

Report

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“The US Appears to be Destined by Providence to Plague the Americas with Misery in the Name of Freedom.”

-Simón Bolívar, 1829

LATIN AMERICA: The Pandemic Divide



Chinese doctors in Hubei Province. Photo: str/afp

By Roger Stoll, Task Force member

COVID-19 has reached every country in the world, and we now know that whether or not the disease kills in great numbers does not depend on GDP. With some exceptions, poorer, socialist-oriented nations have protected their citizens, while rich capitalist nations have not.

The starkest comparison is China, at 4,634 deaths, and the US, with 100,000 and rapidly rising. This is a paradox, if national wealth matters. China has seventh the wealth per capita and four times the population of the US. And China faced a wholly new disease, while the US had weeks to expect COVID-19, its symptoms and infectiousness already known.

But China is building socialism, while the US is decidedly capitalist, as

are Belgium, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Sweden, and Netherlands. Like the US, these countries have among the world’s highest rates of deaths per capita. (Two capitalist exceptions, South Korea and New Zealand, followed China’s lead and beat the virus.)

China’s discovery, announcement and suppression of the disease is celebrated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and worldwide. Government financial support for the population made economic shutdown possible; hundreds of thousands of volunteers and medical personnel were mobilized; massive transports of food and supplies went to the outbreak in Hubei Province.

US failure to fight the disease was perhaps inevitable. Decades of bipartisan austerity had produced extreme inequality, poverty, homelessness, mass

incarceration in crowded, inhumane facilities, inaccessible health care, and little medical preparedness. The shutdown was belated and haphazard, cruelly forcing people out of work without replacing incomes. Nor did the US initiate mass-testing, contact-tracing, and other measures WHO’s experts recommended. Adding insult to injury, the multi-trillion dollar CARES Act has little to do with COVID-19 or helping people, much less “essential workers” (low-wage, undocumented, of color, most at risk). Greatly exacerbating US inequality, the House passed CARES on a voice vote without Democratic objection.

In Latin America, Ecuador, Bolivia and Honduras, poorer capitalist countries with governments largely imposed by the US, followed the leader in acting late and ineffectually. In Ecuador, Bolivia and Honduras, death statistics are low but far less reliable than elsewhere.

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Bodies line the streets of Guayaquil, Ecuador, testifying to the disaster. Bolivia performs the least COVID-19 testing in all Latin America, while exploiting the quarantine to arrest members of the coup-ousted party of Evo Morales (MAS). In Honduras, COVID-19 deaths mount and healthcare services are limited. Government corruption defeats procurement of COVID-19 equipment.

The WHO now designates the entire Americas as the disease epicenter. Brazil's healthcare system is overwhelmed and the dead are placed in mass graves; the indigenous die at twice the national rate. Among wealthier countries of the region, Chile's healthcare system is reaching its limit, and Colombia, Argentina and Peru have failed to flatten the curve.

Along with China, states with the lowest rates of deaths per capita include Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Vietnam, and India's Kerala state. All but Venezuela and Kerala inherited socialist revolutions; Venezuela pursues a socialist project, and Kerala's government is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Cuba's exemplary healthcare system has produced longevity and infant mortality statistics superior to many rich countries. It uses immune-system-boosting treatments and nationwide disease monitoring to fight the virus.

Sandinista Nicaragua's health system acted early, organizing 250,000 volunteers to monitor the disease across the country. Venezuela's Bolivarian "Barrio Adentro" healthcare system used house-to-house screening for the disease, a model studied by the UN.

In global solidarity, Cuba's COVID-19 medical brigades are in twenty-four countries; China uses Cuba's anti-viral

accessibility and affordability in developing countries." And crassly, the US blocked 20 ventilators bound for Barbados, 60 million masks bound for France, and outbid Massachusetts and New Mexico for medical supplies, while Maryland's governor hid masks and ventilators to keep the federal government from seizing them.

China, Russia, Syria, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are under crushing US sanctions or blockades. US-backed wars continue, including in Syria and Yemen (with the worst cholera outbreak in modern history). US coup attempts on Venezuela continue. The virus only increases this US-authored suffering.

The US itself is a disease vector. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has carried out hundreds of deportations, including people infected or exposed, to Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Colombia and Jamaica. The US military conceals or denies outbreaks in its ranks, yet moves personnel to and from its 800-1000 close-quartered military bases worldwide.

None of this should surprise. If the US cared about human life, including at home, it could end hunger and bring potable water to the world. Over half the world's annual 60 million deaths result from malnutrition and contaminated drinking water, both remediable for about \$40 billion a year.

In the fight against the pandemic, popular mobilizations within nations and solidarity between them is being led not by the richest nations in the world but by socialist countries and governments. Humanity must follow.

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, May 28, 2020



Trump riding the virus

drug, and its disease experts are in Iran, Europe and elsewhere; Russia, Iran and Vietnam directly and indirectly aid the international effort.

Perversely, the US works against solidarity, blaming China and the WHO for US failure and rejecting the WHO's multi-national efforts. Previously, the US unsuccessfully pressured a German pharmaceutical for future vaccine rights. Indeed, the US expressed fear China would find a vaccine and give it to the world, which China's President Xi Jinping has just pledged to do, making any vaccine it discovers a "global public good...ensuring vaccine

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CUBA: Covid-19 Medical Brigades Are Not Medical Diplomacy, They Are International Solidarity



Cuban doctors leaving for Italy. Photo: Ismael Francisco Gonzalez

By Bill Hackwell, Task Force Board member

After being quarantined for 14 days upon arrival in South Africa the staff from Cuba's Henry Reeve medical brigade has now been cleared to join the front lines with those saving lives in the battle against the Covid-19 pandemic. The 216 member group, made up of family physicians, epidemiologists, bio statisticians, health technology engineers, and biotechnology experts, will be deployed to all nine provinces in that country.

Meanwhile another 85 Cuban medical professionals arrived in Peru this week making up the 26th Cuban Covid-19 brigade, so far, to be requested during

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this international medical crisis and more are expected. Cuba has made no distinction in answering the call to every country that has asked; no matter if they are rich or poor, if their government is led by progressives or neoliberals, socialist or reactionary. The virus does not recognize political borders but the response to it is another matter.

Today at the 73rd World Health Assembly Cuban Minister of Health, Dr. José Angel Portal Miranda elaborated on their world view. "Without ever neglecting the responsibility to protect our people, we have not abandoned the Cuban Revolution's vocation for solidarity. More than 2,300 collaborators, organized in 26 medical brigades from the Henry Reeve Contingent, contribute today in the battle against this disease in 24 countries - in addition, to the more than 28,000 Cuban health professionals already working in 59 countries."

The approach of the US to the pandemic couldn't be more different. It has been chaos with no national plan, unmasking the deep inability of the privatization of healthcare to meet the challenge materially or to muster any comprehensive and coordinated plan for the population, let alone participating in any collaboration with the community of nations. No, the US in all of its exceptionalism is only excelling in this crisis

in intercepting personal protection equipment and ventilators meant for other countries or even states in the US. It excels in blaming other countries for the disease with wild, unproven accusations. Instead of pitching in, the US undermines the role of the World Health Organization by withholding funds, and criticizes and pressures countries who are calling on the Cuban medical brigades to come to assist. There is an irrational desperation in all of this, one that begs the underlying question: what is in it for us?

Cuba is the quiet shining example of the exact opposite approach; giving not what they have left over but sharing what they do have and that is a robust medical system accessible by all, blockaded for over 60 years but still able to produce world-class recognized medical biotechnical institutions that collaborate for the sake of humanity and not profits.

Cuba's approach is not to stumble and fumble opportunities away waiting for the virus to arrive in patients who are already sick, but rather to send out electronic questionnaires to every home. For those who don't have internet access, medical teams come to look for any evidence of the coronavirus, and there is testing for all. Cuba, unafraid, aggressively goes out and finds the virus, and applies the same measures to every person in the country, while also sending their professional medical teams to any corner of the planet.

This world view of humanity first is ingrained in the soul and mind of every Cuban since the revolution in 1959, so when it comes to recruiting qualified medical workers to go on these dangerous missions there is never a shortage of volunteers.

The little island, 90 miles from the unfolding disaster in the US has set the bar high when it comes to responding to the pandemic, and they have done it without ulterior motives, expecting little in return for their collaboration. This is not medical diplomacy we are talking about here; it is international solidarity at its finest. Cuba is simply holding up their piece of the struggle for humanity with deep humility and just as much determination.

Source: *Resumen Latinoamericano*, May 18, 2020

VENEZUELA : “We are On the Right Side of History”



Jorge Arreaza. Photo: COHA

By Roger D. Harris, Task Force Board member and Associate Editor at COHA

Ed. Note: *An exclusive interview with Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza with the Council on Hemispheric Affairs on May 24, 2020*

As Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza spoke to the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) Friday night, five Iranian oil tankers headed to Venezuela in defiance of Washington. Within hours the first tanker arrived through the Caribbean where an armada of US warships were deployed. The Venezuelan navy escorted the Iranian ship into Puerto Cabello serving the El Palito refinery, followed by a second ship. This was a victory for Venezuela and Iran, which are both heavily sanctioned by the US, but have joined in mutual aid.

Arreaza spoke from Caracas in a special video interview arranged by COHA, aired on Facebook Live and YouTube. COHA co-director Patricio Zamorano moderated from Washington, DC, and Senior Research Fellows Alina Duarte from Mexico City and Danny Shaw from New York City asked questions. Co-director Fred Mills from Washington DC expressed COHA’s commitment to fostering critical dialogue in the spirit of its founder, Larry Birns.

As Arreaza explained, “Venezuela is in the epicenter of this part of the world because we are trying to build our own democracy our own way.” Before the Bolivarian Revolution, which brought first Hugo Chávez (1998) and then his successor Nicolás Maduro (2013, 2018) to the presidency, for some Venezuela was considered almost a colony under US influence.

COHA’s Editorial Board and Senior Research Fellows participated in the video-interview of Foreign Affairs Minister of Venezuela, Jorge Arreaza.

Because of illegal US sanctions, Venezuela has been unable to use the interna-

tional banking system, making it virtually impossible to engage in foreign trade or refinance their debt. This has caused shortages of fuel, food, and medicines and it is further crippling the economy. Arreaza defended the shipment of gasoline and related products from Iran as a legal commercial activity protected by international law. Because of the US blockade, Venezuela has been unable to buy the necessary parts to service its own oil industry or purchase additives to refine its own petroleum. Hence the need to import gasoline to support essential services in this time of pandemic.

Now, Arreaza observed, “the sanctions are much worse than the coronavirus” in terms of the human toll. Over 100,000 Venezuelans have perished from lack of essential medicines and food. But, he added, “I would not say ‘devastating,’ because we have managed to control the situation.”

The key to the incredible resistance of Venezuela has been the unity of the government with the people. “We are not only resisting but we are constructing.”

Arreaza views the American people as Venezuela’s “friends” and “the first victims of imperialism.” “We want a good relationship with Washington, working together. What the US wants is to overthrow our government and establish a government of neoliberalism.” He warned that “If the US were to invade Venezuela, we will respond. Like what happened in Vietnam, we will prevail. But it would be a disaster for both parties.”

Three weeks ago, Venezuela thwarted an incursion of mercenaries, including former US Special Forces veterans. While the US government claimed “plausible denial,” their fingerprints were all over the botched coup. Arreaza revealed that the Venezuelans had infiltrated the operation and knew it was happening. Regretting that eight people had been killed, Arreaza admonished that more of the same is expected because the US backs these acts of aggression and has even posted multi-million-dollar bounties for top Venezuelan officials.

Arreaza denounced Colombia as complicit, doing what the US dictates. He was critical of the Colombian government’s failure to stop the illegal bases inside its territory where some 60 Venezuelan deserters and other paramilitary forces had been training for the raid into Venezuela with full knowledge of Colombian au-

thorities.

Before Chávez, Arreaza related, the Venezuelan military was viewed by him and most Venezuelans as an occupying army under the control of the US. “Now we have a civil-military union,” along with three million armed citizens in the militia. Proof of this patriotic unity came, Arreaza pointed out, when the mercenaries attacked three weeks ago, and local fishermen and the militia were the ones who first detained the invaders.

The US proxy self-proclaimed president for Venezuela, Juan Guaidó, has “broken all the laws.” But it is up to the independent judicial branch of government, Arreaza clarified, and not the executive, to prosecute. Within the opposition, Arreaza explained, Guaidó and his boss Leopoldo López have lost their legitimacy but are still backed by the most powerful nation in the world. So, the opposition has only a “fake unity,” which is unraveling.

Reflective of the democratic aspirations of his government, Arreaza said, “we don’t want a one-party state; we want an opposition.” But Venezuela needs an opposition that is independent of a foreign power and wants to serve the interests of the Venezuelan people. Guaidó, in contrast, has welcomed the sanctions by the US, punishing the Venezuelan people, and has even endorsed a US invasion. Arreaza is hopeful regarding the moderate opposition that is committed to the electoral process. Guaidó, who espouses violent overthrow of the elected government, is finding himself increasingly isolated.

Arreaza espoused a multipolar world, respecting the sovereignty of nations. An informal group of states in defense of the UN charter is developing with allies and friends of Venezuela such as Cuba, Nicaragua, China, Russia, and Iran. “We need international law and not the law of the empire of the US.”

“The future of the world will be different after the coronavirus [passes]; people are rethinking; something new is coming.” The Bolivarian Revolution is now in a better position than three years ago, according to the Foreign Minister. “We are on the right side of history.” Venezuela’s contribution to the world has been, Arreaza concluded, “to prove that we can resist. We know how to resist, adapt, and advance.”

Source: *Council on Hemispheric Affairs, May 25, 2020*

COLOMBIA: Crisis upon Crisis upon Crisis

By Alice Loaiza, Task Force Board member

It's hard to describe a country that has so many levels of critical problems as does Colombia. Then you place the Covid-19 virus on top of it all and one wonders how people manage to survive...or maybe they don't. One thing for sure is that most of the suffering, poverty, violence and corruption could be solved in a relatively short time if those in charge were willing to do so.

Colombia has been in the US eye for many years as a strategic area on the Pacific and the Caribbean at the top of South America, with a government willing to sell out in exchange for business favors, money and fun. There is no doubt of the military, political, economic and intelligence significance of Colombia for the US in its desire to dominate the Americas and the Caribbean.

Billions of dollars have been invested over the years to insure the great Colombian "friendship". The US Congress approved \$448 million for Colombia this year, \$30 million more than last year, which was even more than Trump requested. It is the Latin American country that receives the most "aid." This, of course, is the money that we see up front. The hidden money that finances the paramilitary rightwing armies and the military preparation for a coup in Venezuela through Colombia isn't really visible to us.

These times have opened the doors for repressive governments in Latin America to crack down under the guise of "the COVID crisis." The unpopular Colombian government continues its violent attack on the poor and hungry communities and it is challenging to call for mass protests or legal actions, since the country is on lock down.

The COVID-19 virus has come to Colombia on top of an already decadent political system run by many corrupt politicians, judges, and military that are busy accusing each other. The most recent scandal is the discovery of the illegal spying by the military on any person or organization who is critical of the government. The Peace Accord signed with the FARC guerillas in 2016 has been tossed aside by the Iván Duque government and vio-

lence and poverty have again become dominant in Colombia. The failing health system, which has been privatized, is barely present in the cities and non-existent in the small towns and rural areas

Almost 50% of the workforce is informal with no job security. It isn't easy to stay home and just not eat even though you can get a fine of several hundred dollars if you are illegally out on the street. There is panic among all communities with the thought of becoming ill with the virus. But the working class,



Protest in Soacha Colombia demanding food. Photo: AP

peasant, afro and indigenous communities are panicked about more than that. Community leaders as well as ex-FARC combatants are being hunted down and killed every day. The paramilitary and military know exactly where they are: in their homes where the government has told them to remain during the pandemic.

On April 9, *El Espectador* published a long list of recent murders. First on the list was Amado Torres, who was 49 years old and a social leader in the village of La Miranda, in San José de Apartadó (Antioquia). "His body was moved in a hammock due to the refusal of the Judicial Police to carry him out. On 29 February, heavily armed men wearing military uniforms entered his house in the village and killed him."

In a report in the *Guardian* on March 23, Héctor Marino Carabali, a human rights leader in Cauca who usually travels in an armored car stated, "We are being killed, like always, while the government has taken drastic measures to fight the virus but done nothing to protect us or tell us about how we can do our work. Curfews and lockdowns always affect the most vulnerable."

The fact that people are being killed is not a secret since major media is reporting on it around the world. The Institute for Development and Peace Studies counts 96 killings of social leaders in

Colombia between January 1 and May 5.

FARC party members are also being killed. According to the magazine *Semana*, the young 27 year-old father, Robert Hertado was assassinated in his home next to his wife and one year-old child on May 20th by heavily armed men. He was the 197th ex-combatant of the FARC killed since the signing of the Peace Accord and the 25th this year.

The situation in the communities is one of complete terror. There is no place to go, no place to hide, you just wait for the next assassination to come. There is no doubt that the state is behind these murders and the US, the Colombian government's best friend, of course, is silent about the killings. The response of the US is to send more military aid.

In Colombia the US has worked hard to maintain a willing population that supports US aggression in the region. The latest US aggression in Latin America through Colombia is the war against the Bolivarian government of Venezuela. The right-wing media storm created so much anti-Venezuelan sentiment in Colombia that many citizens were ready to march to the border to support Guaidó and overthrow President Maduro. Even a huge concert with some of the most renowned Colombia musicians was organized at the border of Venezuela to support a coup against Maduro in 2019. The recent coup attempt against Venezuela, organized by Silvercorp, a US mercenary company, that took place after months of training in Colombia was an idea hatched in the US with at least complicit support from the Colombian government and military.

Venezuelan refugees coming to Colombia have been made to be seen as personal enemies of the Colombian people. They have been spit on, attacked and insulted, even when living on the street with young children. It seems that many Colombians haven't thought about the fact that their own country is one of the poorest and most violent in the Americas.

Our support and participation in making this situation public is important. This is another US war that is largely unknown in the world but it is definitely a war against those in Latin America who even raise the right to food, healthcare and education or question the involvement of the US in their country.

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, on May 23, 2020

To Those who Regularly Receive our Newsletter

From the Board Members and Staff of the Task Force on the Americas



When our last newsletter came out in early March the real impact of the Covid pandemic had not quite set in. Most of you who receive our newsletter have been with us for some time and we want to take a moment to reflect on how important you have been. You are the ones who have given us encouragement, feedback, support and have financially sustained us for many years.

We cannot predict what is going to happen, but one thing we know is that the US government is not going to miraculously start helping to end world suffering rather than continue to take advantage of a vulnerable situation by creating dependency and austerity, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. Our government wants to snuff out the good examples of Cuba and Venezuela who stand in solidarity and who promote the community of nations not for themselves but for all human kind. The Task Force on the Americas stands strong and continues to be a voice for the voiceless in opposition to the neocolonial plans of US power brokers towards struggling countries.

To do this we need you with us. We hope to continue the newsletter but to do that we need your continued financial support as we move forward. We appreciate that you may be reevaluating your priorities due in part to how the pandemic has affected you. Our hope is that you will value our project and that you see it as something worthwhile, continuing our collaboration for a better world.

Please write a check and use the enclosed envelope or go to <https://taskforceamericas.org/donate/> to make an electronic donation.

CHILE: Between Loss, Hope, Tenacity and Ingenuity



October uprising in Chile. Photo: Mario Davila, Agencia Uno

By Elizabeth Milos, Chilean activist living in the Bay Area who was in Chile in March

Long before the worldwide pandemic arrived, people in Chile had been living precariously in a relentless system of long work hours, minimum wage, job insecurity, crippling debt and poor health outcomes due to privatized education and healthcare, and retirement pensions that are one quarter the minimum wage. Neoliberalism transformed Chilean society into a consumerist, individualistic

and “apolitical” world which many Chileans stubbornly endured.

Since the “transition to democracy” in 1990, the indigenous Mapuche continued fighting for their cultural, political and territorial rights against extractive industries and a succession of Chilean governments (both “socialist” and rightwing). They bore the brunt of state repression with incarceration,

frame-ups, police killings, raids, Pinochet-era Anti-Terrorism laws and mainstream media campaigns that depicted the Mapuche as a “problem” group that didn’t want “progress” for Chile.

Then came October 18, 2019 and the rest of Chile woke up. Initiated by high school students against a 30-peso metro rate hike, soon thousands were jumping over turnstiles, getting arrested and beat up by police. The battle cry was, “It’s not 30 pesos, its 30 years!” Thirty years since “democracy” had come but also more than 30 years of an economic sys-

tem that was wringing the life out of the population. More than 50% scrape by on a minimum wage US\$426 a month. Retirees from the privatized retirement plans (AFPs) only get US\$125 a month.

The social upheaval became an immediate danger to the Piñera government because it was a self-organized revolt not led by any political party, which could have been brought into the political fold of quasi power.

This self-organized movement was almost unanimously against any flags belonging to political parties, but both Chilean and Mapuche flags were everywhere. It was a broad social movement, and the Social Unity roundtable (*Mesa de Unidad Social*), included leaders of unions; student, professional and feminist organizations. They came together to present a list of demands, including higher wages, better job security, an end to the privatized retirement plans, to privatized education and healthcare, a cancellation of all of the student debt, and transit toll debts (TAGS), an end to the privatization of water and all of Chile’s natural resources; an end to the industrial sacrifice zones which leave people and the environment sick from dangerous pollution; abolition of

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Pinochet's 1980 constitution and the creation of a new one via a Constituent Assembly. Self-organized territorial assemblies started meeting to create one.

The social upheaval became like the ocean swallowing up the gigantic avalanches of snow and like the ocean, the waves of protests kept coming. Piñera declared a State of Emergency calling the military to the streets.

At the frontlines fighting the police and military were the "Primera Linea," young men and women, even children, students, workers and youth from the poorest shantytowns, many of them brought up in the oppressive and sexually abusive Child Welfare Centers (SENAME). Medical students and nurses formed Medics Brigades to treat the injured. Millions marched peacefully during Chile's largest marches, protected by the Primera



Primera Linea. Photo: Sebastian Silva

Linea, which confronted the gigantic water cannons and armored police vehicles with slingshots and rocks, neutralizing tear gas with cones and water jugs.

Last November, Congress reached an agreement behind closed doors to hold a referendum on a new Constitution in April 2020. It was an agreement that didn't include the Constituent Assembly option, which held more guarantees of true self determination. Congress acted quickly to tie the hands of this future convention by passing a "reform" law rendering the undemocratic Constitutional Tribunal untouchable and keeping privatized water and the retirement system beyond its scope. Youth under 21 couldn't be elected as members, excluding the same high school age youth who had started Chile's revolution. Negotiations continued regarding representation of Chile's indigenous population and gender parity.

Congress passed laws prohibiting wearing masks during protests, banned protests that blockaded streets or occupied schools, imposing five-year sentences for violations. They also passed laws allowing the President to call the military to the streets to protect essential infrastructure without a State of Emergency.

Each wave of protest was met with severe police repression costing dozens of lives and thousands of injured. The National Institute for Human Rights (INDH) kept an ongoing tally of cases also denouncing torture and cruel treatment and sexual violence. The tally also started showing that the police targeted

protestors' eyes with pellets and tear gas. The Primera Linea ingeniously used hundreds of laser pointers to try to prevent police from aiming their weapons.

Between October and March, more than 450 people had lost at least one eye and two people had lost both. It was the largest number of eye injuries during a social upheaval in any part of the world during the past 25 years combined. Between 2,500 and 5,000 are now awaiting trials in overcrowded, unsanitary Petri dish jails during a pandemic. Three international Human Rights organizations presented reports of systematic violations of human rights.

March brought the half-a-million strong Women's March, and then news of the coronavirus began circulating. The government had been overplaying its preparedness level but as the number of infections and deaths increased worldwide, it took this opportunity to postpone the referendum. Throughout Chile, the same people and social organizations that had been protesting began making calls to stay inside and protect each other, even holding *cacerolazos* (pots and pans protests) from home demanding a total quarantine. Government response imposed only partial quarantines, a curfew

creating more crowding for workers on public transportation, and created laws allowing corporations to lay off millions of workers. Meanwhile, hospital workers denounced lack of protective equipment and ventilators. Chile now has the highest new infection rate in the world.

In May, Piñera finally ordered a shutdown of all of Santiago and other major cities causing a siege of hunger for the poorest sectors who can't work from home and have no income.

Also, in May, Piñera began releasing Pinochet ex-military/police prisoners, convicted of crimes against humanity, from their luxury jails using the pandemic excuse. A new National Intelligence Law passed to monitor and punish political and social organizing. Police arrested Mapuche vegetable market sellers and destroyed their goods in Temuco. Hunger protests have erupted in El Bosque, Villa Francia, La Legua, San Bernardo and Puente

Alto. Again, youth wearing masks and shields throw rocks at the newly purchased million-dollar police water cannons.

Throughout Santiago, traditional soup kitchens have begun sprouting up. It is the same soup kitchens that emerged in 1930 during the authoritarian regime of Coronel Carlos Ibañez del Campo (who organized the police force into *Carabineros de Chile*), and the same soup kitchens of the 1980s during the Pinochet dictatorship. Piñera's civilian dictatorship targets soup kitchens, raiding, arresting and destroying food. In one social media video, a 15-year-old sharing food with neighbors explains that he works to support his little sister. The music in the background pleasantly surprises him and he begins to smile and chant to the song, *Con Todo Sino Pa'Que?* (Give it your ALL, there's nothing left to lose). Hashtags on social media and on the walls of Santiago promise *#Volveremos* (We'll be back).

Source: *Task Force on the Americas*, May 26, 2020.

NICARAGUA: Towards Social Equality and Food Sovereignty

By Carissa Brands, Task Force Board member and delegate in the recent Friends of the ATC delegation

In February, Friends of the Association of Peasant Workers (ATC) and the Alliance for Global Justice (AFGJ) organized an agroecology and Sandinismo solidarity delegation to Nicaragua. Led by Friends of the ATC's Coordinator and co-International Relations Secretariat, Erika Takeo, the delegation witnessed the current conditions in Nicaragua nearly two years after an attempted coup and the ongoing work of the ATC in cooperative communities and unions around the country. Delegates included folks from Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Ecuador, Canada and the United States.

Other than the economy still recuperating from the attempted coup of 2018, the Nicaraguan people continue their struggle to remain independent and out of the grips of the neoliberal orbit of US imperialism. Despite the crippling effects of US sanctions, the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega has made significant social advances since it came to power in 2007, including expanding electricity to 97% of the population. The government is building new water and sewer systems, as well as funding tuition-free public schools through university. All Nicaraguans have access to the country's universal healthcare system, regardless of income or employment, although the rural areas experience fewer services than the more urban areas.

It was apparent everywhere we traveled that the Ortega government is spending money on improving infrastructure and roads so that the country can easily and safely transport people and goods. And the country feels safe to be traveling around, with Nicaragua's crime rate being the lowest in all of the Central American countries.

Gender equality is evident by some of their current laws. Fifty percent of government representatives must be women. For example, if there's a male governor then there must be a female vice governor. This progressive law makes Nicaragua unique in the Americas. Also, there is a Domestic Violence law that is actually enforced and, in some areas of the country, there is a police force made up of only women who respond to these cases, supporting women and children in homes and communities.

The Sandinista revolution remains strong, with the majority of Nicaraguans supporting the current Ortega government. Every Saturday, supporters march through the streets in Managua and other cities around Nicaragua. Graffiti and



Photo: Friends of the ATC

stencils of FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) and other artwork adorn walls, and statues of Sandino stand proudly in central parks reminding everyone of the revolution and the struggle it takes for it to continue.

Our delegation focused on the agricultural cooperatives and unions working in the country, such as the ATC and La Via Campesina (LVC). Agriculture makes up a large part of Nicaragua's economy for internal markets, exports and subsistence farming relied on by campesino families. An enduring part of the revolution is land reform, which has been supported by the Ortega government by continuing to grant smaller growers land title regardless of gender.

The delegation visited several unions and cooperatives, which, in the spirit of the Sandinista Revolution, reject the corporate food regime that demands peasants produce cheap exports for commodity markets paying them very little, while selling them expensive seeds, fertilizers and toxic pesticides. The cooperatives and unions save and share their own, creole, non-GMO seeds and many maintain seed reservoirs. Nicaragua prohibits the import of GMO (genetically modified organism) seeds. Farmer-to-farmer education through the ATC and the LVC supports the horizontal sharing and experimentation of sustainable agricultural practices, rejecting the top-down education of more "developed" agribusiness-dominated nations.

Santa Julia, a women's cooperative growing coffee for market, as well as for their own sustenance, has embraced the agroecological method. This includes the

social, economic and environmental well-being derive from meeting their needs individually, as well as communally. With an anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal and anti-patriarchal methodology, they are improving their community by becoming food sovereign, composting, saving and sharing seeds, and finding ways to protect their crops from the effects of climate change. With the help of the ATC, the community was able to purchase equipment for processing coffee and, since March of this year, they now have running water from their well.

Other cooperatives, such as La Unión coffee cooperative in Jinotega municipality, and the community of Marlin Alvarado in Santa Teresa, Carazo, use agroecological methods of meeting their community's needs. La Unión de Cooperativas Agropecuarias del Nueva Segovia (UCANS), a growers cooperative union in Somoto, has been organizing groups of cooperatives since 1998 to strengthen the social and economic well-being of growers. Their program includes: planning and coaching; exchange with other growers; technical assistance; seed banks; home gardens; crop management; and health nutritionists to the communities.

The radical practices of agroecology and food sovereignty are a figurative middle finger to US agricultural corporations. Nicaragua is about 90% food sovereign, meaning that they produce and consume 90% of the country's food needs. This intentional and popular part of the revolution is one of the major reasons why Nicaragua can hold these powerful agricultural corporations at bay.

As I write this, the US House of Representatives unanimously passed a bill without debate to impose more sanctions on Nicaragua. Why is the US government so obsessed with destroying Nicaragua? Like the examples of Cuba and Venezuela, Nicaragua is in the cross hairs of imperialism for standing up and saying no to the neoliberal model of dependence. The assaults and attacks from the US continue, but the Sandinista Revolution will endure. We can help them by contacting our Representatives and educating them about the realities of Nicaragua and their struggle to protect their country and their right to participatory democracy.

Source: Task Force on the Americas, March 30, 2020

HONDURAS: Why We Shouldn't Go Back to "Normal"



ID's being checked at the markets. Photo: The Guardian

By Karen Spring, Honduras-based Coordinator for the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN).

On May 5, a group of Afro-indigenous Garifuna men stood guard at the entrance of La Travesía community in the department of Cortes in northern Honduras. The men were fumigating vehicles, documenting the traffic transiting through their community, and implementing other bio-security measures as part of community-led prevention efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19.

In the afternoon, a police vehicle arrived and stopped at the checkpoint. The Garifuna men were told they had to disperse and could not put up a checkpoint which, according to the police, is illegal. When the local residents insisted on maintaining it, the police threatened to return with a military convoy and to launch tear gas to break it up. The community refused to budge.

These measures at community access points are just one of many strategies that local Honduran communities are using to protect themselves. According to Miriam Miranda, the General Coordinator for the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) who spoke on a May 6th webinar organized by the Honduras Solidarity Network, "We initiated the creation of COVID-19 attention centers in the communities. We activated networks that have historically operated in the communities. One of the fundamental aspects is that we decided that it was urgent and necessary to create solidarity networks to protect our

elders, not just because of their physical vulnerability but because they are also the repositories of Garifuna culture and knowledge."

Miranda also explained how Garifuna leaders in over 26 communities are offering workshops on medicinal plants that can be used to strengthen the immune system and organizing community food distribution projects.

Community-led efforts are inspiring for many but they are also a sign of citizen mistrust of government COVID-19 management and mitigation efforts led by President Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) and Honduran state security forces. From the time that a few cases of coronavirus were reported in Honduras, JOH imposed an absolute nation-wide curfew and partially suspended constitutional rights including freedom of expression. Military and police set up checkpoints all around the country to enforce the curfew.

In response, all around the country, many began to protest insisting that they could not afford to lockdown. Large protests organized by hungry and poor Hondurans that could not work or had been fired from their jobs were broken up with tear gas and live bullets fired by state security forces. Thousands of people have been arrested.

An already difficult political, human rights and economic situation in Honduras is being exacerbated by the pandemic. The crisis that led to the exodus of Hondurans to the southern US Border in 2019 exposed the level of the poverty, desperation, and political crisis unfolding in the country since the 2009 US backed coup d'état. Like in many places around the world, the pandemic is only worsening an already terrible and desperate situation. At the time of this writing, the Honduran government has reported 1,685 COVID-19 cases and 105 deaths, and the numbers continue to grow.

In alleged efforts to minimize the

impact of the pandemic, the Honduran Congress approved over \$888 million including loans from international financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Based on the past and despite these current efforts, Hondurans are convinced that the government has no intention of equipping the public hospitals or helping those in dire need citing the "corruption pandemic" that has totally depleted public institutions, particularly the healthcare system.

Sure enough, it did not take long for the first scandal to erupt. On April 27, the Anti-Corruption Council (CNA) published a report outlining the most recent COVID-19 corruption scandal involving four companies – three Honduran and one based in the United States – that were contracted by the Honduran government to provide coronavirus bio-security equipment to hospitals. According to the report, the contracts overvalued the purchases of N95 and disposable surgical masks by \$2.3 million and all four companies are linked directly to family members of the National Party, currently in power.

A few days after the CNA report, another scandal hit the Honduran media calling into question, yet again, the legitimacy of the government. On April 30, the US Department of Justice (DOJ), Southern District Court of New York indicted the former head of the US funded and trained Honduran National Police, Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla Valladares on drug trafficking charges. The indictment directly takes aim at President JOH and his brother, Tony Hernández, the latter awaiting sentencing in a New York prison for large-scale drug trafficking.

The indictment reads: "... on behalf of convicted former Honduran congressman Tony Hernández and his brother the president, Bonilla Valladares oversaw the transshipment of multi-ton loads of cocaine bound for the US, used machineguns and other weaponry to accomplish the task, and participated in extreme violence, including the murder of a rival trafficker, to further the conspiracy."

Despite the serious charges against Bonilla, the mention of JOH in the indictment sparked new hope in Honduras

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that the head of the “narco-military dictatorship” would one day be charged. However, many in Honduras remain confused about how the clear accusations in the DOJ statement strongly contradict the US government’s consistent support for the JOH government. This includes President Donald Trump’s recent mention of “the President of the Republic of Honduras is a really nice guy” in a press conference in the Oval Office less than a week before the DOJ indictment of Bonilla Valladares was made public.

It seems that President Juan Orlando Hernández has mastered how to remain in the good graces of President Trump by promoting policies of specific interest to Trump. On March 13, two days before the COVID-19 lockdown was implemented, the Honduran government published and therefore, activated the Honduras-US “safe third country” agreement. The agreement is one of Trump’s racist immigration policies that forces asylum seekers to the US be sent to Mexico, Honduras and other Central American countries to allegedly seek protection there.

In the midst of a global pandemic, the timing of the agreement’s activation may increase the number of deportations to Honduras. Despite widespread reports of COVID-19 cases in US migrant detention centers, deportations to Central America have not stopped. According to a report recently published by the Center for Economic Policy and Research (CEPR), the US sent 18 deportation flights to Honduras from March 15 (the day the coronavirus lockdown was imposed in Honduras) to April 24.

At least one case of a Honduran woman recently deported from the US suspected of having COVID-19 has been reported by the local press. Upon arriving to Honduras she was arrested in relation to a pending charge, sent to prison in western Copán, and then a few days later, taken to the emergency wing of one of the largest public hospitals with COVID-19 symptoms. To date, there have been no reports of COVID-19 cases in the prison where the woman was held, but her brief, unprotected presence may lead to future reported cases.

There are still several weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic crises to unfold in Honduras, particularly since the virus in-

infection rate has not yet peaked. Despite over ten years of active resistance and subsequent repression, Hondurans continue to organize locally, regionally, and nationally to protest the causes of the crises and suggest solutions.

Like in La Travesía, and other Garifuna communities along the coast, Hondurans from all parts of the country are finding ways to protect themselves when gathering together. In Tegucigalpa, others organize food distribution networks to support the families most in need. These efforts are ways that Hondurans hope to avoid returning to “normal” which according to Miriam Miranda, “would be irresponsible.”

“The pandemic really calls upon us to reflect about how the current ferocious, murderous, capitalist system that kills our environment and natural resources does not work for humanity” says Miranda, “we should not go back to the same as before.”

Source: *Task Force on the Americas, May 9, 2020.*

ECUADOR: Moreno Hides the Number of Covid-19 Deaths



Guayaquil, Ecuador. Photo: Jimmy Negrete

By Ángel Guerra Cabrera, journalist and member of the Secretariat of In Defense of Humanity

We are hearing frightening news from Covid-19 out of Ecuador, mainly from Guayaquil, Guayas province, on the Pacific, the country’s second city and an important commercial and financial center with 2.7 million inhabitants.

The BBC states that on April 1, Guayas had reported more victims than entire Latin American nations; 60 dead and 1,937 infected (1,301 in Guayaquil). Images of exposed or burned corpses are profusely circulating in the streets due to the collapse of the health and funeral system. Others are piled up in bags at police stations.

Argentine newspaper *Página 12* reports sources in the Guayas Scientific Police reveal a scandalous concealment of deaths by Covid-19 perpetrated by the government of Lenin Moreno. In this city, they say, there are at least 70 deaths per day from the virus. However, there seems to be a catch. The protocol that was put in place does not require verification of the reasons for death, so the death is counted as inconclusive. Cremation is mandatory

and immediate family members are allowed to see the body for only five minutes and the families have no recourse to appeal.

The Buenos Aires newspaper reports that Moreno’s government paid some 350 million dollars to the IMF last week on its foreign debt. Like other neoliberal governments it has cut the health budget by 30 percent.

The Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin, representing organizations from nine Amazon countries, called on their governments to adopt protective measures to address the spread of Covid-19. Meanwhile, the Wayuu people, the most numerous of Colombian indigenous peoples who live in La Guajira department, asked President Iván Duque for guarantees for the obligatory quarantine. They have no water or food in their homes. They are at risk of contagion and of dying of hunger, said the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia.

Source: *La Jornada, April 15, 2020*

US: Deportations Are Exporting COVID-19 to Latin America

By Daniella Burgi-Palomino, co-director of the Latin American Working Group

Travel is restricted around the world, but the United States has been flying migrants on hundreds of deportation flights to at least 11 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean since the pandemic began in the United States. There have been over 100 cases of migrants deported from the United States testing positive for COVID-19 upon being returned to Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico and Colombia.

These deportations demonstrate the lengths to which the Trump administration is willing to go to prioritize its harsh immigration enforcement agenda. Under a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention order issued on March 20, the administration closed US borders to asylum seekers but still allowed truck drivers, students and others to continue entering the United States.

Over 20,000 migrants have since been expelled to Mexico or rapidly flown to their home country. Worse still, hundreds of unaccompanied children have been subject to this cruel policy in direct violation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act passed by Congress in 2008 to establish a process for migrant children to receive temporary shelter and be reunited with their family members throughout their immigration proceedings.

These deportations also reflect the well-documented negligence in providing access to medical care and poor conditions for migrants in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency deporting migrants. Detainees have been denied access to soap, disinfectant and masks during this public health emergency. Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejía, a Salvadoran man, became the first detained person to die from COVID-19 after having been hospitalized from the Otay Mesa Detention Center in California.

There is no way to know how many more immigrants could already have been exposed to COVID-19, as ICE has only tested a fraction of those within its migrant jails. Of the ones that the agency did test, about 50 percent tested positive for COVID-19. ICE is now shuttling



Immigrants deported to Guatemala. Photo: Johan Ordenez

immigrants back and forth between migrant jails that have had COVID-19 outbreaks and then deporting them with just a temperature check. ICE will be unable to administer tests for all deported migrants, and even when it does test them, there has already been at least one case of a migrant deported back with certification from the US that he tested negative only to test positive in Guatemala. We cannot rely on testing or wait until it is implemented.

Regardless of whether or not migrants test for COVID-19 before being placed on flights, they are being returned to extremely unstable and dangerous situations in their home countries. In El Salvador, those deported are taken directly from the airport to one of at least nine quarantine facilities for deported migrants where there have been reports of flooding, lack of access to medical care, overcrowding and unhygienic conditions.

ICE has only tested a fraction of those within its migrant jails. Of the ones that the agency did test, about 50 percent tested positive for COVID-19.

Governments are also taking increasingly repressive measures in response to COVID-19. Over 6,000 individuals have been arrested in Honduras for violating curfews or for protesting over layoffs

and lack of food, and one man there was killed and another seriously injured by the military police. Curfews and suspensions to public transportation prevent families from accessing their relatives at airports or quarantine centers, which is especially concerning for unaccompanied children.

Migrants are being deported to some of the poorest countries in the hemisphere with extremely fragile healthcare systems. Haiti may have as few as 60 ventilators for a country of 11 million people. A presidentially appointed panel of medical experts in Haiti recently called for a suspension of deportation flights to the country.

Like much of the Trump administration's policies toward the region, deportations reflect a racist and myopic approach to Latin America and its people. The general attitude seems to be: It is not worth testing migrants for COVID-19 and it does not matter if they infect their communities when they are sent back.

"Any measure that contributes to regionally spreading the disease or putting people at risk must be stopped immediately. A major outbreak of COVID-19 could be catastrophic," reads a statement from Doctors without Borders calling for a halt to deportations.

By exporting the virus, the United States is contributing to a destabilization of the region. There are already reports of growing food insecurity and deepening poverty due to COVID-19 in Latin America. Increased out-migration is likely to follow.

The United States should immediately halt deportation flights for as long as there is a public health emergency. Increasing testing of deported migrants alone is not the answer. Instead, the US should release immigrants and asylum seekers and allow them to shelter in place with family and friends in the US. It should also provide countries with assistance based on their public health needs, and not on the extent to which they cooperate on migration enforcement. Doing so will make us all safer and help the region respond in these tough times, building its resiliency for the future.

Source: *Truthout*, May 18, 2020

A C T I O N A L E R T S



ENDORSE THE CAMPAIGN TO NOMINATE THE CUBAN MEDICAL BRIGADE FOR THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Cuban Health Professionals who are part of the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade are now working in 24 countries to fight Covid-19. Since the 1960's Cuba has sent medical teams to assist countries in times of emergency. In recognition of their magnificent solidarity and selflessness, saving thousands of lives by putting their own lives at risk, we urge you to go to the link below to sign on to the campaign to get them nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize
<https://theinternationalcommittee.org/nobel-peace-prize-2020/>



SIGN THE PETITION TO DEMAND PRESIDENT TRUMP STOP DEPORTATIONS TO LATIN AMERICA

President Trump,

We urge you to stop deportations and these policies once and for all, and instead screen and process those seeking protections at our border humanely and fairly. US policies must ensure the health and safety of all our communities during this public health crisis, and not send the most vulnerable away. Now is the time for unity and compassion, not division and fear. Latin America Working Group. Go to this link to sign: <https://lawg.salsalabs.org/stopdeportations/index.html>

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