange have provided a valuable service by exposing the truth. In reality, the US military, intelligence services and political establishment need fundamental reform. They do not serve the interests of the vast majority of Americans. Julian Assange deserves our thanks and support.

In recent weeks John Kariakou of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity has delivered a petition of support for Assange. Former president Rafael Correa has expressed concern. Australian journalist John Pilger has accused the new Ecuadoran president of defaming the good name of Ecuador.

We encourage everyone to visit the website [IAMWikileaks.org](http://IAMWikileaks.org) to learn about the latest developments and to support Julian Assange.

Rick Sterling, President, Task Force on the Americas, June 4, 2018

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### *Cuba, continued from page 3*

Committee for the Defense of the Revolution as well as organizations of university and high school students. Of the 605 members that make up the National Assembly over 53% are women, (in the US Congress women make up a paltry 19%) 80 of them are between the ages of 18-30 and this is the first term for 56% of the delegates. The average age of the representatives is under 50.

The reactionary elements of the Cuban exile community in Southern Florida have made wild predictions about the fall of the Cuban Revolution. From the beginning they thought it was only a matter of months before they would be back to assume their life of luxury at the expense of the Cuban people. They thought it would fall when Fidel died and now when Raúl's term ended. This is their fantasy and that of the ruling class of the US to return Cuba to being their colony; but as usual they

have underestimated Cuba. The seamless transition to the next generation, who has only known life under the nearly six decades long blockade, is not by chance but rather through organized planning and training. Díaz-Canel, 58, is no rookie as Raúl said and has been an engineer in the armed forces, a leader in the Party in Holguín and Villa Clara, a Minister of Higher Education and for the last five years he has been a Vice President of the Council of State. Some of the elected Vice Presidents are from the period of the revolution and Raúl Castro will remain General Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba until 2021.

Cuba moves forward with many problems, the main one being the suffocating unilateral blockade by the United States. The longest blockade in modern history has cost Cuba \$130 billion in revenue according to the United Nation's Regional Economic Body for Latin America (ECLAC). Despite this, Cuba continues to excel in all social indexes from education, to life expectancy, to an infant mortality rate of four per

thousand live births. It is a safe and stable society with the absence of even the most remote thought of gun violence. Cuba puts a priority on the well-being and nurturing of its children and has established medical missions in 65 countries. Cuba is by its own admission a work in progress but the orientation of the society is one that strives for social improvement. It is an example and a friend to the world that is reciprocated every October in the United Nations vote on the blockade where since 1992 the nations of the world have overwhelmingly voted against it. The real problem that Cuba poses for the Empire is its insistence on its sovereignty and its right to forge its own future. As the US plots regime change strategies against any independent nation in the world they should realize when it comes to regime change in Cuba, that already happened in 1959.

Source: *CounterPunch*, May 15, 2018



## Chiapas: Indigenous Women Meet to Inspire the World



Photo: Luisa Riley

By Carolina Dutton, Task Force board member

Seven to eight thousand women gathered in the mountains of Chiapas from March 7 to 11, 2018. Two thousand of them were Zapatistas. They had invited women of the world to gather together for three days in the first international, political, artistic, sports, and cultural gathering of women in struggle. Five

to six thousand women from many nations arrived to accompany them.

I came away from the gathering full of emotion: with many more feelings than thoughts. Or maybe it could be described as a deep understanding of some realities on a heart level. I came away with great admiration and love for the Zapatistas and so many other women who are dedicating their lives to struggle. There I understood clearly that women's struggles, indigenous struggles, and the struggle for land, water, and the health of all the life around us are intimately linked.

The organizers of the *encuentro*, Zapatista women from all five regions of Chiapas, had collectively written the words they shared with us the first day. They called us a forest of women, that like trees, are each unique but also the same; we are all women who struggle. "What also makes us the same is the

violence and the death carried out against us ...by this capitalist system. We see that it has made a forest of women with its violence and death that have the face, the body and the cowardly brain of patriarchy." They invited us to "talk, listen, see each other, and celebrate without the gaze of men."

Every morning at sunrise Mayan women from Guatemala made a fire ceremony in the center of a circle of women. This ceremony addressed that day's energy according to the Mayan calendar. The spider is the animal associated with the Mayan calendar date *ten kat*. The spider weaves the web of life as well as organization and alliances. We invoked the web of life each morning to set the intention of weaving it in our work together and in our connections and conversations.

There were workshops in dance, music, art, theatre, health, and herbalism. There were conversations about feminist theories and about struggles for

*continued on page 6*

## Mapuche Leader Reflects on the Meeting of Zapatista Women



Moirá Millán, on left with participants at women's *encuentro* in Chiapas

By Moirá Millán

On March 8 Zapatista women welcomed us in the Caracol of Morelia, Chiapas with a large sign on the gate that read: "Men over 13 years old cannot enter."

Thousands of women from many parts of the world were lovingly received. We were all treated equally. There were no privileges. We felt horizontality in all its forms. We all slept on the ground, we shared the same bathrooms, showers, and long lines to eat. In this liberated territory we felt completely safe, free, respected, and cared for.

Women of all colors, languages, and traditions arrived embodying their struggles, some known, such as the mothers of Ayotzinapa or the mothers of the disappeared and murdered women of Juarez. Two thousand Zapatista women shared this historic event with us. All was perfectly organized and cared for, even the honesty to be themselves, listening to us and observing us without judgment or reproach, but at the same time maintaining the

rules, keeping their precepts.

Zapatista autonomy translates into this marvelous accomplishment of liberating territory and making it a better place; a place where we all fit, a place we dream to inhabit.

As a copper-skinned millenarian Mapuche woman, I was filled with pride to see that other indigenous women had accomplished so much.

In every corner of this continent we first nation women are put down, maltreated and considered worthless. It is hard for us to build up our self worth and to believe in ourselves. There is always a messiah, macho and half-white speaking for us, or a white woman claiming to represent us.

There were the Zapatista *compañeras*, coming from their hearts, from their humble and dignified condition of women who struggle, from their revolutionary force, from their ancestral wisdom.

I left with an image that synthesized this event, all of us indigenous women from the north of Canada to Patagonia, including Palestinians, who went onto the stage to offer gifts of gratitude to our hosts.

We embraced in a circle. We all represented the struggles of our nations, longing for justice and self determination. *Marici weu!!! Ten times victory!!!*

Chiapas, continued from page 5



Photo: Luisa Riley

land and water. Brave Brazilian women told us about their land occupations. A Mapuche woman warrior shared how urban Mapuches are recovering ancestral land and culture in Argentina. We listened to a woman from the Tonam O'tham nation, which spans the US Mexico border, tell about her people's struggle against Trump's wall of lights and surveillance dividing their communities. We heard about femicides in Juarez and mothers searching for justice for their disappeared children. We also learned about so many lives and struggles in conversations while we stood in line to use bathrooms and buy meals. We felt a sense of caring there, as if we were embraced by thousands of women.

Doña Hilda, a mother of one of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa was asked how the gathering was for her. She said she felt safe in that space with eight thousand women and Zapatista insurgents surrounding the space protecting us. Nothing could happen to her there. She could sleep well. She could speak and nobody would question her truth. She could speak and cry and she would be embraced.

The Zapatistas asked us to give special consideration to elders "Wise women we call them have come here from all over Mexico and the world. They are women who are elders and who struggle... We want to end up like them, to grow old and know we are still in struggle... but in order for that to happen, we have to be alive... This gathering is for life... and nobody is going to give that to us, not god, not men, not a political party. ... We have to struggle for life."

Source: *Task Force on the Americas, March 15, 2018*

## Urgent Call: Solidarity with Nicaragua

*By the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo, May 18, 2018*

Friends in Solidarity,

We have lived a month full of tragedy in our country. The peace we achieved as a people, so fragile and at the cost of so many lives, is in imminent danger of disappearing irreparably.

There are now two sizeable camps of the population with dangerously contrary positions. On one side, there is a combination of university students (with leadership from private universities), media outlets with rightwing owners representing the oligarchy, Catholic Church bishops close to Opus Dei, the private sector and, of course, the US Embassy, working together to create a situation of chaos in the country in order to remove president Daniel Ortega. This group of actors accuses the National Police of having killed dozens of protestors in the riots that reached all Nicaraguan cities, ostensibly against a reform—since revoked—to the system of social security.

As we have described, the reality is more complex, and the violence was generalized and explosive, involving protestors with homemade firearms that often misfired, as well as counter-protestors, paid pickets, street gangs, and unknown gunmen. The truth is that we do not know or understand everything that happened, because the violence from the first moment was something beyond our experience and took place simultaneously throughout the country, resembling the surprise opening of a war more than protest.

Based on what our membership has been able to report, the National Police was really a minor actor in the violence, using tear gas and rubber bullets to clear crowds in a few hot spots following their protocol, but not involved in the vast majority of the 50 or more deaths that have been reported since April. Indeed, we fear that some of the killings may have been carried out by professionals, neither the protestors nor the government. What is clear is that any and all deaths have been the necessary political capital that the opposition needed to put pressure on a government that had been recognized

for its community policing model. The rightwing media has dedicated the full power of its voice to accuse the government of killing peaceful protestors, while the publicly-owned channels talk of right-wing paramilitary violence and a coordinated effort to destabilize the country. The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights has been invited by the government and currently is investigating the events of April.

A national dialogue began on Wednesday, May 16th, with the participation of anti-government students, civil society organizations, and the Presidency, and mediation by the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church led by Archbishop Leonaldo Brenes.

However, the coup-like violence has only grown and currently, rightwing armed groups have all of the main highways in the country closed. Since these groups are masked, it is difficult to know exactly who they are, but in the cases where we have confirmed information, they are mostly made up of unemployed men paid by traditional rightwing political parties to maintain the blockades.

On the other side of the conflict, the militancy of the Sandinista Front continues to feel and withstand phenomenal provocations, including:

- The destruction of its Sandinista homes (party headquarters) in dozens of cities
- The destruction or defacement of hundreds of historic monuments, murals, and memorials of Sandinistas
- The arson of dozens of public buildings
- The interruption of work and the food shortages that have resulted from the road closures and violence
- The deaths of passersby and journalists by paid pickets and violent protestors
- Relentless false accusations and lies circulated by corporate media

*continued on page 9*



## BRAZIL: Lula in Prison, Spirituality and Politics



Photo: Causa

By **Leonardo Boff, Eco-Theologian-Philosopher**

As of May 7th, former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had spent 30 days in prison. For the first time, he was allowed to receive visits from his friends. I had the honor of being the first to visit him, due to our friendship of more than 30 years, and that we share the same *Causa*: Liberating the impoverished and reinforcing life's spiritual dimension. I fulfilled the evangelical precept: "I was in jail and you visited me."

I found him as we knew him before he was imprisoned: the same face, hair, beard... only somewhat more slender. Those who hoped to see him angry or depressed must be disappointed. He is filled with energy and hope. His cell is large, very clean, with built-in cupboards, and a bathroom and shower in an enclosed space. The first impression is good, even though he lives in isolation because, other than his lawyers and children, he can only talk with the guard, who is of Ukrainian origin, gentle and attentive, who has become his admirer. He brings Lula his food tray, more warm or cool, and coffee whenever he requests it. Lula does not accept the food his children bring him, because he wants to eat as the other prisoners do, without any privileges. He has his time to take in the sun. But lately, when he does that, drones appear overhead. As a precaution Lula leaves, because the purpose of those

drones is unknown: to take photos of him, or perhaps something more sinister.

Among our discussions of politics, the most important was our conversation on spirituality... Lula is a religious man, but of the popular religiosity, for which God is existential evidence. I found him reading one of my books, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, (from the editorial *Voces*) a commentary on the famous Psalm 23, the most read of the Psalms, which is also read by other religions. He felt fortified and confirmed, because the Bible is generally critical of pastor/politicians, and praises those who care for the poor, the orphans and the widows. Lula feels that he belongs in that line, with his social policies that benefited so many millions. He does not accept criticism as being a "populist." Lula says: "I belong to the people, I come from the people and direct my policies, as much as I can, towards the people."

At the head of his bed there is a crucifix. He uses the time of solitary confinement to reflect, meditate, to review so many things in his life, and to deepen the fundamental convictions that give meaning to his political actions, all that his mother, Lindu (whom he considers his protector and inspiring angel), often repeated to him: always be honest, and struggle and struggle more. Lula sees in that the meaning of his personal and political life: a struggle that everyone may have a dignified life, and not just a few at the expense of the others. "The greatness of a politician is measured by the greatness of his *Causa*," he emphatically told me.

And the *Causa* must be to make a life for everyone, starting with those who have the least. For that reason, Lula does not accept definitive defeat. Nor does he want to fall on his face. He does not want to fail, but to remain always faithful to his basic purpose, and to make of politics a great tool for organizing a life of justice and peace for all, especially for those who live in the hell of hunger and misery.

This dream has an undeniable ethical and spiritual greatness. It is in the light of these convictions that Lula maintains his tranquility, because he says and reiterates that he lives for that interior truth, one that possesses its own strength, that one day will become evident. "I only hoped," he commented, "for it to happen after my death, but it is already happening, even now, while I am alive." He becomes profoundly indignant at the lies spread about him, based on which they have mounted the triplex procedure. He wonders: "How can these persons consciously lie and sleep in peace?" He challenges Judge Sergio Moro: "show me a single shred of evidence that I own the triplex of Guarujá; if you show me one, I will renounce my candidacy to the Presidency."

He asked me to pass a message on to the press and the people in the encampment: "I am a candidate. I want to carry on with rescuing the poor, and to create social policies in their favor, state policies, and that the costs – that are investments – are in the budgets of the Union. I will radicalize these policies for the poor, with the poor, and to dignify our country."

Meditation has made him understand that prison has a meaning that transcends him, me, and the political disputes. It must be the same price that Gandhi and Mandela paid, with prison and persecution, to reach what they accomplished. "This I believe, and hope," he told me, "that this is what I am going through now."

I who came to encourage him, left encouraged. I hope that others are also encouraged and shout "*Free Lula!*" against a Justice that does not manifest justice.

Source: *Latin America in Movement, May 24, 2018*

## HONDURAS: The Border of Inequality



*Fr. Melo at a demonstration,  
Photo: Ignatian Solidarity Network*

**By Roger Stoll, community member**

*On Tuesday, May 15, at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, California, Fr. Ismael Moreno, S. J. (aka "Father Melo") spoke on the plight of his country of Honduras.*

Before reporting Fr. Melo's remarks, we recall the condition and recent history of Honduras. It is one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the hemisphere, both conditions worsening since the 2009 coup. 65% of the population lives in poverty, education quality is poor, and the murder rate is near the highest in the world.

The country has long been under the heel of the US and has served as a base for various US dirty wars and political destabilizations, notably the Contra War against Nicaragua. Since the 1950s, all bases and airports have been available to the US military and 500 marines are now based in the country.

Manuel Zelaya became president in 2006, and though he came from the ruling classes and traditional parties he promoted left policies, introducing a minimum wage increase of 80%, poverty reduction programs, and entry of the country into ALBA, the Cuban-Venezuelan regional trade initiative. Perhaps inevitably, the US endorsed a coup against Zelaya in 2009, installing Roberto Micheletti as president. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton later bragged of her role in the coup in her memoirs.

The 2013 and 2017 presidential

elections ostensibly were won by Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH), but both elections were likely stolen and have been widely rejected. The 2017 election also violated the Honduran constitution, which forbids second terms.

JOH's presidency has been one of extraordinary corruption as well as criminal impunity on the part of increasingly militarized and deadly national police and military forces, including the notoriously corrupt and violent special forces, the TIGRES (an acronym), trained by the US. State violence has been directed against pro-democracy forces of the broad left, with over 40 killed and 22 political prisoners jailed since the November 2017 elections.

Some US congressional representatives have, thus far unsuccessfully, sought to pass legislation to withhold funds from the Honduran police and military. Called the "Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act," the legislation is named after the celebrated Honduran leader of environmental, indigenous and feminist movement organizations killed in 2016 by US-linked assassins. Congressperson Marcy Kaptur of Ohio is a leading co-sponsor of the bill and has called for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists, specifically naming Fr. Melo.

At 60, Fr. Melo has been a voice and leader of Honduran social movements for decades. He is the director of Radio Progreso (RP) and hosts a nightly program, *America Libre*, which reaches 1.5 million Hondurans. Radio Progreso is owned by the Jesuits but, Fr. Melo emphasizes, "it is for everyone ... you don't need to be Catholic to be on the radio." RP and Fr. Melo began denouncing the 2009 coup from its inception, and have not stopped. As a result, golpista (coup-leader) Roberto Micheletti dubbed Fr. Melo "*Fr. Malo*" ("Fr. wicked").

RP has been a central target of the coup regime, and its tower was downed after the 2017 elections. An RP correspondent was assassinated in 2011, its marketing director in 2014, and Berta Cáceres in 2016. In addition to her fame as an activist and

2015 Goldman Environmental Prize winner, Cáceres was a close friend of Fr. Melo and the two created a network of community radio stations.

Fr. Melo's life has been marked by political assassination. When Fr. Melo was a teenager his father, a labor organizer, was assassinated. In 1989, shortly after Fr. Melo was ordained, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, were assassinated in El Salvador; among them was Fr. Melo's mentor.

In addition to his work at RP, Fr. Melo is director of the Jesuit human rights and democracy advocacy organization ERIC (Reflection, Investigation and Communication Team). He founded Socorro Jurídico, a legal aid organization, and co-founded and edited *A Mecate Coro*, a monthly journal covering current events affecting Honduran peasants and the indigenous.

Fr. Melo began his talk by asking, "Why is emigration from Honduras so great? Why, with so much wealth, fertile valleys, Caribbean beaches, is there so much emigration?"

The problem according to Fr. Melo is not national borders but, "the border of inequality. Our problem is not lack of wealth but the distribution of wealth." Two-thirds of the country's 5.5 million are unemployed, and many of the employed earn just \$2 per day, while 250 Hondurans have an average of \$150 million. "These 250 belong to about seventeen families," explained Fr. Melo. "They have absolute economic and political control of the country. They are the internal armies of transnational capital, the Honduran oligarchy."

Fr. Melo decried "the extractive model of development," and the treaties favoring the model, international capital and the seventeen families. He cited a poll showing 86.4% of Hondurans reject the extractive model, mining and water privatization. "In the valley of Aguán," he continued, "you'll see a beautiful mountain range, now exploited for iron oxide. They have to destroy the mountain to get it." Fr. Melo argued for "a new model of development, one that will diminish the inequality in Honduras

*continued on page 11*



## Hurricane Maria Death Toll Soars



Who can forget the degrading performance of President Trump when he arrived in Puerto Rico to survey the damage of Hurricane Maria two weeks after the island had been devastated by the storm. In his four hour visit Trump insulted every Puerto Rican by arrogantly tossing out paper towels to people in a church and reminding them how lucky they were that they hadn't faced a "real catastrophe like that of Hurricane Katrina." It turns out that the death toll from Maria is far greater than the loss of life that occurred in Katrina and 911 combined.

An independent scientific study by public health experts at Harvard University estimates that close to 6,000 people died as a result of Hurricane Maria, 90 times higher than the official figure of 64 that the government has been stuck on. The study was recently published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The crisis in Puerto Rico remains acute with more people dying from the lack of access to clean water. Thousands of people are still without electricity. All this as another hurricane season begins.

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*

## Unprecedented Cruelty against Immigrants

Since Attorney General Jeff Sessions tightened US immigration policy by issuing a "zero tolerance" order against those trying to enter the country without papers, even for those seeking asylum, more than 700 children have been ripped out of their parents' arms by immigration agents. Many of these parents do not know where their children are nor do the children know where their parents' are.

Recently White House Chief of Staff, John Kelly backed up the policy when he explained that, "the children will be put in foster care or whatever." This comes at the same time as a new report revealed that some 1,500 undocumented children, who have been placed by federal authorities in homes of "sponsors," are missing.

All of this is coming to light along with hundreds of cases of abuse of immigrant children. The American Civil Liberties Union has condemned the practice of separating children from their parents as a deterrent to immigrants and described this policy as one that is, "more than cruel and unnecessary, it is torture."

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*

*Nicaragua, continued from page 6*

It must be added that Facebook has been the primary means for transforming Nicaraguan society that one month ago was at peace into a toxic, hate-filled nightmare. Currently, hundreds of thousands of fake Facebook profiles amplify the hatred and pressure Nicaraguan Facebook users to begin to share and post hate messages.

Many, if not most, of these fake Facebook profiles have been created in countries other than Nicaragua, and in particular, Miami is the city where many of the Facebook and WhatsApp accounts behind the violence are managed.

Historically, the ATC has been a participant in the Sandinista struggle. In truth, we have not felt fully consulted or represented by the current government. The current coup attempt makes use of these historical contradictions

and is trying to co-opt the symbols, slogans, poems and songs of Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution, since of course the rightwing has none of its own.

However we may feel about Daniel Ortega, the ATC would never contribute to making chaos and sowing violence in order to force the collapse of the democratically elected government in order to install a more docile, Washington-friendly neoliberal government. There are clearly real frustrations in sectors of the population, especially youth, and if these sectors are unable to find popular organizing processes, they will end up being the cannon fodder for a war, which would be the worst possible situation for the Nicaraguan people.

In this context, the ATC has called for "all national actors to reorganize themselves based on their aspirations." With this intention, the ATC proposes to confront the national crisis with a series of dialogues among young people, without party distinction or any ideological basis, in favor of peace and understanding. We propose extraordinary youth assemblies in the cities of San Marcos, Jinotepe, Rivas, Granada, Masaya, Estelí, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Juigalpa, Santo Tomás and Tipitapa as spaces for young people to discuss the national situation and find points of unity. It is important to mention that we do not have a previously defined "line" to impose upon these debates—they will be spaces for listening, forming ideas and thinking with our hearts.

We call upon your solidarity and generous support for the creation of an emergency fund for peace in Nicaragua that makes possible this round of extraordinary youth assemblies. The national coordinators of the Rural Youth Movement, Sixto Zelaya and Marlen Sanchez, will have the responsibility of organizing the assemblies and administering the fund with absolute transparency.

To contribute to the emergency fund, you can make a donation through the Friends of the ATC solidarity network online at [https://org2.salsalabs.com/o/7315/donate\\_page/friends-of-atc-urgentcall](https://org2.salsalabs.com/o/7315/donate_page/friends-of-atc-urgentcall) or by check (payable to "Friends of the ATC/AFGJ" with "Emergency Fund" in the memo line) and mail to 225 E. 26th St. Suite 1, Tucson, AZ 85713, USA.

It is urgent to organize the Nicaraguan family and win peace!

Source: *International Secretariat of the ATC, May 18, 2018*

## Tribute to Robert Parry: A True Patriot

By Rick Sterling, Task Force board president

An enthusiastic salute to the great American investigative journalist Robert Parry took place on Saturday, May 19 in Berkeley, California. The event was organized by Task Force on the Americas, Veterans for Peace, *Resumen LatinoAmericano* and KPFA. A video of the event "Tribute to Robert Parry" is at [vimeo.com](https://vimeo.com).

Robert Parry was born in 1949 and died suddenly of pancreatic cancer in January 2018. Robert Parry was not a household name, but many people will recognize the breakthrough stories he played a key role in investigating, and putting into the public consciousness. He uncovered the "Iran-Contra" scandal where the US secretly sold weapons to Iran via Israel with profits for the Nicaraguan Contras, exposing a conspiracy involving Oliver North secretly working out of the White House, while the CIA colluded with criminals to ship weapons to the Contras as cocaine was brought into the US on the return flights.

Nearly ten years later, journalist Gary Webb uncovered much more detail on the cocaine connections. The story was explosive and Webb came under attack. Robert Parry was one of the few who defended him. The 2014 movie *Kill the Messenger* shows the Gary Webb story and tragedy. It is highly recommended.

A blockbuster lineup of speakers highlighted the Tribute to Robert Parry.

Dennis Bernstein of KPFA's *Flashpoints* talked about his memories of Bob Parry – his thoroughness, dedication, his integrity. Dennis personally knew both Parry and Webb. "I have a distinct memory of Bob trying to caution Gary about how dangerous the story was and what could happen." Dennis spoke about the

power that Bob and Gary had when they spoke before audiences. "It was easy to understand why the powerful would be afraid of them. They were truth-tellers."

As their stories challenged the powerful, it was increasingly difficult to get support. Parry's fellow reporter Bob Barger was demoted and quit the profession. Gary Webb was wrongly discredited, demoted and ended up taking his own life. Robert Parry

time, every day by big, powerful institutions and big powerful people. He took it because he had a community of supporters and like-minded individuals, people who understand the importance of telling the truth and speaking truth to power and that community of people is people just like you. You were his community; you were, in many ways, his family of like-minded travelers in this world."

He described his dad's commitment and work ethic. "Dad worked at that website for 23 years. Every single day he was tinkering away at it. He was gathering stories, editing stories, working with contributors to keep our truth alive. He felt so passionately about that." "Something else I wanted to share," Sam continued. "Dad was a patriot. I think that he really loved America. He loved our ideals, he loved the people, he loved the idea of holding the institutions that govern us accountable. That was



Sam Parry speaking in Berkeley CA.

chose a different path: he started a new publication. After beginning as a bi-weekly print journal, in 1995 *Consortiumnews* began publishing on the internet. It is possibly the first online investigative journal, still going strong.

Sam Parry, eldest son of Bob Parry, flew in from Washington DC to participate in the Tribute to Robert Parry. He said, "Dad chose a very difficult profession....You're fighting to get the truth. You have to write it down, you have to edit it, and you have to make sure you're correct all the time. Dad always felt he couldn't make a single mistake because if he did, they'd come after him even harder.... He was part of the mainstream and then he sort of had to confront them and fight for all the stories that he was able to bring forward. In doing so, he made himself sort of a target for retribution and attacks. And so he was attacked all the

his passion. That was what he was all about and what really drove him and propelled him through his life."

The next speaker was the local author, Natylie Baldwin. She expressed her deep appreciation for Robert Parry and *Consortiumnews*. As a young writer she was thrilled when *Consortiumnews* started publishing her on-the-ground reports and observations from Russia and Crimea. She was again thrilled when she got paid for her writing. Natylie talked about the decline in journalism and how dangerous it is when media broadcast the views of uninformed neo-conservatives instead of people with real experience and knowledge. "It's not just sad, it's dangerous."

The new *Consortiumnews* editor, Joe Lauria, also flew out to participate in the event. Joe talked about his

*continued on page 11*



*Robert Parry, continued from page 10*

experience in mainstream media at the *Wall Street Journal* and covering the United Nations for a major Canadian newspaper chain. He recounted his own experiences with subtle and overt pressure to follow the government's lead on war issues. Joe talked about his commitment to continuing the great work of *Consortiumnews* and his ideas about bringing in more writers from different parts of the globe.

Norman Solomon gave the closing address. Norman recalled working with Robert Parry on a series of stories about Colin Powell as he was being promoted in the media. In contrast with the fawning media, Parry and Solomon revealed how Powell had responsibility for "the killing of so many people in foreign lands with names that couldn't be pronounced." Their investigation revealed that Powell always took the expedient path to get along with the powerful. Norman recalled Bob Parry's insistence that they "master" the material and not rush the story. "We've got to know that it's nailed down and solid."

Norman recounted Bob Parry's commitment to following the truth wherever it led. Mainstream journalists have a sense of the stories which should not be followed, the stories that could be "dangerous" to their own careers. Norman continued, "But Bob Parry went there again and again. And as his book *Fooling America* points out, he had to pay a price. I remember him telling me a number of years ago when he was hammering on the Israeli role in US foreign policy and then writing about Russia, one of his former colleagues, a high level editor at the *New York Times*, said to him 'Bob, you're losing credibility. You keep this up, you're going to marginalize yourself.' But Bob had crossed the Rubicon a long time earlier."

Bob Parry's last article was published after he had a stroke on Christmas Eve. Norman talked about his conversation with Jeff Cohen, founder of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and professor of communications at Ithaca College. Jeff said, "That last article by Bob Parry should be assigned and read by every journalism student in America. It's about independent journalism. It's

about the herd mentality that has gotten into so many journalists in the country. Independent journalism is the opposite of running with the crowd."

At the close of the event, numerous people bought books written by Robert Parry that Sam and Joe had brought from the east coast, contributing to support the ongoing work of *Consortiumnews*.



*Joe Lauria, new editor of Consortiumnews*

May the integrity, tenacity and courage of Robert Parry be long remembered.

And may his example be passed on to a new generation of journalists and truth-tellers.

Robert Parry, *¡presente!*

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, June 4, 2018

*Honduras, continued from page 8*

and throughout the continent. This is at the root of Honduras's expulsion of Hondurans from the country. So long as the extractive model is followed, and the infinite concentration of wealth and power in the hands of very few continues, there will be emigration."

Fr. Melo and the five Honduran activists accompanying him on his US tour brought their demands to Wash-

ington: withdrawal of US backing for, and demilitarization of, the Honduran police and security forces; investigation of the assassinations since the November 2017 elections; liberty for the twenty-two political prisoners; annulment of the 2017 elections that violated the national constitution, and new general elections.

Honduras needs "a return to constitutional order," said Fr. Melo, "but this government can't do it. It is the most illegitimate government in Honduran history. 70% of Hondurans believe the president holds office illegally."

An audience member asked Fr. Melo what motivates him. "I have faith in the God of life." And he has seen many friends killed, including Berta Cáceres. "We were close friends," he said. "She had the key to my house. And there have been hundreds killed over the years. How could I live in peace if I didn't try to be faithful to my friends?" Fr. Melo said some were killed because of his influence. For example, a friend in El Salvador decided to run for mayor with Fr. Melo's encouragement. The man was killed before his campaign ended.

When Fr. Melo returns to Honduras he'll go to the communities, celebrate mass with the people and "see their poverty." This poverty motivates him. He recalled a time he went with eighteen others to visit Berta Cáceres. "That's a lot, you have to prepare food, but I didn't have to tell them in advance. The poor offer you what they have out of their poverty." Yet another inspiration for Fr. Melo is international solidarity: "You're helping us, praying for us, defending us. We see it and say, 'Look, the gringos are organizing.'"

Asked about the Honduran church, Fr. Melo quoted Pope Francis: "The root of violence is inequality. Corruption and violence will end when we face inequality." But, Fr. Melo said soberly, because it is close to the powers that be, "the Honduran church is hypocritical."

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, June 1, 2018

## TAKE ACTION: US Militarization of Mexico

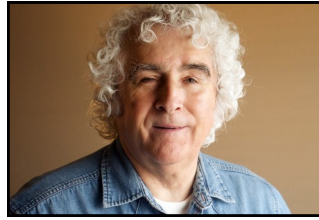
The Trump Administration has proposed deregulating gun exports to all countries. In Mexico, removing Congressional oversight would lead to more weapons going to police and military units that collude with organized crime or have committed serious human rights abuses. The US has long supported military solutions to civilian criminality in Mexico with more than a billion dollars in military and police aid since 2008. The results are devastating: more than 29,000 homicides in Mexico last year, and an increasing number of atrocities committed by the military on counter-drug operations.

Recently, Rep. Keith Ellison circulated a Congressional letter urging the Administration to conduct a full and public assessment of US security assistance to Mexico and to suspend the US support for internal policing by military forces.

It is crucial that Congressional members hear from you, asking if they signed on to Rep. Ellison's letter to Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mattis. Let your Representative know that you are concerned that this funding supports and encourages militarizing public safety, leading to higher levels of violence and impunity in Mexico.

To reach your member of Congress contact the Congressional Switchboard: 202-224-3121.

## SAVE THE DATE: SEPT. 15, 2018 Task Force on the Americas Annual Dinner Guest Speaker Daniel Sheehan



Constitutional trial attorney Daniel Sheehan litigated a number of high-profile social justice cases. He was chief trial counsel on *The American Sanctuary Movement Case* in 1984, which established the right of American church workers to help Central American political refugees fleeing Guatemalan and Salvadoran death squads."

Sheehan teaches at UC Santa Cruz, is president and co-founder of the Romero Institute, a non-profit law in public policy center, and chief counsel for the Lakota People's Law Project which works to rescue Native American children from an abusive state care system and return them to their families.

Currently he is heading a legal team defending Chase Iron Eyes and other water protectors facing felony charges related to the #NoDAPL movement to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline. The case alleges a pattern of unlawful collusion between the fossil fuel industry, their private security forces and the government.

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