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ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Quito

"We've balanced out the power"

Ruling Alianza País party wins absolute majority in Constituent Assembly.

The ruling party's list of candidates swept the Sept. 30 vote for a 130-member assembly that will write a new constitution for Ecuador, making President Rafael Correa's government responsible for the results. The assembly is expected to begin on Oct. 30.

According to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, Correa's Alianza País party won 70.5 percent of the valid votes — 80 seats in the assembly — far more than the 66-seat simple majority needed to pass reforms.

The government's party can also count on nine allied assembly members from the left, giving the bloc the greatest political control in Ecuador's political history.

"We've balanced out the power," said Correa after the results were released.

The Alianza País victory will allow government reforms that were blocked by the current Congress to push through (*LP, March 7, 2007*).

"Before we couldn't, but now we're going to talk with the bankers, but we're not going to talk about whether the interest rates are going to go down, we're going to talk about *how* the interest rates are going to go down," said Correa.

His big win gave Correa the backing to decree on Oct. 4 to change the breakdown of windfall oil profits so that they would go almost completely to the Ecuadorian government.

"Now the oil is everyone's," Correa said when he signed the decree, which stated 99 percent of windfall profits — when the price of oil exceeds that specified in the contract — will go to the state.

Galo Chiriboga, energy and oil minister, said the "referential price in the oil contracts is US\$24 per barrel. The contracts obligated the state to compensate the companies if the price fell below \$24, but if it was up, the companies gave the state 50 percent of the profit. The decree establishes that now 99 percent of the excess will be for the state".

Correa later warned that if the companies do not accept the new rules, he will establish that all windfall profits will go to the state. The leader had given special importance to the country's oil industry since he was economy minister under President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007) when a law established a 50-50 split of windfall oil profits, up from an 85-15 split in favor of the companies.

Almost 82 percent of the 9.1 million Ecuadorian voters voted in favor of the assembly on April 15, a clear blow to the country's traditional political parties. But Correa is taking clear aim at the economic powers which he says have ruled the country through the political parties.

The Congress is now on its way out. Correa has called on the assembly to close the legislative body.

"Congress should cease its functions. It should go on an unpaid vacation, or the most convenient thing is that the deputies resign and go to their houses," said Alberto Acosta, former energy minister and top vote-getter in the Sept. 30 assembly vote.

Several lawmakers have heeded his call and resigned.

Without any strong opposition the debates will be centered around the government party and its left-leaning allies, but there are certain differences between the assembly members themselves (*LP*, Sept. 5, 2007).

"The Constitution is going to improve", said Ramiro Rivadeneira, an adviser to Ecuador's Constitutional Court. "What is up for debate is how profound those improvements will be."

Alianza País is a coalition that joins the president's party with social democratic parties such as the Ruptura de los 25 movement and the Democratic Alternative as well as the Communist Party.

While Correa is expected to have a strong influence over the assembly, there are differences. For assembly members like Acosta or Mónica Chuji — Correa's former spokeswoman — the first priority should be restructuring the economic scheme and recognizing the plurinationality of the Ecuadorian state. Other members, such as María Paula Romo, Norman Wray and Fernando Cordero, tied to academic sectors, are pushing for radical constitutional reforms under a Western legal vision.

Right-wing opposition parties have not yet outlined their plans since Correa's party won the overwhelming majority in the assembly, but they are expected to close in on social democrats, while the fragmented traditional left and the indigenous movement will try to influence through radical members such as Acosta and Chuji.

Chuji says she is a grassroots member of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador. "I owe the indigenous movement and my behavior in the assembly will be in that direction," she said.

As the victory parties subside, the assembly members face the fact that they are responsible for bringing real change. □

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

A 1st-round win for Cristina?

Polls show Fernández set to be Argentina's next president.

Argentines go to the polls to elect their next president on Oct. 28, and recent surveys show that Sen. Cristina Fernández, wife of outgoing President Néstor Kirchner, will cruise to an easy win as the country's first elected female president.

Argentina was governed for 20 months by a woman, but María Estela Martínez de Perón, widow of Gen. Juan Domingo Perón (1946-55 and 1973-74), had been elected vice president and took over the office after her husband's death in 1974. She was later unseated by the 1976 military coup. The bloody dictatorship that followed lasted until 1983.

Pollsters a month before the vote, in which almost 27 million Argentines will go to the polls, showed Fernández winning the election in the first round. She is trailed by another woman: former lawmaker Elisa Carrió, leader of the Civic Coalition that she formed a few months ago with the intent to convert her platform into a formidable challenger, though she was unsuccessfully. Carrió lost the 2003 election to Kirchner.

The next president will hold a four-year term. Argentines will also elect 24 of 72 national senators and 128 of the 257 deputies in the lower house of Congress. Eight of the 24 provinces will also elect governors and provincial lawmakers.

"Cristina will win the presidency with a lead of 32 percentage points, surpassing in the first round all the constitutional requirements for a second round," said sociologist Analía del Franco, director of the pollster Analogías.

A second round would be necessary only if no candidate won more than 45 percent, or if he or she captures 40 percent of the vote without at least a 10-point lead above the next candidate.

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BRAZIL

Forest goes private. In a controversial measure Sept. 21, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva put 90,000 hectares (222,000 acres) of the 200,000-hectare (494,000 acres) Jamari National Forest in the northeastern state of Rondônia, for sale.

The Environment Ministry said the decision aims to stop illegal logging by legalizing and monitoring the activity.

Environmental authorities explained that this area could be used for logging, as well as fruit farming and oil seed production. Ecological tourism is another industry possibility.

The Environment Ministry and Brazilian Forestry Service say that social benefit, efficiency and environmental impact will also be taken into consideration with these projects.

The area consists of three lots of 45,000, 30,000 and 15,000 hectares (111,000, 74,000 and 37,000 acres) apiece. Only Brazilian companies can bid. The three winners will sign concession contracts for three to 40 years.

Critics of the project say it amounts to a "privatization" of the Amazon and will do nothing to stop deforestation. —*LP*.

ARGENTINA

Life sentence. Catholic priest Christian von Wernich, 69, was sentenced to life in prison Oct. 9 by a La Plata court for "crimes against humanity during a genocide."

Von Wernich, chaplain of the Buenos Aires police department during the 1976-83 military dictatorship, was found guilty of seven murders, 42 kidnappings and disappearances and 31 counts of torture (*LP*, Oct. 3, 2007).

In a statement issued the day after the ruling, Mons. Martín de Elizalde, head of the Nueve de Julio diocese in the Buenos Aires province and Von Wernich's direct boss, said he lamented "that in our country there had been so much division and so much hate, that as the Church we didn't know how to prevent or cure it. That a priest, by action or omission, was so far from the demands of the mission that confided in him, we ask for forgiveness with sincere regret."

Some 200 witnesses testified during the trial, which began July 5, and many of them said the priest was present when they were tortured.

The Executive Commission of the Episcopal Conference said after the ruling: "We believe that the steps that justice will give in the clearing up for these events must serve to renew the efforts of all citizens on the path to reconciliation, and as a call to move us away from the impunity as well as from hate and resentment."

Human rights organizations cheered the sentence and President Néstor Kirchner called it "exemplary." —*LP*.

Milka Sosa, a grassroots leader of the hotel and food workers' union, says that little is known about Fernández's platform "aside from the slogan: Change is just beginning."

"But her opponents' histories are so poor ... that it's enough for her the consensus that her husband's government enjoys until now," which is between 54 and 58 percent, Sosa continued.

Political scientist Rosendo Fraga, in a meeting with members of the Christian Executives Association, said that this is the "most extensive" campaign since Argentina returned to democracy in 1983.

But "it also shows the greatest voter apathy, motivated perhaps by the fact that the candidates haven't offered possibilities of participation, whether in party structures or in public acts," he said.

The first hints of the candidacy were announced in March, when Kirchner cryptically said that the candidate for the Front for Victory — his grouping within the Justice (Peronist) Party — would be "a penguin," a nickname given to the president for his origins in the southern Santa Cruz province, home to large colonies of these birds.

Only in July did Kirchner announce that the "penguin" was Fernández (*LP*, Aug. 22, 2007).

Since then the government has dedicated its political machinery to the Kirchner family, and also has absorbed political support from various sectors, including the Radical Civic Union, a historical opponent of Peronism, and even the old Socialist Party, a shrinking movement, but an old bastion of democracy.

Fernández's running mate is Mendoza Gov. Julio Cobos, a Radical Civic Union leader — in one of the two provinces governed by this party — and the government's deputy Cabinet chief is Jorge Rivas, secretary general of the Socialist Party in Buenos Aires, a district with almost 10 million voters — 38 percent of the electorate.

Other candidates had weak campaigns. Ex-President Carlos Menem (1989-99) tried to run but found he had almost no support even in his native La Rioja province. But analysts agree that the electoral panorama hints at little change for Argentine democracy.

"This disorderly electoral campaign is marked by the deterioration of the political parties," wrote Julio Blanck in the *Clarín* newspaper.

In the other popular daily *La Nación*, Joaquín Morales Solá write: "It's not crazy to ask oneself if a definitive end to the old political parties is coming."

Opposition leadership, sunk in ferocious personal fights until the expiration of legal inscription of candidates and electoral alliances, has gone above the self-critical analysis and done a big favor to the presidential marriage: continuing disjointed despite the existence of tickets more or less akin in the progressive movement, the right and the many that represent the left. □

GUATEMALA

Louisa Reynolds in Guatemala City

An uphill struggle against impunity

As violence rages, independent new commission serves as a small step toward ending unpunished crimes.

Five young men were playing street soccer the afternoon of Sept. 21 in the notorious crime-ridden Guatemala City neighborhood of El Gallito. According to eyewitnesses, a police patrol vehicle arrived mid-afternoon, and four policemen bundled them into a pick-up truck and took them away. Officials later said no arrest warrant had been issued. Neighbours say no explanation was given for their arrest. Four days later, their bodies were found in a derelict plot of land in Mixco, a sprawling suburb on the outskirts of the capital. They had been shot in the head at point blank range.

At least four of these young men, brothers Óscar Geovanni and Juan Enrique Luna Gómez, aged 21 and 25, Edwin Alexander Alfaro, 22, Herbert Josué Aquil Pérez, 18, and Tomás Eduardo de León, 17, had a criminal record and had served prison sentences for theft, rape and possession of drugs and firearms. Some suspect that they were part of a youth gang.

Police chief Julio Hernández Chávez was forced to admit that by using GPS it had been proven that agent Sabino Ramos Ramírez, inspector Wilson Tobar Valenzuela and two other police agents who have yet to be identified were in El Gallito at the time when the five young men were abducted and were also at the scene of the crime. Ramos Ramírez and Tobar Valenzuela have been arrested and charged with committing an extrajudicial execution and the scandal has forced Hernández Chávez to resign.

Hernández Chávez has been promoted to director of the national police force in March after his predecessor Erwin Sperisen was forced to resign after the murder of

three Salvadoran congressmen and their driver (*LP*, March 7, 2007). Four high-ranking police officers were arrested in connection with the murder and according to government statements, were killed four days later by a death squad, a few hours before the arrival of two FBI agents, who were sent from the United States to assist the Guatemalan authorities with the investigation.

These cases have exposed the extent to which impunity has become part of everyday life in Guatemala. This small Central American country has the highest murder rate per capita in the isthmus after El Salvador, according to official police figures (5,300 murders were reported in Guatemala in 2006), and according to UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions Philip Alston, less than 10 percent of murders in Guatemala result in a criminal conviction, largely due to the corruption and inefficiency of the justice system.

In an attempt to confront this culture of rampant impunity, human rights organizations have lobbied for the creation of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, an independent government body overseen by the UN and financed by voluntary contributions from the international community.

On Aug. 2, the Legislative Assembly approved the body's creation, which will have an initial mandate of two years and will conduct its own investigations and help local institutions, particularly the Attorney General's Office. One of its tasks will be to recommend public policies to help eradicate the illegal armed groups, known as "parallel powers". The CICIG commissioner, Spanish Judge Carlos Castresana, was appointed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and will periodically report to him.

According to leading human rights activist Helen Mack, outside investigators need to be brought in as "much of the country's justice work is too dangerous for Guatemalans, because they can be killed or corrupted. Specialized investigators will come and if they're threatened, they will go home, and new ones will arrive."

As Mack points out, commission is more than ten years in the making, coming out of the "1996 peace accords, which touched upon the idea of tackling impunity, especially by breaking up the death squads".

But approving the commission has not been easy. An earlier version, the Commission to Investigate Illegal Groups and Clandestine Security Organizations, was proposed in January 2004 but was rejected by two congressional committees in May 2004 which considered that the UN's oversight role would violate national sovereignty and was therefore unconstitutional.

Powerful figures, most notably former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), accused of genocide against the Mayan people during the bloodiest phase of the armed conflict in the late 1980s, fear that the full extent of their involvement in human rights abuses and their links with organized crime might come to light.

After years of legal wrangling in the Constitutional Court and in Congress the initial proposal was amended and many of the points on the human rights movement's agenda were left out, such the investigation of anyone who tries to bug telephones used by human activists and the investigation of war crimes, before the courts finally upheld the commission constitutionality in May of this year.

In the end it was agreed that the new commission a watered-down version of the initial proposal, would not be able to investigate crimes retroactively. According to human rights activist Mynor Alvarado, of the Mutual Support Group, this seriously limits the commission's scope as many of those involved in human rights violations during the war are behind many of the crimes that are committed today under a cloak of impunity.

According to Attorney General Juan Luis Florido, the Foreign Ministry and the presidency will decide which cases will be investigated, which raises the question of how effective the body can be if the government can decide that a particular case must not be investigated.

Political analyst and former Foreign Minister Edgar Gutiérrez questions how much the commission, known here by its Spanish initials CICIG, can really achieve. "We are already becoming a "failed state": there are simply no official institutions in the country that can liaise with the international community. Who can CICIG work with? The police? Unthinkable. The Attorney General's Office? No way. CICIG would be trapped like a fly in a spider's web." □

PERU

Voluntary isolation. Survival France, an indigenous-defense organization, has warned that an indigenous group is living in voluntary isolation in the Alto Purús National Park.

The group was spotted by accident on Sept. 18 by a group of specialists from the government-run National Institute of Natural Resources and the Frankfurt Zoological Society as they flew over the banks of the Las Piedras River, looking for illegal loggers.

According to Survival France, there are 15 different indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation in the Peruvian jungle that are under threat from oil exploitation and deforestation.

The organization warned that these populations could easily be killed if they are exposed to outside illnesses from which their bodies lack immunity.

"It's about the most vulnerable citizens in Peru and the government owes them assistance," said Survival France in a statement. "It's time that their territorial rights be recognized and respected, that the oil and gas exploration on their lands be prohibited and that all loggers be kicked out." —*LP*.

MEXICO

Kent Paterson for the Americas Program*

Women forest defenders

Female community members take the reigns of their own environmental organization.

Celsa Baldovinos knew there was a serious problem when only about an inch of water trickled from the irrigation hose.

In the mountains of southern Guerrero state where Baldovinos and her activist husband Felipe Arreaga lived during the 1990s, the small farmers were becoming increasingly alarmed about water supplies. "This was in January and by the next year it was gone," Baldovinos recalls. As the rainfall diminished so did the prospects of the mountain residents. Animals died, crops withered, and the social fabric unraveled.

Baldovinos and her neighbors connected the environmental changes they were witnessing to deforestation. More and more forest cover was disappearing every year as farmers burned hillsides for corn patches and pastures, drug growers torched forest cover to plant their illicit crops, and contractors felled trees for a Boise Cascade Corporation mill that operated on the Pacific Coast at the time.

Long before climate change became a trendy cause, the Campesino Environmentalist Organization of the Sierra of Petatlan and Coyuca de Catalan (OCESP), emerged as a grassroots group in 1997 dedicated to saving Guerrero's forests. Soon, however, the movement faced repression from loggers and the Mexican army. In 2001, jailed OCESP leader Rodolfo Montiel and his friend Teodoro Cabrera were released by Mexican President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) after an international campaign was waged on their behalf by environmentalists and human rights activists (*LP*, June 27 and Sept. 5, 2007).

Arreaga was detained on false charges in November 2004 and freed 10 months later. Other OCESP supporters were killed, arrested, or disappeared.

Now, 10 years after the OCEP burst onto the world stage, Baldovinos and a growing cadre of poor rural women quietly carry on the work of defending and restoring Guerrero's forests, and are even taking the struggle to new levels. Once in the background, women are now in the forefront of the movement.

Founded in 2001, the Women's Environmentalist Organization of the Sierra of Petatlan (OMESP) promotes sustainable and organic agriculture, forest fire prevention, reforestation, water and soil conservation, and recycling. The group has grown from 12 to 90 members, and Baldovinos serves as the president. Infused with a strong self-help ethos, the women largely carry on their work with little more than a great love for the land.

"There's a lot of consciousness among the people. For example, the majority of the people in our group dispose of their garbage properly and don't allow the children to trample too many trees," Baldovinos says. "We're not going to change from day to night, but there is a lot of progress among the people."

Baldovinos' group can take credit for simple but groundbreaking accomplishments during the past six years. In 2003 and 2004, members planted more than 175,000 red cedar trees in the hills. The seeds came from a nursery run by the Mexican army. Some members of the group have found that they can earn a decent side income of as much as US\$3,000 annually from selling tree seeds.

Most of the women environmentalists have family gardens, and Baldovinos and Arreaga are starting a new tree nursery. Beekeeping is another new project viewed with great potential. "People are used to cutting trees and taking away the hive and letting it go to waste," Baldovinos says. "What we're going to do now is put the hive in a box; we're learning how to reproduce many hives from this box."

An environmental outlook is apparent even with young mountain residents like 16-year-old Cristina Cabrera. A soft-spoken young woman, Cabrera says more youth are hearing the green message she's absorbed and put into practice.

"We can make compost with organic trash and dispose of inorganic trash, and we can take care of the trees because they give us water," Cabrera says. "We have to plant a lot of them so there is a lot of water in the future, and animals too."

Outside support for the OMESSP has been spotty. The organization has received some funding from two German foundations but is now seeking additional sources of support. Dealing with government agencies is difficult, Baldovinos says.

But the OMESSP's luck with the bureaucracy could be changing. Salvador Anta Fonseca, the director of Mexico's National Forestry Commission in Guerrero and Oaxaca, has pledged to help the OMESSP access federal programs that help finance tree nurseries and plantations, soil conservation, and reforestation.

Interviewed by *La Jornada* environmental reporter Angela Enciso, Miguel Martínez of the Biological Tropical and Conservation Association estimated that only 5 percent of the nation's tropical forests remain. Tourist development in places like Acapulco, which was once covered with lowland tropical forest, has contributed to the ecocide.

The local consequences of tropical forest loss were tragically borne out during tropical storm Henriette when mudslides and flooding killed or injured victims in Acapulco.

NICARAGUA

Abortion ban leads to deaths.

The ban on therapeutic abortion that has been in place since November of last year has had a devastating impact on women's lives and health, said the New York-based Human Rights Watch organization in a statement.

Eighty pregnant women have died since the law took effect almost a year ago, said Angela Heimburger, a researcher for Human Rights Watch upon presenting the report "Over Their Dead Bodies: Denial of Access to Emergency Obstetric Care and Therapeutic Abortion in Nicaragua" on Oct. 2.

On Oct. 26, 2006, an article in the Penal Code dating back to 1893 that allowed therapeutic abortion when a woman's life was in danger, or in cases of rape, incest or fetal malformation, was struck down by the legislature (*LP*, Dec. 27, 2006) just days before general elections.

The new article establishes prison sentences of four to eight years for a woman who has a therapeutic abortion and for the person who performs it.

Even though the Health Ministry had released detailed obligatory protocols for gynecological emergencies, including medical treatment after miscarriages or induced abortions, Human Rights Watch found that doctors are afraid to act, fearing being performing against the law, which has caused the deaths of numerous pregnant women. —LP.

On a global scale, some recent studies suggest that the cutting down of tropical forests could account for upwards of 30 percent of global warming. President Felipe Calderón's administration has set a goal of planting 250 million trees this year.

Lorena Paz, an organizer for the Mexico City-based Maya Institute, lauds the land-based OMESSP for offering a shining example to city-slickers. "There is a group of people that is taking action to protect the environment in the zones where water and air is produced and where biodiversity is abundant," Paz says. "Informing the urban population about this has an enormous impact, because it educates about the need to take care of the environment in the cities too, of struggling against contamination, and above all of taking care of the water, which goes to enormous waste in the cities." □

*Program at the Center for International Policy

COSTA RICA

María Flórez-Estrada in San José

CAFTA greenlighted

Costa Ricans approve trade pact with the United States in referendum with only 60 percent voter turnout.

Despite a significant disadvantage in funds and airtime, almost half of Costa Rican voters rejected the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA) in the Oct. 7 referendum.

According to official partial results, 51.6 percent voted in favor of the trade pact and almost 48.4 percent against it. Official results will be released Oct. 20.

Almost 40 percent of voters abstained, figures show, topping the 32 percent voter abstention rate in the Feb. 5, 2006 general election (*LP, Feb. 22, 2006*).

The close win was met with a restrained government response because before the pact goes into effect, the legislature will have to approve 12 controversial "implementation" laws before March 2008. The laws, which include measures to end public telecommunications and insurance monopolies, require a majority of 38 votes.

Parties supporting the trade agreement — the governing National Liberation party, Social Christian Unity party, the Libertarian Movement, National Union, National Renewal party and independent Dep. Evita Arguedas — are expected to easily pass these measures. Opposition parties such as the Citizens' Action Party, Broad Front and Accessibility without Exclusion party only total 19 votes.

Opposition lawmakers, led by former presidential candidate Ottón Solís, said they will try to negotiate these laws with the executive branch so that they would include subsidies for small and medium businesses and an increase in the budget for education, science and technology.

Sociologist Ciska Raventós said that "the referendum resolved very little in institutional terms because the process did not create conditions so that all sectors accept the results as valid."

There was a stark disadvantage in the resources that the campaign against the trade pact had compared to the campaign in its favor. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal has also been accused of favoring the pro-CAFTA campaign.

Up until the end of the campaign, the tribunal permitted the government to use public funds to speak in favor of the trade pact in public acts in poor neighborhoods and at businesses. Arias himself plugged the agreement as he handed out housing loans and subsidy checks, while making many promises.

The tribunal also failed to control the emission of certain criteria or political propaganda that in the opinion of some analysts influenced the decision of the population during the 48 supposedly campaign-free hours before the vote.

Messages also came from the United States government at the request of Ambassador Mark Langdale that the country would be at risk if it did not approve the trade accord.

Raventós and fellow sociologist Manuel Solís agreed that the void left by the weakened political party system has been filled by other actors.

"The great success of the 'No' created ties between the people again, within communities," said Solís. He said this was common within the Patriotic Committees, citizens' groups created during the campaign to explain the risks of adhering to CAFTA. "The community wants to recover some kind of 'center,' contact points facing the everyday fears," he said.

"The movement for the 'No' did not lose and the 'Yes' did not have an absolute victory," said Roberto Salom, a professor at the University of Costa Rica. "The fight doesn't stop here and the government knows it. Now, the 'No' has to consolidate new leaderships that have emerged in this process."

In fact, immediately after the results were released debates within these Patriotic Committees were held, where participants declared their intention to maintain their



GUSTAVO RAUJO

Demonstrators protesting CAFTA crowded San Jose's streets.

"The referendum resolved very little in institutional terms because the process did not create conditions so that all sectors accept the results as valid."

— Ciska Raventós

“We have the most outrageous situation. Haiti, the poorest country on the American continent, is one of the top four importers of rice from the United States.”

— Camille Chalmers

resistance against the free trade agreement and its implementation.

Sociologist Lucy Gutiérrez says that abstention was so high because both campaigns “failed to reach those who feel indifferent toward politics.”

But she said that a new factor is the participation of young voters.

“We’re hoping that the participation of these young people doesn’t stop here. Their participation in the Patriotic Committees is part of new ways of doing nonpartisan politics that indicate processes of change in Costa Rican society,” she added.

Commentator Carlos Sandoval said that “in perspective, there could be a generational replacement” in political processes here. □

HAITI

Charles Arthur in Port-au-Prince

Standing up to the EPA threat

Rights groups urge government to back out of trade pact with European Union.

Haitian development and human rights organizations in Haiti are campaigning against the signing of a new trade relationship with the European Union (EU) that they say will strike a further blow against the country’s already ailing economy.

An Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and the 16 Caribbean nations grouped together as Cariforum is due to be signed by the end of this year.

The Haitian government has indicated that it is ready to sign, but Haitian organizations, including those representing peasant farmers, say the agreement — which will eliminate tariffs on goods traded between signatory nations — will destroy the country’s agricultural sector, which provides a livelihood for around two-thirds of the country’s 8 million people.

Campaigners stress that the Haitian economy needs more protection, not less.

The EU has been negotiating these trade agreements for five years with groups of mostly former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. The EPAs are set to



Many groups here say that a trade pact with the EU would destroy Haiti’s agriculture sector.

replace the existing trade structure, the Cotonou Convention that expires on Dec. 31 of this year. EU negotiators state that the agreements will help these countries to develop their economies, many of which rely on basic commodity exports, and will help foster regional markets by attracting foreign investment.

But a newly-formed coalition of nine Haitian organizations and networks, *Bare APE* in Creole, or “Block the EPA,” disagrees. On Sept. 26, the coalition, which includes the Tèt Kole peasant movement and the Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development, launched a campaign of demonstrations, workshops, and meetings with government entities and international organizations.

“This mobilization will allow various sectors of our nation to continue to consider the

best ways to arrive at an alternative, sustainable development by protecting the vital sectors of national production, and to prevent the European Union from mortgaging this country's chances of development," the coalition said in a statement on the eve of the campaign launch.

One of the driving forces behind the campaign is Camille Chalmers, director of the Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development. He points to the case of rice, the staple diet of the vast majority of Haitians, stating that the reduction of protective tariffs on imported rice and the absence of state support for rice farmers over recent decades have already taken their toll.

"Haiti was self-sufficient in food until 1972. In 1985 we produced 123,000 metric tons of rice, but the latest figures for 2006 indicate we produced just 76,000 metric tons and imported 342,000 metric tons," he said. "We have the most outrageous situation. Haiti, the poorest country on the American continent, is one of the top four importers of rice from the United States. If the trend continues, we will witness the disappearance of rice production, and 120,000 people will become unemployed."

Another critic of the proposed EPA is Jean-Baptiste Charles, the director of the dairy production program of the Veterimed organization that helps peasant farmers to improve production. Veterimed's dairy production program has revitalized milk production, but Charles laments the fact that "theoretically we have enough milk to supply national demand, yet we are continuing to import milk to the cost of around US\$30 million a year."

Charles says his organization sees the industrialized countries subsidizing their producers and then their cheaper products invade the markets of countries like Haiti. The result is that Haitian farmers are forced out of business.

"We see four basic areas of Haitian agricultural production: sugar cane, rice, chickens, and chicken eggs — and over recent years we estimate that 830,000 jobs have been lost." Chalmers says the impact of the EPA and the total opening of the Haitian economy to foreign imports will hit not just the agricultural sector but the whole country's chances of development.

"The EPAs will deliver multiple blows to the economies of poor countries like Haiti. There will be a budgetary blow because the elimination of import tariffs will reduce the resources that each state needs to finance development and public services, thus creating an even greater dependence on the international finance institutions." The Haitian government itself has taken little interest in the EPA negotiation process and until recently had mandated the CARICOM regional body — of which it is one of the 15 members — to negotiate on its behalf.

In one of the few public statements about the EPA process, in late April at a meeting convened by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Maguy Durcé, appeared to embrace the EPA, stating, "The moment has come for us to set to work, to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses, and in particular to face up to the competition from regional and European companies, and especially the requirements of reciprocal engagements."

With the Haitian government dependent on loans and grants from international finance institutions that are, in turn, disbursed on condition that the government refrains from erecting protective trade barriers, there appears little likelihood that the anti-EPA campaigners can stop the process.

However, as the Dec. 31 deadline approaches, the failure of European and Caribbean trade negotiators to agree on many matters of principle and detail, despite years of discussion, has cast a shadow over the EPA. The Haitian campaigners will be hoping for more time to pressure their government to reconsider the agreement's implications. □

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

Decent housing for country's poorest

Rights group fights for low-cost housing.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina's most prominent human rights movement, is leading an ambitious popular housing construction project for the marginalized populations of Buenos Aires. By late August, almost 50 of the 1,500 houses planned in the Plan Sueños Compartidos, or "Shared Dreams Plan," had been constructed on the outskirts of the capital.

"We haven't resigned our commitment to the past and demand for justice for the victims of the dictatorship [1976-83]. We understand that with this plan we're fulfilling the legacy of our disappeared children and we are trying to expand our experience to the whole country, allowing other social entities to use our technology, experience and technicians," said Hebe de Bonafini, the group's president.

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

Few advances in fight against corruption. Fighting corruption continues to be a big challenge for Latin American and Caribbean countries, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2007 conducted by the organization Transparency International.

The report, which was released Sept. 26 and analyzed 180 countries, said a third of the region's nations' residents see corruption as rampant.

The index is based on public surveys of experts on their perceptions of corruption in the public sector, with a score of 0 (most corrupt) to 10 (very transparent). —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN Corruption Perceptions Index

Country	Rank	Score
Haiti	177	1.6
Venezuela	162	2.0
Ecuador	150	2.1
Paraguay	138	2.4
Honduras	131	2.5
Nicaragua	123	2.6
Guyana	123	2.6
Guatemala	111	2.8
Bolivia	105	2.9
Argentina	105	2.9
Belize	99	3.0
Dominican Rep.	99	3.0
Panama	94	3.2
Jamaica	84	3.3
Brazil	72	3.5
Peru	72	3.5
Mexico	72	3.5
Suriname	72	3.5
Colombia	68	3.8
El Salvador	67	4.0
Cuba	61	4.2
Costa Rica	46	5.0
Uruguay	25	6.7
Chile	22	7.0

Source: Transparency International

COLOMBIA/ECUADOR

Impact of fumigations. The fumigation of coca crops along the Colombian and Ecuadorian borders must cease until Colombian President Álvaro Uribe can show that the chemicals used are harmless, warned a high-ranking United Nations official.

"Colombia must not jeopardize the enjoyment of the right to health in Ecuador. It must do no harm to its neighbor," said Paul Hunt, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health. Hunt is in charge of providing a report, requested by the Ecuadorian government, on the impact of the fumigations on the local population's health.

Uribe's government has said that there is "no scientific doubt" that the spraying of the herbicide glyphosate has innocuous impacts on health, and has demanded that Ecuador demonstrate the effects.

Ecuadorian officials have said the population that lives within 3 kilometers (1.9 miles) of the spraying runs a risk six to eight times higher of genetic damages than the population that lives 80 kilometers (50 miles) away.

Ecuador has repeatedly threatened to take the case to the International Court of Justice and has demanded that Colombia observe a no-spray zone within 10 kilometers of the border. —IPS.

The group has an agreement with the city's government in the Ciudad de la Luz neighborhood. The name "Ciudad Oculta" or "Dark City," was adopted by its residents themselves when Argentina hosted (and won) the 1978 Soccer World Cup. The dictatorship government erected a wall around the neighborhood so visitors would not see the poverty-stricken conditions.

The Shared Dreams Plan uses an Italian building method using expanded polystyrene, steel and cement. In five months, a US\$15,000-housing unit, of 70 square meters (753 square feet) is completed and furnished with a refrigerator, water heater and gas stove.

Before signing the contract with the city government, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo first needed to win a bid for which also five big construction companies competed. The homes cost is half of what the government pays in its Federal Housing Plan, a state-sponsored program aimed at curbing the housing crisis (*LP*, 20 Sept. 2006), but which doesn't include houses lack appliances nor community services.

"In deciding we did not only take the cost into account, which is notably less, but also the social content implied by the Mothers' proposal that the houses are equipped and each development has community services, two things that were not planned; the work is done by the future occupants: men and women in equal number, who are provided with training, a wage double of that on the market and three meals a day," said Jorge Telerman, head of the Buenos Aires government.

When they signed the agreement, the Mothers demanded that they be able to select the future tenants — people with disabilities and neighborhood residents — and promote the unionization of their workers, mainly chronically unemployed who scraping a living by scavenging and lacked social security benefits, medical care or pension plans.

While the first 48 housing units were being building, the construction plan in Ciudad de la Luz is focused on the repair of what residents here call the "White Elephant," a giant white building that was going to house a public hospital before the project was abandoned in the mid-20th century. It became a big hovel, home to heavy drug-trafficking and use.

When the 48 homes were handed over on Aug. 24, the White Elephant started to play an important social role: the building now houses a cafeteria for the workers, a medical clinic, a day care center for workers' children, three nursery schools, an auditorium, a community laundry room, and it's the meeting place of mothers' groups dedicated to fighting their children's drug addictions.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo also created a factory to satisfy the demand for other community housing projects, producing polystyrene panels, wrapped in woven steel, covered in cement.

Because the houses are built with light materials, they do not require foundations or concrete beams. The floor is put in and then the panels are installed. When the cement is forged the panels become an excellent insulator for heat and noise. They are fireproof and anti-seismic.

"I'm building houses where my family and hundreds of other families will live," said Fabiana Flores, a 26-year-old mother of three. "I was working in a restaurant until I started working here, from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., with one hour of rest. They paid me 100 pesos a week [\$33] and gave me no benefit. Now I'm a skilled construction worker, I earn 315 pesos a week [\$100] and they give me pension and social benefits."

Darío Corbalán, a Ciudad de la Luz resident, said he and his neighbors were fed up with the unfulfilled promises of the political leaders every election season.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo "came to revolutionize the neighborhood. Now there's work, our children eat well, the criminals of the White Elephant were forced out, and we see that it's true that we're going to have our houses with light, hot water and good furniture." □

URUGUAY

Pablo Long in Montevideo

Seeking a vote to end impunity

Social organizations launch campaign to annul infamous law.

Union members, students, rights and social organizations are collecting signatures to hold a plebiscite on whether to an impunity law benefiting dictatorship-era military officers should be annulled.

Luis Puig, secretary-general of human rights for the PIT-CNT union, said that since President Tabaré Vázquez took office in 2005 (*LP*, March 9, 2005) there have been improvements in ending impunity of crimes committed during the 1973-85 dictatorship, such as extradition of military officers, arrests and the indictment of former dictator Juan María Bordaberry (1972-76) (*LP*, Dec. 13, 2006), but he says "that's not enough."

The impunity law was approved without legislative debate in the early hours of Dec. 22, 1986, the day the first group of military officers were scheduled to appear in court.

President Julio María Sanguinetti (1985-90 and 1995-2000) had been threatened by the military with a new coup that would put an end to the country's return to democracy, only nine months old at that point.

The current campaign, which began Sept. 4, proposes nullifying some articles of the law so that cases against human rights could proceed.

Participants include the Federation of University Students of Uruguay, Amnesty International, the Peace and Justice Service, the Legal and Social Studies Institute, sectors of the ruling Broad Front political party and two lawmakers from the right-wing *Blanco* Party, as well as cultural, sports and entertainment celebrities.

Fifty-four percent of Uruguayans ratified the law in 1989, but many were fearful of rumors that the country was on the brink of a new military coup, spread by the traditional *Colorado* and *Blanco* parties.

"That situation and the current one are totally different. The military and the right-wing parties cannot impose that climate of terror again because the jailing of some military officers, the extradition of others and the imprisonment of Bordaberry have proven that there is no destabilizing power in the barracks," said lawyer Oscar López Goldaracena, who wrote the plebiscite text.

Campaign participants are confident that Uruguayans will vote to overturn the law, now that "abhorrent facts" are known about the dictatorship that were unknown at the time of the 1989 vote, such as the discovery of clandestine graves, where torture victims were buried (*LP*, Dec. 28, 2005), the existence of hundreds of victims kidnapped in Argentina as well as the kidnapping of the infant children of the detainees.

Until Vázquez took office in 2005, no other Uruguayan president made use of a provision in the law that excludes civilians from its protections and allows also the executive branch to exclude from these protections the cases of kidnapping and disappearances of children and crimes committed outside national territory under Operation Condor.

But even though Vázquez has indeed used this power, hundreds of military and police officers have still not been charged with dictatorship-era crimes and are enjoying impunity under the controversial law.

Since the return to democracy in 1985, Presidents Sanguinetti, Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-95) of the *Blanco* Party and Jorge Batlle (2000-2005) of the *Colorado* Party, all considered that observing this law would put democratic institutions in jeopardy by inviting pressure from the military.

For López Goldaracena "it's very good that the resolution of such a fundamental topic is left in the citizens' hands, but a firm ethical stance of the judges would be enough to strike down the impunity law since it's unconstitutional because it violates international agreements Uruguay has signed that established that there can be no amnesty nor statute of limitations for crimes against humanity."

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights warned Uruguay in 1992 that the law was incompatible with the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and the American Convention on Human Rights.

The Commission said that Uruguay cannot be punished, but that "its decisions and sentences are judicially and morally obligatory, which is why we have recommended to the Uruguayan state to adopt the measures necessary to clear up the facts and make clear who is responsible for the human rights violations that occurred during the de facto government," said Florentín Meléndez, the Commission's president.

During the campaign, which also involves countries with significant numbers of Uruguayans, participants are seeking more than 250,000 signatures, equal to 10 percent of the electorate, to hold the plebiscite. □

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
Inter Press Service

Remittances for development

Most money sent from abroad is used to purchase food.

Civil society organizations suggest that a plan be designed so that the money sent home by Dominicans abroad, known as remittances, will be used to foment development instead of simply going towards daily expenses.

The idea is "to deepen public reflection and debate to optimise the impact of remittances on the development of the national economy," says a document by the Asociación Tú, Mujer, or "You, Woman" Association, in English, which is carrying out the Proyecto Remesas y Codesarrollo (Remittances and Co-development Project) under the sponsorship of international organizations.

inbrief

- The Los Dogos team of **Argentina** won the gay soccer world cup when it shut out British team Stonewall 1-0 on Sept. 29. The tournament was held Sept. 23-29 in Buenos Aires with 28 teams from 14 countries including Chile, Mexico and Uruguay.

- The Supreme Court of **Brazil** ordered the armed forces to open its secret archives to disclose the whereabouts of Brazilians who were killed or went missing during the 1964-85 dictatorship. The court gave the military 120 days to reveal where the bodies were buried, and exhume their remains and move them to the cemeteries requested by their relatives.

- The government of **Chile** announced the discovery of a mass grave on Sept. 25 that supposedly contains the bodies of 22 *campesinos* killed in October 1973 in the so-called Paine massacre, 45 kilometers south of Santiago. Officials used a witness' tip to find the site.

- Journalist Salvador Sánchez, a correspondent for the YSUCA, Mi Gente, Sonoro and Maya Visión radio stations, was murdered in **El Salvador** Sept. 20. The 38-year-old was a harsh critic of the government, and criticized the lack of efficiency in stopping gangs from extorting people.

- Between January and September of this year, 1,908 people have been killed tied to organized crime in **Mexico**, according to a study published in the daily *El Universal*, a 19 percent increase compared to the same period in 2006. The highest number of murders was registered in May with 327.

“Neither senders nor receivers have been integrated into the formal financial sector” in a market dominated by “a handful of money transmitter companies”.

— Lenora Suki

Legislators, ministers, the representative of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and delegates of civil society groups met Tuesday in a conference organized by the Association.

“We have to find mechanisms so that remittances are used more efficiently towards social development, and in the fight against poverty,” said Carmen Julia Gómez, the Association’s director of research and the head of the Remittances and Co-development Project.

“We are concerned that they are almost completely used for direct consumption: buying food and clothing, and paying for education,” said Gómez. “That’s a good thing, but there are other uses that could be of greater help to the families with respect to pulling out of poverty in the long-term,” she added.

During the Meeting on Remittances and Development Sept. 18 in Santo Domingo, Carmen Moreno, director of the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), said that “the issue of remittances shows a new phenomenon in the relationship between rich and poor countries that requires the need to push the concept of co-development. It’s important to cooperate in projects marked by broader policies between countries of the migrants’ origin and the receiving countries so that remittances can have a greater impact on development.”

Studies show that only 5 percent of remittances are saved or invested in small businesses, while larger percentages go towards education (17 percent), clothing, food and other day-to-day expenses.

Another issue of concern is the large chunk taken out by money transfer companies — a commission that ranges between 8 and 12 percent.

An estimated 1.5 million Dominicans live abroad, mainly in the United States, and in 2005, the Dominican Republic received some 2.7 billion dollars in remittances.

Immigrants living in the United States sent back an estimated \$62.3 billion in remittances to their home countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2006, and no fewer than \$12 billion remained in banks or money transferring companies (*LP, May 2, 2007*).

In September, immigrant groups in the United States boycotted Western Union, the largest international money transfer company.

According to the 2006 UN-INSTRAW study on “Gender, Remittances and Development: The Case of Women Migrants from Vicente Noble, Dominican Republic”, 59 percent of that total comes from the United States, 30 percent from Spain and nine percent from Puerto Rico (*LP, Oct. 4, 2006*).

The study found that three in five Dominicans who migrate to Spain are women, and that even though the remittances can help alleviate poverty, their ability to spur development are limited.

“The majority of small businesses women open when they return to the Dominican Republic have low productivity and profitability because of the lack of loan and technical training programs,” says the study.

“Neither senders nor receivers have been integrated into the formal financial sector,” says Lenora Suki of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in her 2004 study “Financial Institutions and the Remittances Market in the Dominican Republic.”

Furthermore, “Recipients have neither incentives nor options for saving a portion of their remittance transfers” in a market dominated by “a handful of money transmitter companies”.

Besides, home delivery is the norm, which drives up the cost of money transfers, says Suki, who adds that “Improving the intermediation of remittances can increase savings mobilization.”

The latest national census, carried out in 2002, showed that 10.2 percent of Dominican households received remittances. Other studies, however, put the proportion closer to 40 percent of the population of this Caribbean island nation of nine million people.

Remittances contribute close to 10 percent of the Dominican Republic’s gross domestic product, which amounted to 28.1 billion dollars in 2006, and they are equivalent to 47 percent of the exports from industrial free zones and 62 percent of tourism revenues.

Mar García, UN-INSTRAW’s research specialist for migration and remittances issues, told IPS that encouraging people to open bank accounts with their remittances would help foment savings.

García suggests that agreements be reached by the migrants’ countries of origin and destination, to regulate remittances and help channel them towards development. “It’s a matter of political will,” she said.

“The countries should reach a consensus. It’s clear that migrants benefit the countries that take them in, and they contribute to both economies,” she said. □

SOUTH AMERICA

Cecilia Remón in Lima

Erasing borders

An 11-member team with all terrain vehicles tries to unite the continent.

More than 30,000 kilometers (19,000 miles), 10 countries in 100 days. That's the itinerary of the Continente de Colores, or "Continent of Colors" project.

The initiative, a project of the Venezuelan Fundación Desdibujando Fronteras, or "Erasing Borders Foundation," plans to course through five continents over the next five years to get to know the culture and history of each country.

The project will visit Africa in 2008.

This year's trip began Sept. 10 in Caracas, Venezuela, following then to Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil. Participants will return to Venezuela on Dec. 15.

"The peoples of South America share origin, struggles for their sovereignty before the conquest and colonization, religion, festivals, rituals, music and customs," says the project's statement. "They share strategic natural resources, such as the Amazon Rainforest, the Andes, immense coasts of two oceans, the Atlantic and Pacific."

"The purity of the air, the beauty of its countryside, the variety of its climates, rivers, water reserves, the knowledge of different cultures also unites them. They only need to know and exchange their cultural values to truly unite and that way create one Grand Homeland," the statement adds.

While the group passed through the Peruvian capital, Lima, on Oct. 5, Gerardo García, general coordinator of the project, said that the spirit of the expedition is to "know, integrate."

"The issue of the union is crucial, transcendental," he said. "It's erasing the borders of ignorance. The cultural diversity that we have in food, music, accents, clothes is always surprising."

García said that he learned things on the trip that his education did not give him.

"How is it possible that in my education they made me to ignore Patagonia?" he asked.

He underlined the need to unify educational criteria to avoid that students have to be reinstructed when traveling to different countries.

Continente de Colores is funded by the Venezuelan government, but young participants say there are no ideological tendencies, and that the trip is essentially cultural.

In each place, participants will make audio and television recordings that will go into a free public archive, García explained.

The crew includes 10 Venezuelans and an Argentine, traveling in four all-terrain vehicles that were designed specifically for the trip in Venezuela.

Valentín Tirado, one of the drivers, said the vehicle, the Tiuna, "can ride in the mountains, coast and jungle. It runs on gasoline and each one has a miniature television and radio studio, a Global Positioning System and a personal computer."

Tirado said that the vehicles' greatest challenge will be in Brazil where the roads are the roughest.

Marcelo Marzano, the only Argentine in the team, said that the central idea is "about traveling the whole South American continent during which we intend promoting the union of peoples through their own identities, their realities, their struggles, their history, their present, from their organizations, their media."

"We want to meet social groups and organizations of each place we cover in order to get to know its reality through them, and make recordings and films which we will be also showing in each community we visit," he added.

The audiovisual material, which will be ready for mid-2008, will include information about integration processes in South America, such as the Andean Community of Nations and the Southern Common Market (*LP*, Nov. 29, 2006). □

"The issue of the union is crucial, transcendental. It's erasing the borders of ignorance."

— Gerardo García

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