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Latinamerica Press is a bi-weekly (fortnightly) journal of information and analysis from Latin America and the Caribbean, with emphasis in the issues that affect marginalized populations within the region.

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EDUARDO GARCÍA

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ARGENTINA

Pablo Waisberg in Buenos Aires

Repressors face prosecution

Repeal of impunity laws opens the door for prosecution of crimes against humanity.

The Supreme Court ruling that declared unconstitutional the Final Point and Due Obedience laws, which allowed crimes against humanity committed during the last dictatorship (1976-83) to go unpunished, will force the Argentine government to investigate and penalize those responsible for the atrocities.

Human rights organizations, victims' relatives, as well as the government itself welcomed the Supreme Court's ruling (7-1, with one abstention), which was made June 14. Shortly after the announcement, President Néstor Kirchner stated that the ruling "returns our faith in justice."

The Final Point and Due Obedience laws — passed in 1986 and 1987, respectively, by former President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-89) — impeded the prosecution of former repressors. The first closed all cases against military personnel for human rights violations while the second prohibited investigations into low-ranking military personnel, on the basis that they were following orders from superiors (*LP, April 9, 2001*).

These laws, however, did not include the crimes of appropriation of minors and identity replacement that are being investigated. There have been 10 military officers arrested and prosecuted for this crime. They included neither the Operation Condor, a plan that the Southern Cone's military dictatorships used to coordinate repression in the 1970s and 80s, nor the theft of political opponents' assets.

Each branch of the armed forces expressed agreement with the ruling, including army chief Roberto Bendini, who said that the next step must be to annul the pardons that were signed in 1989 by then-President Carlos Menem (1989-99), pardoning 277 civilians and military personnel. "It would be unacceptable for the junior officers to be thrown into prison while the high-ranking officers, who held the greatest responsibility go free," he said.

The high court ruling — that gave priority to international treaties — took as a precedent the repeal of the impunity laws by the Argentine Congress in 2003. The issue was sent then to the Supreme Court, which had to rule on the laws' constitutionality. In May, Attorney General Esteban Righi ruled that the crimes committed during the last dictatorship are "imprescriptible".

The Supreme Court ruling was issued in the case of the disappearance of José Poblete and his wife Gertrudis Hlaczik and the kidnapping of their infant daughter, Claudia Victoria. Five years ago she learned that she had been raised by the couple that kidnapped her, ending a 22-year search by her real family.

That process — in which federal Judge Gabriel Cavallo and the Federal Chamber

ruled that the amnesty laws were unconstitutional — was impelled by the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. “Justice has knocked down the last obstacle that could impede the truth and prevent the punishment of those responsible for State terrorism,” CELS said in a statement.

The voiding of the amnesty laws can pave the way for prosecution of roughly 400 military officers, according to CELS, although Defense Minister José Pampuro calculates that some “1,500 retired and active military officers could be brought to testify” before courts.

The Court’s decision — which in the last two years changed four of its nine justices — is not isolated from the human rights policy that President Kirchner brought to the table with his administration. On March 24, 2004, 28 years after the coup that eventually led to 30,000 disappeared adults, 500 kidnapped children and thousands of exiles, Kirchner’s government converted the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA), the dictatorship’s largest extermination camp, into the Museum of Remembrance (*LP, April 21, 2004*). This was seen as a turning point in the human rights policy in place since the restoration of democracy in 1983.

ESMA was the illegal detention center most emblematic of the last dictatorship. The site had not only a clandestine maternity ward, but also a center to falsify documents, including the appropriation of the disappeared persons’ assets. “It is not a grudge nor hate that guides us. It is justice and the fight against impunity,” said Kirchner at the museum’s inauguration last year.

“The Court’s ruling has to do with President Kirchner’s policy to end the state of impunity that reigned in Argentina,” said Estela Carlotto, president of Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. “The Grandmothers were searching for justice for our grandchildren, but for our children, there had been none. Now, new avenues have been opened,” she said. Since the group’s creation in 1977, members have found 80 of the 500 children born in clandestine nurseries functioning during the dictatorship (*LP, Dec. 3, 2003*).

“Now we also have to fight the pardons so they are repealed and so those convicted are sent to general prisons, not to VIP jails or barracks,” said Hebe de Bonafini, president of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo group (*LP, Jan. 17, 2000*). □

MEXICO

Richard Jacobsen in Mexico City

“New stage in the struggle”

Zapatista rebels break their silence, but claim no new military offensives are in the works.

Mexico’s Zapatista rebels have put their forces on high alert as they convened a clandestine meeting in the mountains of Chiapas to discuss a “new stage” in their fight for indigenous rights.

The Zapatistas ended a lengthy public silence on June 20 with a startling communiqué signed by Subcomandante Marcos saying Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) troops were being activated, while civilian supporters of the movement were urged to leave rebel strongholds. As the supporters abandoned rebel-controlled villages and Radio Insurgente, the Zapatistas’ “Voice of the Voiceless”, was taken off the air.

“All elements of the EZLN that were carrying out social work in Zapatista communities have been called into ranks and our regular troops have been brought into barracks,” the statement said.

The triggering of the “general red alert” — a measure not taken since paramilitary forces killed 45 people in the Chiapas village of Acteal in December 1997 — led to speculation that rebels were bracing for an offensive from the Mexican army or even preparing for an offensive of their own.

In a later statement, however, Marcos said the red alert was sounded as a precautionary measure to protect the Zapatistas from any surprise attacks while its leadership held a meeting to decide on a new and undisclosed direction for the movement.

The Zapatista leadership is “proposing to its supporters ... a new stage in the struggle, a stage that implies, among other things, risking the loss of all that has been achieved, and that attacks and persecution against Zapatista communities may get worse,” according to the second statement.

Later, Marcos flatly ruled out that the Zapatistas were debating whether to launch a military offensive. “We are not, from our side, planning or discussing the restart of offensive military actions,” the statement said.

The Zapatistas launched a guerrilla war in Mexico’s poorest state on New Year’s Day 1994 — the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect — demanding indigenous rights, and calling, among other things, for greater control over the way local communities govern themselves and how their natural resources are used.

The shooting war lasted only about 10 days in Chiapas and the Zapatistas have spent much of the past 11 years in their jungle stronghold surrounded by army troops



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HONDURAS

Millennium donation. Honduras became the first Latin American country and the second in the world — after Madagascar — on June 13 to receive aid from the United States’ Millennium Challenge Account.

Honduran President Ricardo Maduro signed an agreement in Washington with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that would grant Honduras US\$215 million to invest in rural development and infrastructure projects over the next five years.

“The idea is to reduce transportation costs and to facilitate access to markets for small agricultural producers,” said Maduro, who added that these funds will be managed with transparency.

US officials said that Nicaragua will be the next country to receive aid in the amount of \$175 million.

President George W. Bush called for the Millennium Challenge Account’s creation in March of 2002, as an instrument to “fight poverty, strengthen democracy, consolidate economic liberty and promote social investment.” —*LP*.



C / WWW.CHIAPAS.INDYEDIA.ORG

The Zapatistas issued a "red alert" for the first time since 1997.

ECUADOR Fighting child exploitation.

The Flower Industry Social Forum (FSF) has been founded with the objective of urging action and proposals to help reinstate the breached rights of children who work in the country's flower industry.

The FSF is comprised by government representatives, as well as by production and exportation associations, non-governmental organizations, workers and international agencies.

Magne Svartbekk, director of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Time-Bound Program in Ecuador, highlighted the need to "make the problem visible, establish the consequences, conclusions and risks of child labor for the various parties involved, and make evident the need to increase efforts to face this problem together."

Svartbekk added that the FSF's existence is a recognition of the exploitation of child workers in flower plantations and, at the same time, "a great indicator of the need to develop concrete actions to eradicate child labor."

As part of FSF's work plan, a project financed by the ILO will be developed in the province of Pichincha, where 35 percent of the national flower production is concentrated, to motivate the prevention and eradication of child labor in these plantations. —LP.

during a cease-fire, while tensions and underlying violence remained in the state.

Instead of rifles and grenades, the Zapatistas' chief weapons have been symbolic gestures and communiqués disseminated over the Internet, penned mostly by Marcos, their pipe-smoking, ski-mask-clad spokesman who is believed to be a former university professor named Rafael Sebastián Guillén.

Their multimedia struggle took on a new form in 2001 when Marcos and 23 rebel commanders emerged from their Chiapas stronghold and embarked on a 15-day, 12-state tour to promote passage of an Indian rights bill, which culminated in a mass rally in Mexico City's central square and an audience before Congress. Legislators eventually passed a watered-down version of the bill that the Zapatistas rejected.

The cryptic nature of the latest statements from Marcos led to widespread speculation as to what the rebels' next move may be. Some ventured to guess that the Zapatistas might be contemplating a move into mainstream politics ahead of next year's presidential elections. Such a move would follow in the footsteps of other Latin American guerrilla movements, including those in El Salvador and Colombia. But most Zapatista-watchers said that was highly unlikely, given the movement's outspoken rejection of Mexican politics and political parties.

"I find that hard to believe," said Harry Cleaver, a Zapatista expert at the University of Texas. "The Zapatistas have said from the outset they have no interest in electoral politics." Just a day before sounding the red alert, Marcos issued a statement blasting Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the leftist front-runner for the presidency, as overly ambitious and authoritarian, comparing him to reviled former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94).

There was also speculation that the Zapatistas were regrouping in order to address rising violence from paramilitary groups in Chiapas. "If there has been a buildup (of paramilitary activity), it is easy to imagine they could be getting together to see how to deal with it beyond what they have done," Cleaver said. However, he said he doubted the Zapatistas would undertake an armed response against the paramilitary forces, but rather adopt some sort of "proactive but unarmed" stance.

The Chiapas-based Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center said it had noted an increase in army activity in Chiapas. "In the past two months there have been movements by the Mexican army that constitute the largest military movement (in the area) since 2001," the center said in a statement issued in the wake of the Zapatista's red alert.

Meanwhile, the Defense Ministry said that some 200 troops had joined federal police in destroying marijuana plantations in what it described as three municipalities within the Zapatistas "zone of influence." The government, however, later backpedaled from the statement, on June 23, saying the marijuana crops were not in areas under rebel control.

The government, nevertheless, denied it was making a move against the rebels. "I categorically deny an army advance or mobilization," Rubén Aguilar, spokesman for President Vicente Fox told reporters.

Reporters and rights activists visiting the Zapatista-run village of Oventic in Chiapas said the town was virtually deserted, with rebel-run primary schools, clinics and cooperatives shut down. A sign was posted reading "Closed Due to Red Alert."

In his statement, Marcos gave no indication when the Zapatistas would emerge from their meeting. "When this internal consultation is concluded, we will inform national and international public opinion of its result," the statement said. □

GUATEMALA

Eduardo García in Peten

Two sides of the coin in the Maya Biosphere

Agricultural and livestock expansion, along with drug trafficking, threatens nature reserve.

A land management debate is heating up within the Maya Biosphere, a 2.1-million-hectare (5-million-acre) protected area in the northern Guatemalan department of Peten, considered the largest tropical forest north of the Amazon.

While the situation is unsustainable in the Tiger Lagoon National Park, the system used in the Multiple Use Zone (ZUM) is thriving.

Tiger Lagoon is included on the Ramsar Convention's List of Wetlands of International Importance, an area under strict protection where human settlements are prohibited by law.

From the park's entrance in the municipality of Naranjo through the Xan military checkpoint, there exists an area that cannot be described better than as scorched land. The landscape is distressing: felled trees, recent fires, smoke, idle farms, and barbed wire everywhere.

"In total, close to 100,000 hectares (247,000 acres), or 40 percent of the park, has suffered irreversible effects, most of them in the Xan area," said Byron Castellanos of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), a US-based organization.

However, authorities do not attribute the problem simply to illegal occupation but rather the presence of drug trafficking. Evidence indicates that the drug trade is not something that is brought in from outside but is instead something that involves many of the illegal occupants", some of whom use the lands for stockbreeding as well, giving way to a new phenomenon: "narco-stockbreeding."

"The problem is not only the occupations, but also everything that is tied to the 'narco-stockbreeding' and money laundering," said Vinicio Montero, director of the National Protected Areas Council (CONAP) in Peten.

According to Montero, there are six clandestine landing strips within the park, and CONAP knows of at least 13 small airplanes, that have been abandoned by drug traffickers.

The area's limited police presence, along with the drug traffickers and high number of illegal occupants – which WCS estimates to be between 7,000 and 8,000 people – has rendered the area ungovernable.

"We are not making arrests here," said Elías Ramos Quiroa, one of only two CONAP agents who protect the post of El Tigrillo at the park's entrance. "If we arrest someone, the neighbors will lynch us."

"It is frustrating because we have a job to do, but we cannot do anything. It is as if we are prisoners here."

The future of the Tiger Lagoon is uncertain, but it is clear that the "strict protection system" of the park is not working, due, among other things, to the lack of state resources and the limited ability of President Oscar Berger's administration to impose its authority on this area.

"We wanted to apply the strict Costa Rican protection system here, but that model is not applicable in a Third World country like Guatemala," said Montero.

In contrast to what is happening in Tiger Lagoon park, the model of forestland concessions that is being implemented in the ZUM, the 848,000 hectares (2 million acres), 40 percent of the biosphere, granted to 13 communities, and two private companies for 25 years so that they make a sustainable use of forest resources, seems to be working relatively well.

Of the communities working in ZUM are in possession of a certificate of good forest management or "green seal" called SmartWood, which is granted by the US organization Rainforest Alliance.

Satellite photographs of the area demonstrate that in the ZUM the forest is far better conserved. A recent WCS report supports this: "In current intensities, the use does not seem to pose a major threat to the Biosphere. On the contrary, extraction operations (of wood and other forest resources) create jobs for community members and, thereby potential land uses that are less conservation-friendly decrease."

Macedonio Cortave, director of the Association of Forest Communities of Peten, which includes all the communities that have land in the ZUM, thinks that they are making a good job regarding preservation of the area.

"To put a police officer on every tree is not the solution because the police are corrupt. The lesson that we have learned is that conservation only will be possible as long as communities can use the resources rationally," he said.

The Guatemalan government is negotiating a loan of US\$10 million with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to develop the Maya Biosphere, with the aim of supporting concessions.

"One of the priorities will be to support the concessions, mainly to the communities, so that they are sustainable," said Carmen Rosa Pérez, national coordinator of the Integral Program of Sustainable Development in the Reserve of the Mayan Biosphere.

Although the concession model has shown to be more successful than the strict protection system of the Tiger Lagoon, Cortave does not believe that the ZUM model can be translated there.

"There the cancer has spread and those who are destroying (the land) are the big fish, not the small ones," Cortave said. □

LATIN AMERICA

Inter Press Service

US names the usual suspects

Some warn that politics, not fact is behind US human trafficking report.

The inclusion of Cuba, Venezuela and other countries out of favor with Washington on a blacklist of nations that sponsor or tolerate human trafficking has raised eyebrows among experts who believe the assessment reflects a policy of "selective indignation".

ARGENTINA

Art without a home. "I was devastated and I did not want to live. With writing and theatre, I came back to life," recounts Arnaldo "el Chaca" Ponce, while Juan Carlos Núñez remembers that "when I did not have anything else in life, I discovered color."

Both street artists were homeless, but thanks to the *Arte sin Techo* (Art without a Home) cooperative they have been able to return to society.

Arte sin Techo originated from the program *Camino de los Murales* (or Path of Murals) founded two years ago by the municipal government of Buenos Aires to decorate the city's deteriorating walls. To fulfill this objective they enlisted the talent of muralists, art students and street artists.

"The channeling of their distress and desperation through art is the first way to return their dignity, expectations in the future, and energy to develop an activity that will integrate them into society and provide them with a job," said the Web site of *Arte sin Techo*, that has successfully integrated homeless people back into society.

Arte sin Techo also works with other artistic disciplines — sculpture, theatre, and visual arts — as a means to encourage individual or group initiatives gain financial independence. —ADITAL.

PANAMA

“Gag laws” repealed. President Martin Torrijos’ May 19 announcement that a series of laws repressing freedom of the press, known collectively as the “gag laws” would be revoked was received favorably by journalists’ unions and media owners, grouped under the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).

The move signals an end to certain rules used by the military dictatorship (1968-1989) to close newspapers, incarcerate journalists, forbid some people to work as journalists or simply discourage any kind of communication voicing opposition to the regime in power.

While the president of the National Journalism Council and general manager of the Panamanian daily *La Prensa*, Juan Luis Correa, considered the laws’ repeal “a step forward”, Justice Minister Héctor Alemán reminded media owners that the ruling should not be interpreted as “powerlessness on the part of citizens in the face of slander or offense.”

While the move may signify the end of the government’s repressive role in press freedom, media owners are notorious for exercising a strong control over certain issues considered “proscribed” in their editorial line.

According to journalists who asked to remain anonymous, media owners use their power to manipulate information according to their political interests or to benefit people close to them.

—INFORPRESS CENTROAMERICANA.

The US State Department report divides countries into three tiers. Tier 1 includes those nations that have met international standards for coping with trafficking and are vigorously addressing the problem, while Tier 2 is comprised by countries that demonstrate a commitment to address their problems but have not yet achieved international standards.

A country is branded Tier 3 if it “fails to take significant actions to bring itself into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons”.

This year, 14 countries out of the 150 surveyed were classified as Tier 3 nations, including Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Jamaica and Venezuela.

According to John Miller, the US State Department’s senior adviser on human trafficking, the ratings are based strictly on government actions to combat trafficking of persons as defined by US law.

“The standards are set up by the Trafficking Victim Protection Act and are applied equally to every country,” he said.

In Venezuela’s case, whose President Hugo Chávez has been at odds with Washington for several years, the report charges that the (Venezuelan) “government did not fund any non-governmental organization program geared toward victims of trafficking” and that prevention efforts were “inadequate”.

But in a June 3 statement challenging the report’s conclusions, the Venezuelan embassy cited 640 community organizations that inform the public of the human trafficking conflict. The statement also noted the country’s joint operations between the Metropolitan Fire Department and the National Guard to monitor the frequency with which non-Venezuelan citizens check in to motels, and “increased scrutiny of documentation regarding those seeking to enter and exit the country.”

The country’s Tier 3 status is “an example of a profound lack of knowledge of what the government of Venezuela is doing”, concludes the statement.

The report’s section on Cuba, concedes that “there are no reliable estimates available on the extent of trafficking in the country; however, children in prostitution (are) widely apparent, even to casual observers.”

This lack of concrete data has led some non-governmental organizations, including prominent groups like the Inter-American Dialogue and Human Rights Watch, to suspect that the Tier 3 list is shaped more by politics than reality.

“The purpose is to show that Venezuela is a failed state, making it a candidate for Organization of American States (OAS) intervention,” said Larry Bins, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a Washington-based think tank. “What is noteworthy is that the (George W. Bush) administration does not realize how isolated it is.”

Sanctions against Tier 3 countries may include the withholding of non-humanitarian, non-trade-related aid, and US opposition to assistance from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, among other public lenders.

This year, Caracas plans to apply for a US\$250 million-loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, but Washington has announced its intention to veto the request, based on Venezuela’s Tier 3 ranking.

“How is it that Tier 1 includes countries that engage in the arrest, jailing, and fining of trafficking victims?” asked Janie Chuang, an international legal expert on trafficking issues who teaches at American University’s Washington College of Law. “Or countries that fail to distinguish between smuggling and trafficking, and end up simply deporting trafficked persons rather than affording them the human rights protections they deserve?” she continued.

“It will be interesting to see which countries actually end up under trafficking sanctions,” said Chuang. She noted that so far the countries the United States has actually targeted for sanctions tend to be ones with which it has no relationship or at best, a strained relationship, like, Cuba and Venezuela.

An International Labor Organization study released in May stated that at least 12.3 million people are trapped in forced labor around the world, and that of these, the study estimates a minimum of 2.4 million to be victims of human trafficking (*LP, May 18, 2005*).

No one disputes that the problem of global trafficking for forced labor and sex work is horrendous. According to US government data, of the 600,000 to 800,000 persons trafficked across international borders each year, about 80 percent are women and girls and half are minors, the majority of whom are condemned to commercial sexual exploitation, and these figures do not even include the millions of victims around the world who are trafficked within their own national borders.

“I think what has been largely omitted in the report is the economic situation of the Latin American countries, which is the main cause for the trafficking in persons,” said Teresa Ulloa Ziaurriz, the regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean of the International Coalition Against Trafficking in Women.

“But it is not only poverty. It is a poverty that is preyed upon by recruiters, traffickers and pimps,” she said. “And it is both local and foreign demand for the sex of prostitution which promotes the market for victims of trafficking.”

Human trafficking is the third most profitable illicit activity in the world, just after the trafficking of drugs and weapons, Ulloa added.

“It is the demand that perpetuates stereotypes of submission and inferiority of women, considered as merchandise that could be sold, bought or rented for the sexual pleasure of men,” she said. She then pointed out that 80 percent of the demand for sexual tourism in Mexico and Latin America comes from the United States and Canada. □

Grassroots reforestation

Community involvement key to revitalizing forests, project's founder says.

Residents of the Fondes Amandes Community, on the edge of the capital remember how forest fires once threatened their homes and how the nearby stream ran brown with eroded soil after rainstorms.

As in many parts of Trinidad and Tobago, rampant wildfires and slash-and-burn agriculture denuded these hills in recent years, replacing much of the forest with grassland. This led to landslides and flooding across this two-island nation, which stirred the country to various efforts to combat the problem. Few projects have been as successful as that of Fondes Amandes.

The reforestation project was born out of a community of Rastafarians in the 1980s, among them the husband of Akilah Jaramogi, the director of the project, who lived in the hillside forest, planting crops. They engaged in short-term farming, said Jaramogi, which left the farmers unemployed during the dry season. In reaction, she helped them to develop long-term agricultural techniques, such as planting fruit trees, as well as promoting reforestation.

Jaramogi's husband died in 1994 and most of the other Rastafarians left the area to live elsewhere. Nevertheless, Jaramogi worked to expand the reforestation project, involving the two vastly different neighborhoods on either side of the reforestation area: an affluent area of businesspeople and diplomats in large, often gated homes, and a poor neighborhood, which has its roots in a squatter community.

On a recent afternoon, Jaramogi hiked up a shady hillside trail to a bamboo shelter built for visiting school groups.

"We try to plant indigenous trees," she said. "We look around and see what is missing. It is not easy to bring back a forest."

Jaramogi's reforestation project supports itself through donations, the sale of forest products, such as nuts, handicrafts and herbs, and through ecotourism, such as tours of the land for schoolchildren.

In addition to reforesting the land, the Fondes Amandes program has generated environmental consciousness in the low-income, often otherwise-unemployed youths who work for the program.

Cowin Collett, 22, spoke proudly about cutting firebreaks and planting trees. The stream below the houses now flows clear, the animals are back and there has not been a fire for years, he said.

"We protect the ourselves and we protect the environment," he continued.

Jaramogi said the project has been featured in international media and been used as a model for programs in other Caribbean nations.

Fondes Amandes is "an amazing demonstration of what public initiative can do for a person without resources," says John Agard, chairman of the Environment Management Agency (EMA), who lives near the reforestation project. Agard said the project is particularly admirable because it demonstrates that environmental work can be economically sustainable.

It is critical work in a nation losing forest cover at the "unprecedented" high rate of one percent per year, says Agard. During recent years Trinidad, which has huge amounts of natural gas, has experienced rapid industrial and residential development.

According to the Forestry Division's 2003 annual report, the nation had 248,000 hectares (612,000 acres) of forests, covering 48 percent of its territory, although tree plantations accounted for about 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres) of the total.

The deforestation has caused floods and landslides, some of them fatal. In January 2004 the government responded by beginning its own 10-year national reforestation program. Paschal Osuji, the project's coordinator, said the program, budgeted at US\$7 million, is working with about 50 communities, and plans to add 22 more, with the goal of reforesting 20 hectares (50 acres) per community.

Within a decade, the program aims to reforest more than 13,000 hectares (33,000 acres), he said. Participants learn how to plant and tend trees and build fire trails. In addition to reforesting the island, the program will also help compensate for Trinidad and Tobago's significant production of global warming gases, Osuji said.

Agard calls the national reforestation program a valuable first step, but not enough to reverse the deforestation.

Jaramogi has her own reservations about the government's reforestation program. "People are not doing it from their hearts," she said. "They are doing it because they are getting paid."

Agard says community projects like Fondes Amandes are an ideal solution, because when forest neighbors do not participate in reforestation, people will often come and clear recently planted areas.

"We try to plant indigenous trees. We look around and see what is missing. It is not easy to bring back a forest."

—Akilah Jaramogi

Akilah Jaramogi, shown here, founded a program that increases environmental awareness in area youths.



MIKE CEASER

“The conventional (agricultural) model requires capital and farmers do not have capital.”

—Álvaro Acevedo

Jaramogi says the key to successful reforestation is community involvement. In some nations, such as Venezuela, officials say that paying communities to plant forests can be futile because people may burn the forests down to obtain more work. Jaramogi, however, says every person can have a role in reforestation work.

“Not everybody wants to be a farmer,” she said. “So, you can be a tour guide or sell crafts. Granny cannot climb into the bush, but she can sell baskets.

“You have got to engage the people,” she said. “You recover the forest, but what next? Do they just sit and watch the forest grow?” □

COLOMBIA

Suzanne Timmons in El Salado

Alternative education

An increasing number of agricultural schools aim to spread sustainable farming techniques among *campesino* communities.

As president of his community water service, Félix Alarcón, knows that the Lajas stream flowing through the rural district of El Salado is unfit for drinking. Contaminated by commercial pig farms in this pineapple-growing region of central Colombia, the Lajas is some families' only source of drinking water, and until recently, Alarcón could offer no alternatives for cleaner water.

In April, while participating in a water workshop at an El Salado farm, Alarcón learned that river water can be purified with a filter made from no more than a large plastic bin, river gravel, sand, and plastic pipe. “Imagine, you can purify water yourself, at home,” Alarcón said. “Everybody can make one.”



Students in the agroecological school test an irrigation system that was installed in one of their workshops.

Alarcón received his lesson in water purification from the Soto Province Agroecology School of *Campesino* Promoters, one of an increasing number of independent agroecological initiatives that have cropped up throughout the country.

Despite a lack of governmental support, at least 20 agroecological schools are now educating *campesinos* in better farming techniques.

The schools are a response to an agricultural crisis that has forced rural farmers to find production alternatives. For the past several years, Colombia's economic policies have focused on monoculture techniques, the cultivation of tropical crops for export, and the use of expensive, industrial fertilizers and pesticides. Farmland is increasingly in the hands of fewer owners and, small farmers, unable to compete, have been kept on the sidelines.

For Álvaro Acevedo, director of the SOS Agroecological Farm School – one of Colombia's oldest agroecological schools, which takes its name from the principal sponsor, Austrian organization SOS Children's Villages – agroecology has emerged as the only alternative to improve the lives of poor *campesinos*. “The conventional (agricultural) model requires capital,” he said. “And farmers do not have capital.”

Colombia's *campesino* agroecological schools use a combination of classroom theory with hands-on learning. Students apply their lessons on water use, organic fertilizers, or insect and soil management to their own communities' farms. Often backed by non-governmental environmental organizations, each school operates in a unique style.

The Soto Province School, for example, has no classrooms, but instead the students' communities host intensive workshops one weekend each month. The school shapes each month's lesson around one issue – such as water management in El Salado — pertinent to the host community. The only costs for participants is a food contribution for shared meals, and 3,000 pesos (US\$1.30).

"For us, the classroom is the farm, the avocado tree, the pond," says Álvaro Obando, 51, who graduated in May from the Soto Province Agroecology School's yearlong program.

SOS, on the other hand, operates a permanent campus with an 18-month on-site program. It has a formal curriculum, and targets students aged between 18 and 25.

But agroecology is not the curricula's only focus. Additionally, schools aim for *campesinos* to recover their autonomy and cultural identity, to learn to form a balance among economic, social, environmental, and cultural values.

The training ground is often nourished by discussion of controversial issues and current events, such as genetically modified crops, the conservation and exchange of native seeds, free trade agreements, globalization, and local farmers' markets.

The Soto Province school wages a campaign to promote food sovereignty, said Claudia Roa of Fundaexpresión, one of the institutions coordinating the school's activities.

Campesinos, Roa said, are becoming increasingly dependent on local stores for their food, even though Colombia's tropical climate allows many crops to be harvested year round.

"The farm next door is full of only pineapples," Roa said, referring to the El Salado farm, which, like others in the region, has neglected basic food crops in favor of pineapple monoculture. "If the crop fails, they are not going to have money to buy (food)."

Many *campesino* schools still partly depend on outside experts and organizations to lead workshops and provide funding. But the goal, said retired university professor Mario Mejía, who works with some of the schools, is "for the movement to be as autonomous as possible."

One way schools seek to promote that autonomy, and to ensure that knowledge is spread among *campesino* communities, is to ask students to share their expertise in their communities. Schools also seek students already committed to local grassroots organizations.

Oscar Cacua, 21, who graduated from the Soto Province school in May, has already begun his role as community educator by teaming up with four families and 15 young people interested in agroecology. "I will be able to teach them something," he said, even though the group is still looking for a plot of land on which to work.

Despite the proliferation of agroecological schools, the participants do not appear to be organizing a network. An event last September in central Colombia brought together some 20 *campesino* schools dedicated to agroecology and other disciplines, but this is not the norm. In general efforts to maintain contact have received a tepid response.

"There is a spirit, interest and need (for a network), but also, there is no plan that allows us to put it to work," said Acevedo. In his opinion, schools could benefit from such a network that allows them to exchange native seeds and texts and create nation-wide newsletter.

A network may eventually gel. But not everyone agrees that would be suitable for a national *campesino* community seeking autonomy and striving to use local experience to find its own answers to its own problems. "That idea of tangling everything up in a network is an idea from the outside," Mejía said. "Things must be born from the inside." □

GUATEMALA/ BELIZE

Latin America Data Base

Battle for the border

Border and territorial dispute with Belize intensifies as trade talks advance.

Guatemala's Foreign Minister Jorge Briz has accused Belize of assuming an "intransigent" posture in its effort to resolve a border dispute whose history reaches back beyond the birth of Belize as an independent country in 1981.

Briz challenged the latest Belizean attempt at border security while the two countries were on the verge of finalizing a trade pact between them. Intransigence in this case, however, is a two-way street. Guatemala failed to submit a treaty for ratification by referendum in 2002, which would have ended the dispute.

With that aborted attempt at resolution as justification, Asaad Shoman, Belize's minister of foreign affairs, in late May sent a letter to Luigi Einaudi, then-acting secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), accusing Guatemala of trying to delay a resolution indefinitely. Shoman wants the border dispute settled, and he also wants his country out from under the cloud of Guatemala's historic claim to half of Belize.

Briz denied any heel dragging on his country's part and returned the accusation. "Guatemala has followed a process without affecting the claim. If it has not advanced, it

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA

New governance criteria. A World Bank study released in May aims to provide a "set of governance indicators that can help depoliticize efforts to track the quality of institutions, support capacity building, improve governance and address corruption."

The index, which analyzed 209 countries between 1996 to 2004, focuses on six components of good governance: political, civil and human rights; political stability and violence; government effectiveness; the incidence of unfriendly market policies; rule of law; and control of corruption.

"On average the quality of governance around the world has remained stagnant, highlighting the urgent need for more determined progress in this area in order to accelerate poverty reduction," said the World Bank.

The percentile ranks below indicate the percentage of countries worldwide that rank below the selected country. For example, 83 percent of countries studied worldwide have less political stability than Costa Rica, meaning that according to this study, it is the most stable country in Latin America.—LP.

LATIN AMERICA Political stability

Country	Percentile
Costa Rica	83.0
Chile	76.7
Uruguay	62.1
Panama	55.3
Dominican Republic	48.1
Mexico	43.7
Brazil	43.7
Nicaragua	41.7
El Salvador	39.8
Argentina	38.3
Bolivia	28.6
Peru	27.2
Honduras	26.7
Paraguay	25.7
Ecuador	23.3
Guatemala	21.8
Venezuela	13.6
Colombia	5.8

Source: World Bank

LATIN AMERICA

United States defeated in the

OAS. The 2005 General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), which met June 5-7 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, rejected a US government proposal to establish a mechanism to supervise the quality of democracy in the continent's nations.

The United States proposed to the OAS Permanent Council the development of a "process to evaluate the situations that can affect the institutional, democratic and political development of a member state or the legitimate exercise of power, and to make concrete recommendations."

"The OAS cannot make evaluations on the state of democracy," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Alí Rodríguez. "This is something that is exclusively in the people's hands. Only the people have the legitimacy to evaluate and make decisions about their political system."

At the end of the meeting, the foreign ministers of the 34 OAS member nations — every country in the western hemisphere, except Cuba — approved the final declaration titled "Delivering the Benefits of Democracy" and undertook to continue building on the ideals of the OAS Charter and the Inter-American Democratic Charter. —LP.

Protests demand debt relief for developing countries.



is Belize's fault," said Briz, adding that he has asked for a meeting with the new OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza, to discuss the situation.

When the 2000-2002 negotiation with Guatemala was well under way, Belize assembled a panel of international law consultants to evaluate the Guatemalan territorial claim. In January 2002 the panel issued a 98-page report, entitled, "Legal Opinion on Guatemala's Claim to Belize". Part one of the publication begins, "We have been asked to consider whether Guatemala can validly question the sovereignty of Belize over the whole or any part of its territory. We can state our conclusion immediately; the answer is 'No'".

With the 2002 OAS-brokered solution effectively dead, Belize Prime Minister Said Musa recently took Guatemala to task for rejecting it and said he might take the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) if a round of talks within the next couple of months fails. "We may be forced to go to the international court, and we believe we have a very strong case," Musa said at a May meeting of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Guyana."

The Guatemalan government is well aware that ownership of half of Belize's 22,792-sq km (8,800 sq. mile) — territory is deeply embedded in the national psyche. Jorge Serrano (1991-1993), president of Guatemala (1991-1993) before he was booted into exile after a palace coup, faced massive popular protest for even suggesting recognition of Belize's claims.

Serrano normalized relations between the countries in September 1991. In August of that year, he recognized the right of its people to self-determination and stated his willingness to settle the dispute, but he did not drop Guatemala's territorial claim.

In return, Musa introduced legislation in Belize allowing Guatemala access to international waters from its Caribbean coast. Musa said then that the concession, much needed by Guatemala for shipping, was an act of good faith to promote settlement of that claim. After Serrano's ouster, however, President Ramiro de Leon Carpio (1993-1996) withdrew what Serrano bestowed.

Now, Musa is for a second time threatening to go to the ICJ for a final solution, but the Belizean government may have a roadblock to face. Briz countered that, if Guatemala refuses to go to court, Belize would be unable file the case unilaterally.

As Guatemala and Belize continue to stare each other down over the twin issues of their common borders and the legitimacy of Belizean sovereign territory, the trade officials and private sectors of both countries are on the verge of cementing a trade deal. The work on the trade pact puts in perspective the geopolitical tensions that have in times past threatened open warfare.

Guatemalan producers of animal feeds, iron, steel, and plastic seek to export their wares to Belize without restrictions under a Partial Range Agreement (AAP).

The AAP is not a free trade agreement, but it would lift tariffs on a list of roughly 1,300 goods, whereas the free trade agreement Guatemala negotiated and ratified with the United States does lift these barriers on more than 6,000 products. The Central American Free Trade Agreement, however, has not yet been ratified by the United States and is therefore not in effect.

The terms of the AAP are expected to be favorable to Guatemala, whose central bank, Banco de Guatemala, has reported the country exported US\$33 million in goods to Belize and imported \$27 million. The Belizean imports were principally petroleum derivatives, electrical appliances, scrap metal, construction iron and steel, chemicals, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs.

Negotiations for the agreement began in February 2005 in Guatemala, and a second round was held in Belize in March. The rounds were notable for their lack of rancor and the swiftness with which technical obstacles were resolved, even as the territorial dispute turned bitter. Guatemalan Foreign Minister Briz turned from his focus on the conflict to say that it "does not necessarily have to oppose the achievement of the AAP."

Enrique Lacs, told the media that the third round of talks, which ended in late May round had been "successful" as chapters on legal and investment aspects had been agreed upon, and the parties had "reached the objective of closing the texts that contain the accord and beginning the discussion of the products to be included." □

LATIN AMERICA

Lucy Hurn in Lima

Relief for few

G8's debt relief criteria draw harsh criticism.

The Group of Eight countries announced a historic deal June 11 to cancel the debt owed by 18 of some of the world's poorest nations, among them Bolivia, Guyana, Honduras and Nicaragua.

The agreement, which was announced by British Chancellor Gordon Brown ahead of the G8 Summit, which will take place in Scotland July 6-8, means that the G8 — the governments of the world's wealthiest countries, plus Russia — have agreed to relieve

the 18 of the 42 HIPC (highly indebted poor countries) of US\$40 billion debt.

The deal will free the countries of a total of \$1.5 billion in annual debt repayments. According to Mario Arana, the Nicaraguan Finance Minister, the money “can be assigned to a use of greater priority for a country with enormous social demands and necessities.” President Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana said the deal will allow his country to continue “investing in education, housing, and health care; creating better infrastructure, reducing poverty, and generating more employment”.

Church and campaign groups have pressured governments for such a debt relief package that has been under debate for more than 10 years, but made very little headway until now.

Nevertheless, the deal has generated much criticism. Countries are given HIPC status based on narrow economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. However, evaluating economies on a macroeconomic level fails to account for Latin America's extreme economic inequality, meaning that high levels of poverty are averaged out by wealth that is concentrated in very few hands.

Peru, for example, is classified as a middle-income country, and therefore, does not qualify for debt relief. This is in spite of the fact that over half the country's population lives in poverty (less than \$2 per day), 25 percent lives in extreme poverty (less than \$1 per day). In addition, Peru's total foreign debt accounts for 46 percent of its GDP and debt service absorbs 20 percent of the national budget.

Within the list of the 24 remaining HIPC countries waiting to receive debt relief, there are no other Latin American nations. The G8 announcement reaffirms the body's belief in this evaluation system, even though as Rocío Valdeavellano from the Jubilee Network Peru, said, “there are other countries that also deserve debt relief.”

The Jubilee Network is an international debt relief campaign, with members in more than 70 nations.

Haiti's exclusion from the list was highly criticized and, according to Jubilee South — comprised of members in over 40 African, Asian and Latin American countries — despite suffering a great humanitarian crisis, Haiti “not only continues to be excluded from these proposals, but in addition, the international financial institutions continue charging regardless.”

Many have called into question the HIPC model on which the deal is based. In order to qualify, countries must follow a series of measures to combat corruption and “the elimination of impediments to private investment”. Throughout Latin America, the privatization model has often led to greater suffering, especially within poorer sectors.

According to the Honduran Social Forum for External Debt and Development, the imposition of economic measures in order to meet the conditions for debt cancellation has been “achieved at the expense of an increase in poverty”. Civic society groups are calling for the right of developing countries to decide their own economic agenda, rather than having one imposed through conditionality. The call is echoed by the British government which made a series of announcements last March declaring that “developing countries [should not be] forced to liberalize through external pressure”.

Another hurdle facing Latin American countries is that while the deal proposes to cancel all debts owed to the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the African Development Bank, those owed to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) or the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) will not be cancelled.

According to President Jagdeo, Guyana will be relieved of \$336.6 million in debt, but will still owe the IDB \$446 million. In a similar case, the sum Bolivia owes the WB and IMF accounts for only 41 percent of its total debt, according to Bolpress.

The debt announcement has also been criticized for the risk that it may reduce pressure on G8 countries to meet the commitment they made to raise official development assistance (ODA) to 0.7 percent of their GDP by 2015 (a target only currently met by a handful of small European nations and a underachievement by the United States, which in 2004 only gave 0.16 percent).

In addition there are already signs that ODA budgets will be used to meet debt cancellation commitments, meaning a further depletion in budgets already stretched thin by the tsunami disaster and involvement in Iraq. Latin America is already experiencing a recent pattern of ODA withdrawal, again due to rationale based around GDP and average income.

In November 2003 the British Department for International Development decided to close programs in “middle income” countries such as Peru, and last April, the Canadian International Development Agency announced that it will focus its ODA on just 25 countries (within Latin America just the same four countries are due to benefit from debt cancellation).

Another point of contention is that the world's most powerful are also failing to address one of the biggest development obstacles: the tariffs and subsidies that stop developing countries' from being able to compete in the markets of the developed world. Instead, free trade negotiations, for example, between the United States and Central American or Andean countries, and European negotiations with their former Caribbean colonies, concentrate on the opening of Latin American markets rather than reciprocal action by United States and Europe. As Steve Tibbett from the Make Poverty History campaign, UK member of the Global Campaign Against Poverty, says that “trade is the biggest issue, where there is the deepest unfairness — it is the root of the problem”. □

inbrief

- At least 87 children under the age of 12 were tortured in **Chile** during the military dictatorship (1973-90). The minors, who were detained along with their mothers, comprised part of the 30,000 people tortured by repressive agents, according to the Political Prison and Torture report released last November.
- **Brazil** has the sad privilege of having the second worst income distribution level in the world. The nation also suffers the world's fourth-highest homicide rate, according to the governmental Institute of Applied Economic Research.
- After 10 years in prison for allegedly planning the murder of Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the secretary general of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1994, Raúl Salinas de Gortari — brother of the former president of **Mexico**, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) — was released on June 14. A court overturned his sentence and said there was not sufficient evidence against him.
- Twenty percent of the 28 million inhabitants of **Peru** do not have access to medical services because they live in poverty, according to Forosalud, a group of organizations defending the right to healthcare.
- A recent Amnesty International report stated that 1,188 women, mainly adolescents, were assassinated in **Guatemala** between 2001 and 2004. Sexual violence, torture and mutilations occurred in the majority of cases, of which only 9 percent were investigated and 40 percent were filed.

Sweet experiment with organic sugar

High profits and increasing international demand prove nation's organic sugar production a worthy venture.

In 1994 a Paraguayan sugar company moved to fill the demands of niche markets abroad for sugar produced without agrochemicals. Eleven years later, Paraguay has become the world's leading producer and exporter of this organic product.

Since the modest beginnings of Azucarera Censi & Pirotta in the organic sugar business, a number of other companies have followed suit, and with it there has been an increase in the number of hectares of organic sugar cultivated, tons produced, workers hired and revenues generated for this impoverished South American nation.

Ironically, the pioneering sugar company Censi & Pirotta has returned to producing conventional non-organic sugar, but seven companies continue to produce the organic version of the sweet stuff, concentrated in the heart of Paraguay's sugarcane region, the south-eastern department of Guaira. Paraguay was the first country to engage in industrial-scale organic sugar production. Later came Brazil, Colombia and Cuba, but the decline in international sugar prices made the business less attractive, prompting Colombia and Colombia to abandon the effort, and a sharp decline in Brazil's organic sugar production.

The organic sugar industry "is a way to compete on the international markets against the cheap sugar that Brazil produces," said Raúl Hoeckle, president of Azpa, Paraguay's biggest sugar mill, and the second company to turn to organic production, in 1999.

The business remains "tempting," despite the costs and the international organic certification requirements, he said.

A ton of organic sugar is worth some US\$330 on the international market, while conventionally produced sugar sells for about \$260 per ton. Hoeckle underscored the importance of the environmental benefits, and the fact that cycle of sugarcane harvesting and sugar production requires a great number of workers, "which helps provide employment to rural residents."

In the first year of organic sugar production, the total output was 379 tons. Since then there has been a sustained increase (except 2001, a year of droughts and freezes), reaching 40,000 tons in 2004, translating into \$20 million in exports.

In 2005, production is expected to increase 20 percent compared to last year, and export revenues to reach \$26 million.

The organic sugar buyers' requirements have increased each year. Today they demand independent certifications of compliance with the principles of organic farming and with production regulations. Requirements vary from country to country.

Azpa has 14 certifications of different types, including the United States' Quality Assurance International for organic products.

It also implemented a food security program based on the standards of the American Institute of Baking, which includes risk analysis and critical point control, best practices for manufacturing and pest control.

The top buyers of Paraguay's organic sugar are Australia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain and the United States.

According to a document from the Paraguayan Sugar Center, in order to qualify for organic farming, the land needs to be free of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, growth regulators, and other such substances for three years.

Furthermore, a five-year history of how the land has been used is required.

Cultivation practices are not regulated, but the sector's leaders advocate preserving earthworms and other organisms in the soil, and protecting the richness of the soil in general.

Although conventional seeds are allowed, experts recommend organically produced seeds.

"From one well-managed hectare can come 70,000 tons of organic sugarcane – the same as one conventionally grown hectare," Jorge Bonzi, an agronomist specializing in sugar production, said in an interview. Conventional sugar production uses chemical fertilizers at the moment of ploughing. Then, the rows are covered and herbicides are applied to prevent weed growth, he explained.

For organic sugar, natural fertilizer is used, such as manure, as well as a by-product from organic sugarcane processing, known as *torta de filtro*, or filter cake, Bonzi said.

Weed control is done by hand, as is the cutting of sugarcane for transport to the mill. This is where organic sugar production has greater social value, because of the great number of workers needed, he added.

The average workforce is 6.5 people per hectare for a yearlong process that entails weeding, cutting, cleaning up the leaves after harvest, application of organic fertilizer, among other duties.

Another aspect that Bonzi underscored is that 90 percent of the farmers are involved in small independent rural operations who later sell their yields to the sugar mills. "In Brazil, in contrast, all organic production belongs to the companies." □

Organic sugar cultivation is less hurtful to the environment than conventional methods.



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LATIN AMERICA

Mike Ceaser in Caracas

Taking to the airwaves

Founding of Chávez-supported station is historic move for region's media, but many remain skeptical.

When Venezuelans want to access news about their nation, they have plenty of Venezuelan-produced media to choose from. When they want news about the Latin American region, however, the choices are much slimmer, as most broadcast media outlets to which they have access are based outside of the region, in North America and Europe – where President Hugo Chávez's self-described "Bolivarian Revolution" is often portrayed with disapproval.

This will change at end of July, however, when CNN, the BBC, and Spain's TVE are joined by Televisora del Sur (Telesur), a new station promoted principally by Chávez.

The station's programming will include news, commentary, non-Hollywood films and features. "Programming made in Latin America for Latin Americans," the Web site says.

"It is the first time that South Americans will see themselves through their own eyes," says Aram Aharonian, a Uruguayan journalist and Caracas resident who will head the station. The new network was started with US\$110 million dollars, contributed by the governments of Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina and Cuba, according to Aharonian. But with a 51 percent share in the station, Venezuela will remain the heavyweight. Telesur plans to open offices in each of the contributing nations, as well as in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the United States, and has contributors in a total of 35 countries.

Chávez's critics, who accuse him of weakening Venezuela's democratic checks and balances and using legalisms to curtail media freedoms, predict that Telesur will be a propaganda engine similar to Venezuela's own state-run media. State television and radio generally parrot the government line and give Chávez's domestic opponents little voice. While Venezuela continues to enjoy a vigorous independent media, Chávez's critics and many independent observers charge that the country's laws are intimidating critics of the government.

Telesur "will permit Chávez to promote his *anti-yankeeism* and lots of propaganda" said Gerbert Koenecke, a professor of political science at Simon Bolivar University in Caracas.

Chávez has been vocal about his disapproval of private television. He once called the private Venezuelan stations the "horsemen of the apocalypse" and threatened to shut them down. During the April 2002 coup which unseated Chávez for 48 hours, private Venezuelan television and newspapers cheered on the de facto government and even blacked out Chávez's return to power (*LP*, July 1, 2002). Chávez's government has already worked domestically to compete with private media by founding a second government-owned television station.

But Chávez and his supporters have argued that the international image of his popular government is tarred by foreign media that are influenced by the openly hostile Bush Administration as well as by capitalist interests.

Chávez's critics warn that the goal behind Telesur is to extend the leftist president's media influence across the continent.

John Walsh, an analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, says that Telesur is another element of Chávez's efforts to show that "Latin America is not following squarely behind US leadership."

Nevertheless, Walsh expects the Chávez government's agenda to be moderated by those of the other nations participating in Telesur. Something he believes is a necessity.

"You are talking about hundreds of millions of people who want their story lines first on the news", he said. "It is an interesting idea."

"It is a way to end CNN's monopoly and to get to know the lives of other people," said José Hurtado, an independent producer of pro-Chávez videos. □

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