

- 1 **PERU**
Underestimating the damage
- 2 **PERU**
The illusion of aid
- 3 **GUATEMALA**
Election campaign marred by violence
- 5 **ECUADOR**
Correa's ups and downs
- 6 **BOLIVIA**
Economic growth threatened
- 7 **COLOMBIA**
Landmine danger continues
- 8 **VENEZUELA**
Constitutional reform takes off
- 10 **MEXICO**
Dying in defense of Mother Earth
- 11 **ARGENTINA**
The return of shared pensions
- 12 **BRAZIL**
Unforgotten crimes



Peru: A street in Pisco, the hardest hit city by August's deadly earthquake.

PERU
Lucien Chauvin in Pisco

Underestimating the damage

Critics say governmental reconstruction estimates glaringly low.

The Peruvian government's rush to rebuild after the massive earthquake that devastated a 130-kilometer (81-mile) stretch of the south-central coast in mid-August has been greeted with mixed reactions.

President Alan García has appointed a group of businessmen to lead the Fund for the Reconstruction of the South, or FORSUR, which will coordinate public and private rebuilding efforts. The government's initial pledge is some US\$31 million and international institutions and governments have promised another \$40 million.

"What we want is to start building within a month," Julio Favre, the head of FORSUR, told the press after his first meeting with García on Aug. 28.

FORSUR's task is daunting. The 7.9-magnitude earthquake that struck Aug. 15, left more than 500 dead in towns and cities in the department of Ica and the southern extreme of the department of Lima.

The government declared a state of emergency in Ica, Lima's Cañete province and Catrovirreyna in the highland department Huancavelica because of the damage, which toppled more than 40,000 homes and numerous buildings. Government ministries reported that 763 schools, six hospitals and one prison were damaged or destroyed by the temblor.

Authorities from the regions most affected by the earthquake were quick to criticize FORSUR as an agency that contradicted the supposed decentralization process underway. The tensions subsided somewhat after regional presidents agreed to sit on the agency's board, but mayors from 23 towns hit by the earthquake published an open letter explaining their position.

"FORSUR is an agency opposed to decentralization as a policy for the democratic organization of the state," read their Sept. 1 communiqué.

Critics say the government could be setting itself up for huge problems by underestimating reconstruction costs, creating unrealistic hopes among victims in Pisco, the hardest hit city, and nearby towns.

The government has estimated the reconstruction will cost anywhere between \$100 and \$200 million. While the spread is big enough to cover unforeseen costs, the calculations are well below the initial estimates of private institutions.

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The Lima Chamber of Commerce reported that clean-up and reconstruction of urban and rural areas would cost around \$450 million. The country's engineering society puts the price tag close to \$600 million and some relief agencies say the number is likely to approach the \$1-billion mark.

Calculations based on government claims show that the initial amount is far too low. The administration has promised to hire 8,000 victims for clean-up and reconstruction crews, paying about \$4.40 per day. This totals \$35,555 a day or more than \$28 million over a four-month period. Families that lost homes will also get some \$1,900 to rebuild. This amounts to more than \$76 million if the number of homes destroyed stays at 40,035, the most recent estimate of the National Civil Defense Institute, or Indeci.

Schools, daycare centers — 90 of the 91 daycare centers in Pisco collapsed — hospitals, prisons, museums and productive infrastructure need to be rebuilt. Economy Minister Luis Carranza said at least \$60 million will be spent on rebuilding and repairing schools.

While electricity and water services have been restored, and the Pan-American Highway reopened after segments were fixed, the solutions are temporary and costly, long-term solutions are needed.

Estimates from the private sector have yet to be calculated, but the agro-export, fishing, garment and wine industries will be affected. Production Minister Rafael Rey said that the earthquake will lower Ica's gross domestic product by around 6 percent, while shaving about 0.5 percent off the national total. GDP growth for the year is now estimated at 7.2 percent.

Walter Martínez, general manager of the country's fourth largest fishing company, Hayduk, estimates that damage to fishmeal and canning plants in Pisco and nearby Tambo de Mora could run around \$30 million. There are 17 fishmeal plants and 11 canning and freezing plants in Ica department.

In the first six months of 2007, the department produced 66,444 metric tons of fishmeal, 10.4 percent of the national total, and 714 tons, or 1.4 percent of the overall total, of canned products. Nationwide exports during this period were \$1.1 billion, representing a 17.7-percent increase over the same period in 2006. Peru is the world's primary producer of fishmeal.

In addition to the damage for factories and farms, Rey said the crisis facing workers left homeless is also impact industry.

"The principal problem is that workers are unable to be on the job, having to take care of their homes and families," he said.

The government responds to critics with more upbeat appraisals. The president told reporters that even the estimates of a drop in GDP may be wrong, because the construction boom sparked by reconstruction will become a motor for economic growth.

García and his ministers are also betting on a huge push from the private sector they believe are itching to invest. One of the first projects will be privatizing the port in Pisco, which was all but levelled by the earthquake and an immediate sea surge. The goal is to have it in private company hands by early 2008.

Pisco, home to the plant that process liquids from the Camisea gas fields, is also looking like the primary option for companies interested in using natural gas to create a petrochemical industry. There are around 12 companies interested and initial projections are investments topping \$1 billion to build a complex to produce fertilizers (urea and ammonia).

There is also a push for tourists to return to the earthquake zone, even though most of the hotels in the Pisco area were destroyed and many of the natural attractions, including the well-known rock formation known at the Cathedral in the Paracas National Reserve, were destroyed. □

PERU

Omar Páez in Pisco

The illusion of aid

Homeless and hungry, earthquake victims wait for help.

President Alan García's approval ratings in the Peruvian capital shot up two weeks after the deadly 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit Peru, killing more than 500 people.

According to a new poll conducted in Lima and Callao by Lima firm CPI, García's popularity rose to just over 50 percent at the end of August, up 10 points compared to a poll at the beginning of the month, just after he completed his first year in office (*LP*, Aug. 22, 2007).

But the poll results would have been different had it been conducted in the quake-ravaged Ica and Huancavelica departments.

While government officials were quick to say that aid was arriving to these areas, thousands, especially on the outskirts of the port of Pisco, the hardest hit city, watched the aid trucks pass them by.



Region at a glance

- 2 LATIN AMERICA/CARIBBEAN
Degraded lands
- 3 LATIN AMERICA/CARIBBEAN
Informal labor
- 4 ECUADOR
In search of the disappeared
- 5 LATIN AMERICA
"Invisible" children
- 9 ARGENTINA
Menem defeated

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

Degraded lands. At least half of the land in the region is degraded, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) said recently.

"This creates a vicious circle in the rural areas: overexploitation and degradation of the soil, increased demands for production, more poverty, food insecurity, migration," said ECLAC.

In Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Suriname, between 63 percent and 91 percent of the lands suffer from some type of degradation. Central America is more vulnerable to natural disasters because of soil degradation and drought.

ECLAC says that the situation is particularly severe in northeastern Brazil, where poverty in arid rural areas is as high as 75 percent, double the national average.

The combined area of Latin America and the Caribbean is some 20 million square kilometers (8 million square miles), a quarter of which are arid, semi-arid and sub-humid zones, 75 percent of which suffers serious degradation problems. —*NUEVO SIGLO.*

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

Informal labor. According to a recent World Bank study, 57 percent of work in the urban areas of Latin America and the Caribbean is informal.

The study, "Informality: Exit and Exclusion," called informality "as a possible drag on growth and rising social well being, and as a force corrosive to the integrity of our societies."

Informal employment — work that does not provide social benefits — correspond to two groups, the World Bank says: the self-employed, or small business owners, and salaried workers who are not registered by companies.

"Whether informality is an outcome of exclusionary policies or mechanisms, or a result of cost—benefit decisions by firms and individuals that lead them to opt out of formal institutions, it represents a fundamental critique of the Latin American state," the study said. —LP.

The international organization Doctors without Borders made a demand for more aid two weeks after the quake hit.

Victims themselves said that there was not nearly enough food, and that often times, aid did not arrive at all.

"After more than 10 days without receiving aid, sometimes living with up to 40 people in one tent, these people feel abandoned, and not recognized as victims of the earthquake," said Zohra Abaakouk, a Doctors without Borders mental health worker.

Dr. Loreto Barcelo, the head of the organization's medical team, said poor families living in the village of Guadalupe outside of Pisco was appalled by the conditions. "In makeshift shelters made of cardboard and bed sheets in front of their destroyed houses, families are living in cold and unhygienic conditions. They have no latrines, no drinking water, and no real space to bathe," she said.

Local media reported that some homeless have resorted to eating cats to survive.

"We were surprised by the absence of adult cats in our inspections in the city [of Pisco] and we only found kittens," Shari Artadi, a representative of the Canadian Animal Assistance Team in Pisco, told CPN radio. "Some victims told us that they had no other option but to sacrifice their pets to fight the hunger and lack of food in the first days after the earthquake."

Hundreds of children and their mothers, their hair encrusted with the dust from the Aug. 15 quake, wait along the Pan-American Highway, some holding Peruvian flags, begging passing cars for aid.

"It was impressive to see people living in the mountains, in small tents, under which were 10, 15 or 20 people," said Francois Dumont, a spokesman for the Doctors without Borders team operating in and around Pisco.

Medical officials also warn that the psychological effects of the quake are devastating. Homeless victims dug through the ruins of their home for shoes belonging to their loved ones, photographs, something to remind them that they once had a normal and happy life.

In the San Clemente neighborhood outside of Pisco, some 30 people huddle around each other, trying to keep warm. They have barely received enough water to drink, let alone food.

"We've lost everything, and it's doesn't seem to matter to anyone," said Clara Rosales, whose husband, mother and father were crushed in the rubble of their adobe home in the nearby town of Guadalupe. "They want us to leave the little we have to walk 5, 10 kilometers [to find aid], and that we're not going to do. There are robberies, looting here."

"A wall fell on my back, and I haven't received help from anyone, but I have to cook for my daughter and my husband," said María Delgado, whose home was looted.

Doctors without Borders was heavily critical of the health care victims are receiving.

"We visited some houses and we met this woman who was squashed under a wall with her child in her arms when her house collapsed," said Dr. Barcelo in a statement. "The woman broke her foot and the little girl suffered multiple pelvis fractures. However, the child was only given a plaster and then discharged within 48 hours. The mother, who needed orthopedic surgery, was probably not even treated because the health staff was overwhelmed."

Luis Encinas, the organization's emergency coordinator, said: "The situation of the victims is hardly mentioned in the international media and, on the ground, several aid organizations are starting to leave the area. This situation is unacceptable. Action is urgently needed to prevent these people from living in such unacceptable conditions."

"My little one has a cough. We don't have water even to wash our hands, or face, or hair, and we're living with the dog in this tent. We already smell bad," said Herminia Barros, who lost her home.

She was wearing a red handkerchief around her hair to block the cold sand, which blew up in a storm near Pisco in late August, whipping thousands of victims camped out on the ruins of their homes, battling the cold nights with plastic and used blankets.

Grassroots groups, nongovernmental organizations and church groups have resorted to holding their own collections, and bringing the aid to the victims directly. □

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

Election campaign marred by violence

Analysts suspect drug cartels behind the violence.

On Aug. 14, the body of 14-year-old Marta Cristina Montenegro Hernández was found in the boot of a taxi, under the Olympic Bridge in Guatemala City. The young girl had been shot in the head and was found together with two other bodies that have yet to be identified. Marta Cristina, daughter of lawmaker Héctor Montenegro, of the National Unity

of Hope party, had gone missing the day before.

Héctor Montenegro, who is seeking re-election on Sept. 9, believes his daughter's murder was politically motivated, as he had received death threats for several months. "I always tried to ignore the threats. Many people resent my success within the party. I made enemies and I think my daughter's murder was meant to scare me away from politics."

Nevertheless, Montenegro refuses to give up his political ambitions: "My daughter's death was really painful but I am determined to go ahead and stand for re-election." Montenegro became well-known after he campaigned in Congress for the approval of a law to grant the elderly a compulsory state pension.

Three days after Marta Cristina was found, lawyer Tomás Leñoso Urizar was gunned down in his office in the city of Mazatenango, in the Western department of Suchitepéquez. He died instantly from a gunshot wound to the head. According to witnesses, his two attackers fled in a white pick-up van with no number plates. Leñoso, 48, was running for councillor for the conservative Unionista Party.

Since the election campaign officially began on May 2 this year, there have been 43 politically motivated murders in Guatemala including, activists, candidates and their family members, a death toll that exceeds the 29 murders reported during the 2003 elections. According to the civil society electoral observer group Mirador Electoral, this is the most violent election campaign since Guatemala's first post-conflict elections in 1985.

Fourteen candidates are running for president on September 9. Social democrat Álvaro Colom, of the National Unity of Hope is leading the polls by a narrow margin, followed by far-right candidate, Gen. Otto Pérez Molina, of the Patriot Party, Alejandro Giammattei of the ruling Grand National Alliance party and indigenous activist and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, of Encuentro por Guatemala.

Most politically motivated attacks have been committed against the National Unity of Hope, which has suffered 18 murders, the Patriot Party, the Grand National Alliance party, Encuentro por Guatemala, and the former guerrillas-turned-political party, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity party, which four murders each.

According to the Guatemala-based Central American Institute of Political Studies, political violence can be caused by drug cartels trying to infiltrate political parties, rivalries between opposition parties, or internal power struggles within a party.

Most politically motivated murders have been reported in the departments of Guatemala, Jutiapa, Escuintla and San Marcos. With the exception of Guatemala City, these areas are major points of entry for cocaine shipments. Experts to attribute this spate of politically motivated attacks to powerful drug cartels that are trying to worm their way into the most successful parties, particularly at a local level, in order to continue operating under a cloak of immunity once the new government comes to power.

Mirador Electoral and several human rights organizations also blame politicians for inciting hatred by delivering inflammatory speeches to score cheap points against opponents. Two months ago, Vice President Eduardo Stein accused the Patriot Party of orchestrating a series of attacks against urban bus drivers in order to heighten the existing climate of fear and violence and boost support for Pérez Molina's tough stance on crime, known as *mano dura* (heavy hand). Colom seized the opportunity to attack his closest rival, leading to a series of bitter verbal attacks between both candidates.

On Aug. 11, local human rights organization the Mutual Support Group, issued the following statement: "The politically motivated attacks and murders registered to date have occurred during an election campaign marred by violence and smear campaigns to discredit political opponents. Those who resort to tactics aim to maintain their grip on political power, regardless of democratic values and principles."

"Regardless of the political views of the different people affected by political violence during this election campaign, the Mutual Support Group condemns these acts of savagery that aim to silence the opposition by violently eliminating well-known political figures."

To make matters worse, over 500 former paramilitary civilian militia members in the northwestern department of Peten, have threatened to boycott the elections if the government does not pay them for wartime services. During Guatemala's 36-year-long armed conflict, the patrols were formed at military behest and operated under military orders. Service in them was obligatory, and some of those who carried out the abuses were coerced into doing so, under threat of death to themselves and their families if they did not participate.

The patrols were supposedly disbanded under the 1996 Peace Accords, but in fact have continued to operate in various areas of the country and have been allegedly responsible for new abuses and have been particularly vehement in demanding compensation for the service they rendered while serving in the patrols.

Given this conflictive and highly volatile scenario, electoral observers fear that the authorities might be unable to contain possible outbreaks of violence on September 9, especially if the result is highly contested, as is likely to occur considering the increasingly narrow margin between Colom and Pérez Molina. □

ECUADOR

In search of the disappeared.

Human rights activists cheered the creation of a special commission to find the remains of two minors who disappeared almost 20 years ago.

Santiago and Andrés Restrepo, at ages 17 and 14, respectively, were detained by the police on Jan. 8, 1988 and never seen again. According to one police officer, the bodies were thrown into the Yambo Lagoon in central Ecuador, though their remains were never found.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called it a "state crime."

In 1998, the boys' family agreed to a monetary settlement from the government, but no investigation was ever opened.

In May, President Rafael Correa founded a truth commission that will meet for one year to investigate reports of human rights violations committed since 1980, particularly during the 1984-88 government of ex-President León Febres Cordero. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA

“Invisible” children. Some 2 million of the 11 million children born each year in Latin America are not registered with the state, said the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) during the First Latin American Regional Conference on Birth Registration and the Right to Identity in Asunción, Paraguay, Aug. 28-30.

Representatives of 18 Latin American countries participated to form political plans that “will guarantee free, universal and timely birth registration for all children by 2015.”

Nils Kastberg, UNICEF’s regional director, said that one example of the trend is that of the Miskito indigenous group of Nicaragua. Most of them are not registered, and as a result, do not legally exist.

Kastberg said Chile, Cuba and Guyana are the countries in the region most advanced in registering children, but that other nations have extremely high levels of unregistered children, such as Paraguay (36 percent), Haiti (30 percent), the Dominican Republic (25 percent), Brazil (24 percent), Nicaragua (19 percent) and Bolivia (18 percent).

Experts found that many governments in the region let the dangerous practice continue because they consider it a low-priority issue. —PÚLSAR.

ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Quito

Correa’s ups and downs

President fails to convince country’s organized popular movement.

Ever since Rafael Correa and a group of intellectuals prominent in the country’s nongovernmental organizations created the *Movimiento País* party to participate in last year’s election, Ecuador’s political scene experienced its greatest change since the nation returned to democracy almost 30 years ago.

Correa took office Jan. 15 blasting Ecuador’s traditional political parties. He also implemented a series of social policy measures such as doubling funds for human development and housing, which helped solidify his support that allowed his initiative to write a new constitution cruise to approval (*LP, March 7, 2007*).

In an April 15 referendum, 82 percent of voters approved the need for a constituent assembly to write a new charter, Correa’s first major victory.

It was also a blow to traditional political parties, especially right-wing parties and powerful business owners who, then, began to use other forums to voice their opinions: the mainstream media and production chambers.

Correa has had to confront the media and the harsh criticisms they dolled out.

“The media have become political spokespeople, so they will receive a political response,” said Correa’s then-press officer Mónica Chuji, who said that the government was not trying to curb freedom of expression.

Earlier this year, Correa filed a libel suit against Quito daily *La Hora* after it ran an editorial criticizing him for how he handled a political crisis ahead of the April referendum. Congress tried to block the vote, and 57 lawmakers were fired by the electoral court.

He later issued a series of decrees including one that prohibited the airing of videos without the permission of those who were taped. Earlier this year, a scandal erupted after then-Economy Minister Ricardo Patiño was shown in a video meeting with investors, discussing plans to possibly manipulate bond prices. Correa has since replaced him and the minister’s adviser, Quinto Pazmiño, who leaked the tape, filed criminal defamation charges against Correa in June after the leader called him “swine.” Pazmiño was arrested on Sept. 1 in his home for allegedly threatening the president.

Patiño said he taped the meeting with investors himself to “expose corruption” in the financial sector.

“The middle class is purist, it doesn’t forgive mistakes,” said Pablo Dávalos, a political analyst and former deputy economy minister during the government of interim President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007) (*LP, Sept. 21, 2005*).

Correa paid little mind to media criticism and said he would push forth with his economic policy, including the reduction of interest rates and the elimination of bank commissions and control over the energy sector.

“While the country is fighting poverty, the banks are getting the highest profits in their histories,” Correa said in June when he presented his new banking bill to Congress.

Congress approved the law in June but left interest rates and unlimited profitability in place, practically defeating the purpose of Correa’s proposal.

His impulsive nature led Correa to lose support in the middle class sector, but his policy for increased social spending boosted his popularity in poor sectors, though the leader has not been able to forge an alliance with social organizations.

“Correa wants his own social base and he is mistrusted by organized grassroots, especially those that have the most ability to mobilize,” said political analysts Mario Unda.

Organized movements, especially indigenous and *campesino* groups, demand an even more radical position from Correa toward transnational companies operating there. The mistrust is likely to be a major hurdle for Correa, who is seeking a majority in the 130-member constituent assembly, which will be elected Sept. 30.

The assembly, for many, is a chance for Ecuadorians to express their desires for change, but even leftist parties, which could win a majority of seats in the body, are varied and present a fragmented movement to voters, lowering their chances of being elected.

Correa’s Alianza País party, for example, is riding on making agreements with the middle class that do not clearly represent any ideology and have different views about the so-called “Citizen’s Revolution” proposal.

According to former Transportation and Public Works Minister Trajano Andrade and the intellectual María Paula Romo, Correa’s so-called “Citizen’s Revolution” initiative must limit government restructuring to create more independence and transparency. Chuji and former Energy Minister Alberto Acosta, both of whom resigned to run for the assembly, say they the project must help protect indigenous peoples and lands.

But the right-wing does not fare well either in terms of unity. The crisis in the traditional political parties has unleashed the emergence of many movements each one obeying to particular interests.

“It’s possible that the fragmentation impedes that one party or another has a majority,” said Dávalos. □

Economic growth threatened

Energy and mineral wealth not enough, economists warn.

Under the nationalization of Bolivia's rich gas reserves, which President Evo Morales declared in May 2006, the state can receive up to US\$2 billion a year. Coupled with high mineral prices, the country should have more money.

But while this income plays an important part in the Bolivian economy, it is also a manifestation of a structural problem, says economist Gonzalo Chávez, director of the Postgraduate Program for Development at the Bolivian Catholic University.

"Exports have registered an increase from \$1.5 billion in 2004 to \$4 billion in 2006, but they are excessively concentrated in the exportation of natural resources." He says that 80 percent of Bolivia's exports are gas, minerals and some agro-exports.

"We are a country that lives off the sale of raw materials, just as we did in the 1920s. We have to strengthen the production and exportation of value-added goods," Chávez said.

Natural gas income goes to both the central government as well as local governments. Officials say it is used for infrastructure projects, such as roads.

Money generated by mining, however, is controlled by the owners of the mining cooperatives (*LP, Oct. 18, 2006*), and the majority of these earnings go to their own bank accounts, while the miners themselves do not share them. There is a similar trend in the agricultural sector in eastern Bolivia, where most of the wealth is concentrated in the hands of large farming companies that export mainly soy.

These trends mean that despite increased exports, the wealth does not reach the country's poorest sectors.

Bolivia's economy has grown almost 4.5 percent annually in recent years. But the devastating effects of El Niño this year threaten the country's growth.

Economic growth and an increase in the money circulating, owed to exports and remittances from Bolivians living abroad, which totaled \$1 billion last year, also create price increases.

But damages caused by deadly floods and frosts produced by El Niño have cut output significantly, resulting in higher prices for basic items such as bread, milk, meat and vegetables.

"Inflation in 2007 will reach 10 percent. The government could issue bonds to get money out of the market and combat inflation, but it doesn't do that," said financial analyst Juan Cariaga.

The Bolivian currency has appreciated against the dollar, from 8.04 bolivianos per dollar to 7.78 last year, partly due to the increase in exports and the remittances, meaning more dollars were in the country. The weak dollar benefited only some Bolivians who vacationed abroad.

"It's not good that the national currency appreciates in value. It strengthens imported goods and is a blow for the local production," Cariaga said. "Inflation has a greater effect on the lower and middle classes because they have fixed and/or low salaries. Ten-percent inflation could nearly break a family. Business owners, however, have more income when prices rise."

Another problem is employment creation. Unemployment rates have dropped, but that does not mean that there is more work.

"Every year 120,000 young people enter the labor market, but the country only creates some 30,000 new jobs. Unemployment has dropped slightly, not because there is more work, but because workers have gone to Spain. We're not going to create jobs while we don't promote local industry," said Chávez.

Chávez and Cariaga say that Bolivia lacks a clear economic policy. Chávez says that while Morales' government pushes for nationalistic policies in certain sectors, such as natural resources, he applies neo-liberal policies on the macroeconomic level.

"There is fiscal austerity. The government allows the national currency to appreciate, and has liberalized the meat and flour markets, for example. They are neo-liberal measures, but now we save the money from the International Monetary Fund, because they no longer come here to control us," Chávez said.

Cariaga, in turn, says that the country has no economic policy at all. He said Morales' decision to nationalize the country's gas reserves (*LP, May 17, 2006*), which does generate more money for the country, has also had a negative effect on other areas of the economy, sparking fears among investors that more nationalizations will follow.

"The nationalizations have sparked a loss of markets and have stopped investments. An economy can't grow without investments. In 2000, investments were some \$2 billion. Now they total some \$200 million."



Gonzalo Chávez

"We're not going to create jobs while we don't promote local industry."

— Gonzalo Chávez

“Many of the survivors are among Colombia’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens: peasants or others who live in impoverished rural regions.”

— Human Rights Watch

The government increased minimum monthly wages in May from \$60 to \$67, as well as salaries for teachers, medical personnel and police officers, among others.

Chávez praised this and other initiatives listed in the National Development Plan 2006-2011, which will span Morales’ five-year term.

“There are positive signs. But governments are judged for the results, not for their policies. Now we have to wait and see if the current policy brings results,” he said. □

COLOMBIA

Susan Abad in Bogota

Landmine danger continues

Anti-personnel landmines put Colombian civilians at risk.

A late July report by Human Rights gives Colombia the shameful list-topping title of the country with the highest number of victims and accidental explosions of anti-personnel landmines in the world.

Luz Piedad Herrera of the Anti-Personnel Landmines Observatory of Colombia’s vice president’s office says it’s “alarming.” “We have two or three victims a day,” she said.

The Observatory says that 22 people were victims from landmine explosions in 1990. In 2006, there were 1,122 and from Jan. 1 to Aug. 15 of this year, there have been 557.

José Miguel Vivanco, the director of Human Rights Watch in the Americas, said that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) plant the most landmines, adding that another rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and paramilitary groups are also responsible.



Anti-personnel mines (inset) have had devastating effects on many Colombians.

“Even though it’s the FARC who is planting mines right now, the majority of victims are from mines planted by the ELN,” Herrera said, adding that this group started planting mines in Colombia 15 years ago.

The Human Rights Watch report, titled “Maiming the People: Guerrilla Use of Anti-personnel Landmines and Other Indiscriminate Weapons in Colombia,” says guerrillas’ frequent use of antipersonnel landmines, improvised out of cheap, readily available materials, leaves hundreds of civilians maimed, blind, deaf, or dead every year.” The landmines can remain live in the ground for 50 years.

When one suffers “a landmine injury, survivors’ whole lives are seriously affected, not only because of the injury’s physical effects, but also because of the incident’s impact on their mental health, their ability to support themselves and their families, and their ability to remain in their homes,” said the report.

“Many of the survivors are among Colombia’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens:

LATIN AMERICA/
CARIBBEAN

Military spending on the rise.

Military spending rose 3.5 percent worldwide compared to 2005, including in Latin America, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's annual report.

The SIPRI Yearbook 2007, noted that military spending in Latin America and the Caribbean last year totaled US\$32.8 billion — 1.5 percent of the region's economy, calculated at \$2.2 billion by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean — US\$1.7 billion more than in 2005.

Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico, whose military spending comprised 80 percent of the region's spending, totaled \$26 billion in 2006, a \$1.4-billion increase compared to 2005.

Elisabeth Sköns, director of SIPRI's Military Expenditure and Arms Production Program, said, "we know that millions of lives could be saved through basic health interventions that would cost a fraction of what the world spends on military forces every year." —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/
CARIBBEAN
Military spending
(US\$ millions)

Country	2005	2006
Brazil	12,510	13,446
Chile	4,397	4,858
Colombia	4,562	4,609
Mexico	3,193	3,136
Venezuela	1,606	1,924
Argentina	1,912	1,847
Peru	1,088	1,086
Ecuador	887	908
Uruguay	219	210
Dominican Rep.	175	165
Bolivia	153	155
Guatemala	105	137
El Salvador	108	105
Paraguay	55	63
Jamaica	55	54
Honduras	49	52
Bahamas	39	47
Nicaragua	34	33

Source: SIPRI

peasants or others who live in impoverished rural regions, far from state authorities and hospitals, and who are often caught in the middle of the conflict involving guerrillas, Colombian security forces, and paramilitary groups. Often, landmine survivors are victims of other abuses too, such as forced displacement," it added.

Colombian law gives the survivors of landmine explosions a variety of benefits.

But survivors face many obstacles to receive them — there is only a small window, one year, for survivors to apply — and worse still, they are rarely aware of what their own rights are.

The state provides assistance of up a single payment of US\$8,680 to victims, but they can also apply for disability by of just over \$1,300 within a six-month period.

The report says that "of 139 cases of landmine survivors that the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines reviewed in 2005 and 2006, only 17 survivors had received humanitarian assistance. Seventy-nine had lost their rights to payments because the deadline to claim the benefits had expired."

A 1996 decree that regulates a government care fund orders victims to provide a confusing set of paper work — claim forms, certificates from local authorities to prove they are victims, transportation and health care receipts.

Herrera says that the government is now trying to rehabilitate victims and prevent new incidents.

She said that every survivor needs an average of \$100,000 for his or her rehabilitation. Also, planting a mine costs just \$1 while disarming it costs \$1,000.

There are an estimated 100,000 landmines in Colombia that have been planted by guerillas and paramilitaries in strategic areas or near their cocaine laboratories.

Guerrillas also use the mines to protect their camps, where they house their commanders and hostages, as a means to ward off the militaries, making it difficult for these armed groups to agree to clear their mined areas.

In February 2005, the ELN agreed to remove its mines, but the deal was deceptive.

Herrera said that while the ELN picked up 54 mines it had placed on a 12-kilometer (7.5-mile) stretch of the road in the Bolivar state, "that same day they planted 50 more."

The ELN is currently negotiating a demobilization plan with the Colombian government in Cuba.

The Colombian government ratified the Ottawa Convention in 2000, an international agreement that prohibits the employment, production or transferring of anti-personnel mines. In October 2004, the government destroyed more than 8,000 mines that were protecting its military bases, energy and telecommunications (*LP*, Dec. 29, 2004).

Human Rights Watch warns that "the provisions prohibiting indiscriminate warfare are part of customary international law and are binding on all parties to both internal and international conflict" and that if "guerrilla members intentionally direct attacks against civilians using anti-personnel landmines, then they could be subject to prosecution for war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court." □

VENEZUELA

José Orozco in Caracas

Constitutional reform takes off

Critics call Chávez's reforms "cyanide candies" to divert attention from power grab.

President Hugo Chávez's proposal to reform the Constitution, which was presented to the Chávez-allied Congress Aug. 15, would go beyond the billions of dollars he has injected into social programs to give Venezuela's poor the power to shape their daily lives. "Communal power is the essence of our reform," he said.

Chávez's reform proposal enshrines a new concept of Venezuela's territory by using "communities" as the new socialist state's "basic and indivisible" administrative unit.

Already active, communal councils would take on more responsibilities, executing decisions made by citizen assemblies about public services and works projects, while representing the community in local governments.

But critics argue that Chávez's reform will only further concentrate power in his hands, leading the country down the slippery slope to authoritarianism.

Along with eliminating presidential term limits, the proposed reforms would grant Chávez powers to create parallel regional and local governments, all under his control. Though the reform would preserve municipalities and states, critics argue that by keeping communal councils dependent on the president, Chávez would use these councils and the parallel governments to override municipalities and states when he saw fit.

Even some Chávez supporters have balked at parts of the reform.

Rafael Uzcátegui, national secretary for the Chávez-allied Patria Para Todos party,

ARGENTINA

Menem defeated. Former President Carlos Menem (1989-99) suffered a resounding defeat in his bid for governor in his native La Rioja province.

Menem won 21.7 percent of the votes on the Aug. 19 election, coming in third place behind Gov. Luis Beder Herrera, who was reelected with 41.3 percent, and Ricardo Quintela, mayor of the city of La Rioja, with just over 27 percent.

Menem, 77, blamed his defeat on President Néstor Kirchner who would "block his path at any cost." Both belong to the country's Peronist party.

Fellow candidates Beder and Quintela both consider themselves pro-Kirchner, and have supported the candidacy of senator and first lady Cristina Fernández, the favorite to win October's presidential election (*LP*, Aug. 22, 2007). —LP.

criticized the dependence of popular power on Chávez. "It's dangerous to subordinate popular power to the executive," said Uzcátegui.

While Uzcátegui "salutes" Chávez's proposal, he calls it "limited" for restricting indefinite re-election to the executive — he supports eliminating term limits for mayors and governors as well.

Chávez rejects his ally's counter-proposal, arguing that mayors and governors would like to act as "little *caudillos*."

On his radio show, Chávez defended the double-standard by reiterating his argument against the "little *caudillos*," adding: "If I hand over the brush to another person, even someone dear to me, he may use some other colors because he has another vision, beginning to change the painting's outlines."

Long-time Chávez ally Ismael García, a lawmaker for the Podemos party, has further distanced himself from the *chavista* consensus by protesting the reform's timeline.

The assembly will have three months to approve the proposal, which will then go to a referendum late this year or early 2008.

"The president had six months to study the project to present it to the country, so the country can't analyze this in only three months," García told reporters after withholding his party's vote on the timeline, a first for Podemos under Chávez.

The opposition often dismisses popular power as just another one of Chávez's power grabs. Its dependence on Chávez, they argue, is quite deliberate.

As part of the constitutional reform, Chávez also proposes labor reforms such as instituting a six-hour workday and creating a "social stability fund" for informal workers. Opposition party Un Nuevo Tiempo responded by drafting law decrees for both initiatives, arguing that the current Constitution already supports these measures, making the reforms redundant.

Even as the government argues that the shorter workday will spur job growth and reduce unemployment to under 5 percent, business groups have protested the proposal.

Fedeagro, a national agricultural business group, argues that unpredictable weather patterns make overtime hours impossible to get around. Even Empreven, a pro-Chávez business group, says it will recommend making an exception for small businesses with ten or fewer employees. The group estimates over 2 million small businesses operate in Venezuela.

Some opposition members call these labor proposals "cyanide candies," included to sweeten the deal for voters while sneaking through less popular reforms such as indefinite re-election in the bulk reform.

Chávez supporters call the reform "integral," arguing that it needs to be voted on as a whole.

More than a reform, critics argue, Chávez's proposal represents far-reaching changes that require a Constitutional Assembly to draft a new Constitution.

Other Chávez reforms include formally incorporating the civilian reserves into the Bolivarian Armed Forces as the "Bolivarian Popular Militia," and, critics fear this proposal aims to militarize the population and politicize the military.

Promoting the civilian militias responds to Venezuela's military doctrine of asymmetrical warfare, which asserts that the country must prepare for a US invasion. Chávez has charged the US with coup-plotting and even planning his assassination, since the Bush administration tacitly supported a 2002 coup that briefly ousted the Venezuelan leader.

The opposition claims the reform restricts private property. The current Constitution claims: "Everyone has the right to the use, enjoyment, and disposal of his/her property."

While Chávez's reform guarantees various forms of property — including that owned by the state, communities, communes, private individuals or enterprises or a combination — it recognizes "property of use and consumption and means of production acquired legitimately."

Critics have decried the apparent limitation, while the government has reassured Venezuelans that expanding the conception of property does not endanger private property.

Chávez's reform also authorizes the state to expropriate property without court approval.

Opinion polls consistently show private property is dear to Venezuelans' hearts. A June poll by Hinterlaces, a polling firm, reported that 63 percent of those surveyed rejected constitutional reform and 87 percent supported private property.

In financial matters, the constitutional reform would eliminate the autonomy of the Central Bank of Venezuela, giving Chávez control of the nation's foreign reserves. Critics argue that such a move would boost Venezuela's inflation rate — 8.3 percent from January to July 2007, one of the highest in the world — and further mismanagement and corruption. Chávez calls bank autonomy a vestige of the country's "neoliberal" past and a limitation on national sovereignty.

Proven almost invincible in elections, Chávez holds the upper hand. As Chávez is fond of noting, he remains head of state because of the Venezuelan people's support. □

Dying in defense of Mother Earth

Environmental activists not the only ones who face violence and human rights violations for defending their lands.

Much of Mexico's forestland is titularly owned by 500 mostly-indigenous *ejidos* — shared community land — but indigenous ownership does not guarantee that the forests will be defended and conserved.

Mexico's lush forestland covers a quarter of its national territory and accounts for 1.3 percent of the world's forest resources, but this land is becoming increasingly littered with the corpses of dead forest defenders (*LP*, June 27, 2007).

Mexican forests are a violent battleground between drug gangs clearing land for illicit cultivation, guerilla groups encamped under the canopy, heavily-armed wood poachers who steal 2,000,000 board feet of timber each year, and those who seek to defend the trees.

In recent years, Mexico's forests have become a killing floor every bit as lethal as Brazil where such environmental martyrs as Chico Méndez, Sister Dorothy Stang (*LP*, March 9, 2005) and young Dionicio Ribieras were allegedly by the *pistoleros* of ruthless landowners.

The list of the dead is horrific. In the state of Mexico, 30 forest inspectors, a third of the state force, have been murdered since 1991 according to a count kept by Héctor Magallanes, Greenpeace Mexico forest action coordinator.

While many *ejidos* zealously protect their forests which are held in common and represent the communities' most valued resource, other indigenous groups such as the Lacandon, who occupy the forest of the same name lease out their timber rights to millions of meters of precious mahogany and cedar, stands to corporate loggers.

On the other side of the ledger, Zapatista Mayan indigenous rebels who share the rain forest with the Lacandones, enforce timber cutting strictures in their communities and set up roadblocks at key chokepoints in the jungle and the surrounding canyons to keep the wood poachers from moving their loads to clandestine sawmills in the municipality of Ocosingo. Clashes at the roadblocks have resulted in casualties on both sides. "The earth is our mother," explained Omar, a Zapatista forest defender on the Ejido Morelia, a recent forum in the Lacandon jungle. "We are prepared to die to defend her."

When forest defenders are not murdered outright, they are persecuted and jailed on absurd charges. In June, Chiapas activist Jaime González was jailed by local police for a traffic offense and disappeared for 15 days during which he says he was relentlessly tortured. González remains in state prison.

The *campesinos ecologistas*, or *campesino* ecologists, of the Petatlan sierra above Guerrero's Costa Grande organized to combat uncontrolled clear-cutting by the US timber giant Boise Cascade. Boise moved to Mexico in 1995 after having timber permits to log in US national forests cancelled under environmental pressure. A blockade of mountain roads eventually cut off Boise's access to its wood supply and the transnational moved its operations to greener pastures in southern Chile. But *caciques* (rural bosses) who had cut lucrative deals with the transnational to sell off the forests grew disgruntled and at least five villagers were killed by their gunmen.

Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera who had been prominent organizers of the blockade were detained in 1999 by the army and tortured for days by the soldiers. Later, they were charged with possession of marijuana and automatic weapons and thrown into the Guerrero state prison in Iguala where they languished for two years. Montiel and Cabrera were designated as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International in 2000, while still in prison; they were awarded the Goldman Prize, sometimes described as an environmental Nobel. Freed in 2001 by then-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) because of their poor health as the result of the alleged beatings by the military, Montiel and Cabrera, afraid to move their families back to the forests of Petatlan, took up residence at the other end of the country in the Yucatan.

They had good reason to be fearful. Their lawyer Digna Ochoa died mysteriously in Mexico City in 2001. In 2005, a fellow *campesino* ecologist, Albertano Peñaloza, watched his two sons be killed in an ambush in the Sierra of Petatlan.

The persecution of forest defenders is not confined to southern Mexico. Isidro Baldenegro, a Raramuri Indian defender of the diminishing pine forests of Chihuahua state's Tarahumara sierra from "chabochi" (non-indigenous) loggers, and young Hermenegildo Rivas, were taken into custody on their *ejido* in 2003 after state police broke into their home without a warrant and charged them with the usual guns and marijuana violations, the same charges lodged against the *campesino* ecologists.

The two were beaten unmercifully and locked up for 18 months before international environmental groups intervened. Once again, AI declared them prisoners of conscience and they too were awarded the Goldman prize.

But those who defend Mexican forests from predatory wood poaching are not the only defenders of the environment to be killed or jailed for their efforts. In December 2003,

inbrief

- **Argentina, Chile and Venezuela** have the highest gross domestic product per capita (calculated in purchasing power parity) in South America, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Chileans have an average buying power 46 percent greater than the regional average. Argentines have a 32 percent-greater capacity and Venezuelans have a 17-percent greater buying capacity than the regional average.

- Enrique Arancibia Clavel, a former secret police agent during the Chilean dictatorship, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2000 for the 1974 murders of Chilean Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife in Buenos Aires, was released from prison in **Argentina** on Aug. 21. The court granted him conditional liberty because of the number of years he had been imprisoned without being sentenced for another crime.

- Lawyer María del Pilar Hurtado on Aug. 23 became the first woman to head **Colombia's** intelligence agency, the Administrative Security Department, which has been plagued by corruption scandals linked to alleged infiltration of paramilitaries and drug-traffickers.

- **Ecuador's** Communications Secretariat signed an agreement with the Venezuelan's state-funded television network Telesur on Aug. 30. Ecuador acquired a 5-percent share — paid in programming and services — in the company that was an initiative of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina and Uruguay have similar agreements with the two-year-old Telesur.

- Sixty-seven percent of women over 15 years of age in **Mexico** suffer violence in the home, with their partners, at school or at work, according to a recently-released national survey. Forty-three percent of the violence occurred within a romantic relationship, the government-run study found, and most cases were found in Mexico City.

“One day in 1994, I received a letter telling me that from that moment, I was affiliated with a private pension fund.”

— Clara Bogado

Navy officer Andres Espino was murdered by turtle egg poachers while providing protection for endangered Pacific Coast sea turtles on a Michoacan beach — a second sailor was wounded. The Mexican Navy has been active in defense of these diminishing species. But when the Cucapa indigenous group in the Baja California desert try to fish the Sea of Cortez for their sacred corvina — a white fish — they were reportedly removed at gunpoint by sailors assigned to this protected area. □

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

The return of shared pensions

Will private pensions be a thing of the past?

Thirteen years after the privatization of Argentina's pension system, the government decided to give workers the option to return to a state-run pension system, a move that would cut the number of affiliates of the private Retirement and Pension Fund Administrators by half by the end of the year.

In 1994, during a wave of privatizations that affected various sectors of the state, then-President Carlos Menem (1989-99) sold the state's pension system, forcing newly salaried workers to adhere a private pension program, the majority of which, owned by multinational finance companies. Those who were already working were able to choose between the private and state systems.

But a law passed in April 2007 allows all workers who were obligated to sign up for the private program, to switch over to the public pension. Those new to the labor force can chose either plan, including one of the 11 private pensions that have lasted since 1994, when 26 were established.

Teachers, academics, scientists, members of the judicial branch and diplomats, totaling around 300,000 people under special plans, are required to return to the state plan, and any of their accumulated funds from the private plan will be transferred over to the state-run National Social Security Administration, or ANSES.

President Néstor Kirchner, then the governor of the southern Santa Cruz province, was one of the champions of privatized pensions during the trend in the 1990s. But he did not say what caused him to prefer personally to switch to a privatized fund, in which US-based firm Metropolitan Life had significant interest, back in 1994.

Of the 14.5 million people who comprise the Argentina's economically active population, 11.6 million were affiliated to the private funds, but according to official figures, in the first month since the law went into effect alone, almost 400,000 salaried workers opted to return to the state system. The national social security office estimates that that number will reach 2.5 million by December of this year.

“One day in 1994, I received a letter telling me that from that moment, I was affiliated with a private pension fund. My anger, like those of so many, was enormous, but there was no way to cancel that arbitrary transfer. So it seems fair to me that now, finally, the law gives us the right to go back” to the old system, said Clara Bogado, a judicial clerk who is set to retire within five years, when she turns 60.

Under the old system she prefers, the Argentine workforce contributes to a common fund, similar to US social security.

Bogado is one of 1.4 million salaried Argentine workers with less than 10 years before their retirement — women who presently are 50 years old or more and men who now are 55 years old or more and whose funds in the private system did not exceed 20,000 pesos (US\$6,350).

This sector will be able to receive a minimum of \$184 per month under the new law.

The transfer of the private pension funds to the public one includes also some 500,000 self-employed people.

Lawmakers also established a Sustainability Fund, \$7 billion in financial assets and cash that will be transferred from the private funds to what has already been accumulated in the public one “to guarantee that the funds of the retired is never lost for a lack of skill or planning in the management of public accounts,” said ANSES' head Sergio Masa.

If the estimated 2.5 million transfers from the private to the public fund are added to the 300,000 beneficiaries of special plans, the 1.4 million workers who have less than 10 years before their retirements and the 500,000 self-employed contributors, the private funds would lose 4.7 million members, reducing it to 6.9 million people. The state-run pension fund would have 7.6 million subscribers.

According to estimates of the state-run fund, and even private insurers, in the next five years the state fund would grow four times more than the private one.

But it is not all bad news for the private funds. They retain the right to operate the funds, which have accumulated under their control over the past 13 years. Though they cannot charge for this task, these private companies can reap the benefits of investing this huge mass of money. □

BRAZIL

Latinamerica Press and other news agencies

Unforgotten crimes

Government recognizes state terrorism committed during military dictatorship.

President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva presented a report Aug. 29 on the crimes committed by Brazil's military dictatorships between 1964 and 1985 that blames these human rights violations on the state.

The 500-page report, titled "The Right to Memory and Truth," details 479 cases of detentions and disappearances, listing victims' names and the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

The report was prepared by the Human Rights Secretariat, a branch of the presidency, using information compiled since 1996 by the governmental Special Commission of Political Murders and Disappeared.

"It's a historic piece of work, where the state recognizes the rights of the relatives of Brazilians who were killed or disappeared during the military regime," said commission president Marco Antônio Rodrigues Barbosa. "It means a recovery of memory, truth and as a result, justice."

The report was released on the 28th anniversary of the 1979 Amnesty Law, that pardoned both military officials and civilians accused of human rights violations during the two-decade-long repressive regime.

The report says that military officials made "insufficient" progress in clearing up these crimes, adding that these crimes were "part of a conscious decision by governments of that time" with the "full knowledge of the high-ranking armed forces chiefs," dispelling an old claim that the crimes were the result of "individuals acting beyond the control of their superiors."

Human rights groups and victims' relatives praised the book as a positive step toward "revealing the past."

"From a positive point of view, it's the first time that the government has shown the results of the investigations even though that's their obligation," said Victória Grabois, founder of the group Torture: Never Again. "But there is another phase to this that shows the place and circumstances of the deaths, something the government hasn't done yet."

Even though the government, under a 1995 law in which it admitted responsibility for the death of dictatorship-era opposition, paid damages to more than 300 families, Grabois said that this money "served to free the consciences of the former military agents" and that there is no way they could pay for the lives that were ended.

The government's recognition that the military regimes committed these atrocities against dissidents may lead to numerous court cases.

But Defense Minister Nelson Jobim said that any reaction will have a "proper response."

"Everyone, uniformed or not, has a commitment with the Brazilian people and with the history of Brazil," he said after the report was presented.

Victims' family members demand that secret military files be opened so they could know the whereabouts of their loved ones, a right backed by Brazil's president.

"One of the wounds that are still open from the time of the dictatorship is that of locating the remains of many of the dead dissidents. Their relatives and friends are demanding the right to bury their loved ones," he said.

Rodrigues Barbosa said that the military officials responsible for the torture cases should be punished.

"Torture is a crime with no statute of limitations," he said. "It's inadmissible that it could be forgotten. That fight is not yet over. The files have not yet been completely open and the bodies have not yet been found." □



Victória Grabois

"It's is the first time that the government has shown the results of the investigations even though that's their obligation."

— Victória Grabois

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