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Latinamerica Press is a bi-weekly (fortnightly) journal of information and analysis from Latin America and the Caribbean, with emphasis on the issues that affect marginalized populations within the region. Spanish version: **Noticias Aliadas**

The journal is produced by **COMUNICACIONES ALIADAS**, a Peru-based non governmental organization that for more than 40 years has been producing independent and reliable information and analysis. Our objective is to demonstrate the situation facing excluded and marginalized sectors of the population within Latin America and the Caribbean.

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GUUSTAVO TORRES GONZÁLEZ

VENEZUELA

José Orozco in Caracas

"No" to reforms

Venezuelans turn down Chávez's sweeping constitutional reform.

On Dec. 2 Venezuelan voters rejected President Hugo Chávez's proposal to overhaul Venezuela's Constitution by 51 to 49 percent, the leader's first electoral defeat since taking office in 1999. It was a loss of nearly 3 million votes compared to his re-election victory last December.

The referendum results reflected the electorate's worries about Chávez's proposals to scrap term limits and take on wide powers, even though the leader currently controls practically all branches of government.

"Having majority support doesn't represent a blank check to do as he likes," said Margarita López Maya, a historian at the Central University of Venezuela. "You can't impose that vision without a debate."

The results also expressed widespread discontent, even among Chávez's supporters, over such issues as violent crime — gun deaths have almost tripled since Chávez entered power from 4,550 in 1998 to 12,257 in 2006.

"Instead of sending officials to march every three minutes, he has to govern," added López Maya.

Hours before the results were announced, according to opposition daily *Tal Cual*, pro-Chávez lawmaker Luis Gamargo admitted defeat at the electoral body headquarters in downtown Caracas. Analysts have speculated Chávez may have asked for the results to be delayed to prepare a strategic speech.

Echoing the speech he made after his failed 1992 coup attempt, carried out when he was an army colonel, Chávez accepted defeat before a national television audience, but refused to give up on his vision of 21st century socialism.

"For now, we could not do it," said Chávez. In 1992, Chávez told the nation in a live television address that "for now" he and his co-conspirators had not accomplished their mission. He went on to win the presidency in 1998 and enjoys high popularity.

The abstention rate was high in the Dec. 2 vote — 44 percent compared to only 30 percent in Chávez's landslide re-election last year (*LP*, Dec. 13, 2006). Some analysts said many Chávez supporters stayed home rather than vote against their leader. Skilled at using polarization to close ranks against political enemies, Chávez again turned to this tactic late in the campaign.

About a week before the vote, he told supporters: "Whoever says he will support Chávez, but will vote 'No' is a true traitor... If you are really with me, vote 'Yes.' The person who votes 'No,' votes against me, against the revolution and against the people."

But instead of rallying around their leader, Chávez's polarization tactic seems to have

kept many supporters at home rather than feel they were betraying their leader.

Despite the thinnest of margins, opposition leader Gerardo Blyde sees the abstention reflecting a much broader rejection of Chávez's political vision.

Among 16 million registered voters, less than 4.4 million supported the constitutional overhaul. That means only one of every four possible voters supported Chávez's plans to transform Venezuelan society, according to Blyde, with the other three rejecting what he calls the "authoritarian socialist state."

For Chávez and his most devoted supporters, the constitutional overhaul would have given Venezuelans more power through community councils, which receive state funding for works projects and are envisioned as developing into a new form of local government (*LP*, Sept. 5, 2007).

"If there's a problem, we find the solution," said Elizabeth Graterol, a 39-year-old widow and single mother in Petare, a sprawling area of shantytowns in Caracas, on the day of the vote.

More specifically, Chávez's electoral loss reflected widespread doubts on his proposals regarding private property, the scrapping of term limits and even the May decision not to renew the license of RCTV, a private TV network radically opposed to Chávez (*LP*, June 13, 2007), according to Luis Vicente León, director of Datanalisis, a leading polling firm.

"Even though a lot of supporters didn't like the RCTV closing, Chávez did it anyway," said León. "It was his first unpopular move and created a fracture. Then came the proposal and these people were looking at what direction Chávez wanted to go in."

During the campaign, Caracas shantytowns were awash in rumors about the overhaul paving the way for expropriations of private property. Many poor slum dwellers build small compounds with several units, making them humble but proud proprietors and encouraging them to aspire to more. Datanalisis polls show a large majority of Venezuelans rejecting incursions on private property.

"Those radical ideological elements are not the basis of his popularity," said Leon.

That popularity owes itself to Chávez's social programs whose beneficiaries include Graterol, 39. Along with Mercal, government-subsidized food stores, Graterol has benefited from government programs providing free education and health (*LP*, Jan. 24, 2007).

"Thanks to the government, I can be operated on," said Graterol. "Before, you couldn't get an operation even if you were dying. How was I going to pay for a costly operation?"

A key factor in Chávez's defeat was the vigorous and defiant student movement.

Unlike the opposition's leaders, the student movement enjoys credibility and has given many Venezuelans something to believe in. The students have repeatedly marched to the country's parliament, the top court and other symbolic points deep inside pro-Chávez areas, giving the opposition a voice and a measure of respect.

Fiercely independent, the movement has shrugged off the come-ons by opposition leaders eager to capitalize on the students' political capital. The students represent a bewildering opponent for the government, which typically dismisses the opposition by calling them coup-mongers. The opposition briefly unseated Chávez in a 2002 coup attempt that sunk their credibility.

Along with the student movement, Chávez allies turned critics like Raul Baduel, a retired general and former defense minister, and Ismael Garcia, the leader of the Podemos party and a long-time Chávez ally, gave the widespread discontent in Venezuela a public face and voice. No doubt, Baduel and Garcia encouraged moderate Chávez supporters to express that discontent or at least stay home.

Not that Chávez has gone away. He maintains his program.

"I won't erase a single comma from this proposal, this proposal continues," said Chávez in his speech accepting defeat. Chávez has over seven months of special decree powers (the National Assembly granted him 18 months to rule by decree last February), which he will likely use to implement some aspects of his program. But Chávez's moves will be circumscribed by the 1999 Constitution and will face much more skepticism, including from among his own supporters. □

PARAGUAY

Gustavo Torres in Asuncion

Freedom of speech at risk

Community radio stations face obstacles, raising concerns of curbed press freedom.

Community radio stations, the principal medium in Paraguay's organized popular sectors, have recently reported harassment by government authorities.

"Community radio stations have been part of the cause for more than 14 years. Despite the fall of the dictatorship [of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-89)], the government continues to act dictatorially toward the media. Alternative communication is condemned to disappear under the current regulations," said Marcos Ibáñez, president of the Community Radio Cooperative of Paraguay, or Coopradio, a group of some 150 stations.

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LATIN AMERICA

Ombudsmen network. Amid rising social conflicts, representatives from 18 Ibero-American ombudsman's offices have agreed to form a control network to prevent and confront these conflicts that often end in violence.

The network was created during the XII Ibero-American Federation of Ombudsmen Annual Congress, in Lima, Peru, Nov. 20-23. The declaration was signed by officials from Andorra, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico and Venezuela.

Signatories stressed that the most common cases of conflict in Latin America are tied to extractive industries (mining and hydrocarbons), land demarcation and demands for access to basic services due to the government's weak presence in broad social sectors.

"This effort will contribute to channeling conflicts through legal procedures or through dialogue, so that they do not end in violent acts that affect the governance of our countries," said Rolando Luque, head of the Peruvian Ombudsman's Conflicts Unit. —*IPS*.

LATIN AMERICA/ THE CARIBBEAN

Not one more! The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) presented on Nov. 26 its report "Not One More! Women's Right to a Life Free of Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean."

According to the study, conducted by a group of United Nations organizations with ECLAC, four of every 10 women in Nicaragua and Peru experience physical violence from their husbands; more than 900 Chilean women were killed between 1990 and 2007 by their partner or ex-partner; in the Bahamas, female homicides represented 42 percent of the total homicides in 2000, 44 percent in 2001 and 53 percent in 2002.

In Costa Rica, domestic violence accounted for 61 percent of the total female homicides; in El Salvador, half of the cases of violence toward women reported by the press in 2005 ended in murder; in Puerto Rico, 31 women were murdered as a result of domestic violence in 2004; and in Uruguay a woman dies every nine days due to domestic violence.

The report highlights the need for violence toward women to be a central objective in public agendas since it represents an abuse of human rights as well as an obstacle for development.

"It is necessary to advance public policy that highlights the government's duty to protect women from violence," the report says. —LP.

Although the Telecommunications law of 1995 recognizes the legality of community radio stations as a new sector in Paraguayan radio, their work is hindered by bureaucratic obstacles. They face open legal persecution, such as orders issued to close stations or to confiscate their transmission equipment.

In June 2006, press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders reported police intervention in the southern department of Caaguazú against community radio station Manantial FM in Carayo and Tenonde FM in Coronel Oviedo.

"These acts of retaliation are even more unjustifiable and absurd because both stations are negotiating with the National Telecommunications Commission [CONATEL] to obtain authorization to broadcast, proof of their respect for the law. Paraguayan authorities, and in first place CONATEL, should adapt to international recommendations for freedom of expression and concede to the local communities' demands to have a space for their voice," said Reporters Without Borders in a statement.

There are currently more than 250 community-run radio stations — important sources of information on protests and spreading social organizations' demands — that currently face harassment from governmental agencies.

CONATEL has approved a signal no stronger than 50 watts to community radios for urban areas — which would provide a signal coverage of no more than 2,500 square meters (8,202 square feet) or 15 blocks — and 300 watts for rural areas in the country's interior.

"They have reduced us to poverty by setting our signal strength at 50 watts for our community radio broadcasting services," complained Ibáñez.

For the Central department, Paraguay's most populous, CONATEL said it would authorize only three frequencies for the nearly 40 radio stations that had presented requests for accreditation. The radio stations that will function under CONATEL will have low signal strength and other limitations.

"Communication also depends on the political change and the rise of the popular struggle so that the state recognizes these radio stations' work," Ibáñez said. "It is an eminent political issue. The government marginalizes community communication, granting them little coverage so that they do not become actors in society; it is an unfair regulation."

Ibáñez says that the different guilds representing the community radio stations — among them the Paraguayan Association of Community Communication — are asking for a concession of 1,000 watts for the interior of Paraguay and 300 watts for urban areas. They also propose a division between neighborhood, local, and regional radios.

Adolfo Giménez, a journalist and editor for *Diario Popular*, said that "alternative media — and I refer to radio stations — fulfill an extremely important role when they represent an organized community or any social organization, although their reach may be limited in comparison to bigger media networks."

However, the majority of community radio stations that have received legal accreditation to broadcast do not belong to social organizations, but rather political sectors with close ties to the current government.

The Paraguayan Association of Community Communication reported that in December 2006, CONATEL granted authorization to almost 50 community stations, and 80 percent of them were owned by the ruling *Colorado* Party front people, businesspeople who use these stations for profit, and religious sects.

"These accreditations were granted in a supposed process of regularization, when in reality, political relationships took priority and excluded those who really wanted to work on participation and other actions in their communities," reported Coopradio. □

BOLIVIA

Martin Garat in La Paz

Class struggle or regional clash?

New constitution polarizes the country.

"MAS policies economically benefit the popular sectors, primarily from rural areas, while the opposition is headed by economic groups that seek to protect their interests," said political analyst César Rojas, referring to the conflict caused by the new charter that was proposed by Bolivian President Evo Morales' Movement To Socialism party, or MAS.

After several weeks of standstill, the Constitutional Assembly finally managed to meet Nov. 23-24, although this required transferring the representatives to military quarters for safety.

In a tense environment with no opposition present, MAS first approved the general guidelines of the new constitution as police and protesters clashed in the city of Sucre, where the assembly was being held.

Sucre — Bolivia's political capital — demanded that government headquarters be returned to the city, after they were transferred to La Paz after a civil war over 100 years ago. But the issue was left out of the draft constitution after MAS vetoed the discussion in the assembly, which unleashed violent protests from Sucre residents that claimed three

lives before the police left the city.

On Dec. 9 in the city of Oruro, the assembly — with scant participation of the opposition — approved the new constitution five days before the assembly's legal term expired. Before going into effect, the new constitution must be approved in a national referendum, though no date has been fixed as of yet.

MAS's constitutional proposal includes the recognition of Bolivian diversity, argues Rojas.

"The proposal recognizes the indigenous community economy, as well as state and private economies. While it creates departmental autonomy, it also creates regional and indigenous community autonomy. You could say that it is an elaborate constitution, where various very different elements coexist," he said.

The new text declares Bolivia "a plurinational" state, that the country's 36 indigenous peoples are considered nations. It also guarantees private property when its use does not endanger collective interests.

Analyst José Antonio Quiroga warned that the proposal might be rejected by a considerable part of the country.

"In the east they think that MAS is imposing their constitution in an undemocratic way. There is a danger that, subject to plebiscite, the constitutional project will earn approval at a national level, but will lose in various departments. This situation would leave the government with an enormous problem of legitimacy and governance."

"Bolivia is a very centralist country and MAS is hypercentralist in its concept of the state, which has created strong opposition in several regions. While there are class contradictions in the conflict, the dispute between local and central power is key to understanding what's happening to Bolivia," he added.

Both sides of the confrontation show a high level of organization, even though it is not channeled through political parties. Behind the government are the social and indigenous movements, based in the west. Other important groups are the coca producers and urban marginalized sectors, principally in the city El Alto (*LP, July 25, 2007*), which offer strong support to the government. These popular movements see in President Morales a "class brother."

In turn, the opposition is formed by right-wing governors, citizen groups and civic committees who cohere to businessmen and landowners with great capacity to mobilize.

Factions routinely resort to force — marches, regional strikes and closing highways — in order to impose their demands. On occasion, adversary groups confront each other in the streets or clash with police, as occurred in Sucre.

"The constant mobilization is due to the absence of political mechanisms for mediation. The political parties have been replaced by new actors who only know means of pressure as a way of being heard," explained Quiroga.

Though the country has a governance problem and the government has little presence in opposition departments, the regime's stability is not in danger, according to Rojas.

"The government has lost credibility due to the strong protests and violence. In the medium term, it may experience a decline in support. The opposition has gotten stronger, but is very fragmented and lacks a public figure to bring it together. For now, Evo Morales does not have a political rival," he said.

Rojas and Quiroga agree that neither the government nor the opposition is capable of defeating the other. The mobilizations in the street are a way to measure forces before sitting to negotiate.

Both sides are in need of a new constitution. If the current process fails, the east would still lack autonomy and MAS would have to abandon its ambitions to "refund" Bolivia and end historic injustice.

The MAS proposal includes consecutive presidential reelection. In theory, Morales could be elected to two more terms since his current term would be voided under the new charter.

"It is decisive for the political survival of MAS that the president can be reelected at least once more," commented Rojas. □

BOLIVIA/BRAZIL/PERU

Barbara J. Fraser in Brazileia, Brazil

Troubled Amazon corner

Grassroots forum attempts to alleviate negative impacts of Interoceanic Highway.

Marcos Chambilla Copari recalls arriving in the village of San Lorenzo, in the southwestern Peruvian rainforest, in 1986, a refugee from flooding around Lake Titicaca in Peru's southern highlands.

"There was no road to get our products to market," he said. "Everything rotted in the field."

Two decades later, he is happy to see the Interoceanic Highway being paved from the Peruvian-Brazilian border in the southwestern Amazon over the Andes to the Pacific coast (*LP, Dec. 28, 2005*).

ARGENTINA

Forestland law approved. Pressure exerted by civil society and the creation of a compensation fund were crucial in securing the passage of a national law suspending all logging in native forests in Argentina, until such time as each province has a land use plan defining forest areas to remain untouched, and those that may be developed.

The Minimum Environmental Protection Standards for Native Forests Law (*LP, July 25, 2007*), already approved by the Senate, establishes that each province must order its land to specify which class of native forest it belongs to: untouchable, sustainable use and those that can be transformed fully or partially.

The norm includes a requirement to hold public audiences before approving a felling permit and a ban against the open burning of deforestation remains.

To compensate the felling suspension, a National Fund for the Enrichment and Conservation of Native Forests was established — equivalent to US\$330 million annually — of which 70 percent will be distributed to forest land owners and the rest to provincial conservation programs.

"It is a giant step," said Hernán Giardini, coordinator of the Greenpeace forest campaign. "We overcame a huge barrier and now we have a very good tool."

According to the Secretary of Environment and Sustainable Development, each year 300,000 hectares (741,316 acres) of forests are lost in Argentina. A century ago, forests occupied 127 million hectares (nearly 314 million acres), whereas they currently occupy 31 million hectares (over 76 million acres). —*IPS*.

COLOMBIA

Arms for food. From Nov. 17-23, the 14th Disarmament Campaign took place in Bogotá, organized by the city government's Sacred Life program, in order to promote the voluntary rendering of arms in exchange for food vouchers.

The Bogotá municipal government encouraged residents to join the activity, held in 12 parishes, with messages such as "to turn in your fire arms is to show that you have caliber" and "without arms you'll give straight to the heart".

"We invite all Bogotá residents to understand that turning in arms is to give value to life. We are handing out 190 million pesos [US\$95,000] in vouchers," said Catholic priest Alirio López, the program's director. Each voucher is worth 300,000 pesos (\$150).

According to López, since the campaign's start in 1996, people have voluntarily turned in 4,818 fire arms, 42,012 different caliber ammunition cartridges and 580 explosive devices. During the last campaign, 267 fire arms, seven grenades and 4,600 ammunition cartridges were collected.

The municipal government likewise informed that during the Campaign for Coexistence and Disarmament, set in Bogotá on Sept. 16, 1.2 million knives were received. —LP.

He and the farmers' association of which he is president want to take advantage of the highway to get their rice crops to new markets. Chambilla hopes the highway will bring a new wave of migrants who will settle in San Lorenzo and neighboring communities and give them a boost, just as his family and others did 21 years ago.

But not everyone shares Chambilla's enthusiasm about the changes in this remote corner of the Amazon where Peru, Brazil and Bolivia meet. Once heavily forested, the area has seen boom-and-bust cycles of rubber tapping, logging, cattle ranching, and now the rise of the agrofuel industry, all accompanied by social and environmental problems stemming from demographic growth and deforestation.

Researchers and local government officials in the three countries worry that negative impacts of huge infrastructure projects, such as the Interoceanic Highway and a series of large dams planned for the Madeira River in Brazil, are developing so quickly that steps cannot be taken to mitigate them.

Those effects are exacerbated, they say, by global climate change, which is likely to bring more droughts like the one that led to massive forest fires in 2005, especially in the state of Acre, Brazil, and the neighboring department of Pando, Bolivia.

Those issues topped the list of concerns at a three-country conference Nov. 15-17 in Brasília, Brazil, where scientists, government officials, grassroots leaders, small-scale farmers, Brazil nut harvesters, rubber tappers, students and representatives of nongovernmental organizations wrestled with problems facing the area.

The forum was sponsored by the Madre de Dios-Acre-Pando Initiative (MAP), a grassroots movement that began in 1999 with a handful of scientists and non-profit organizations concerned about land-use planning. This year's event drew more than 500 people.

MAP is a forum for discussing issues common to the three regions, including deforestation, land use planning, poverty, migration and population growth, economic development, non-timber forestry activities such as rubber tapping and Brazil nut harvesting, health care and education.

The goal is to share information that can be used to develop joint policy for the region, but participants said the results have been mixed, and that the initiative may be ahead of its time.

"MAP is a success and a failure," said Foster Brown, senior scientist at the Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts and professor of ecology and natural resource management at the Federal University of Acre in Rio Branco, Brazil. While it brings people together to share information, he said, "It's a failure because it hasn't solved the problems of the region."

One obstacle lies at the national government level, according to Benedito González, a small-scale farmer and Brazil nut harvester who is secretary of conflict management in the Bolivian community of Litoral, near the border with Peru and Brazil. Official joint action by the three countries requires the involvement of their foreign ministries, which have not become closely involved with MAP, he said.

Nevertheless, this year marked a milestone because the governors of Madre de Dios and Acre and the prefect of Pando attended the forum, said José Menezes Cruz, MAP general coordinator. That could help move at least some of the nearly 30 recommendations made by the participants off the wish list and into the public policy arena, he said.

Policy development could be hampered by inequalities within MAP, however. Some observers commented that Acre, the largest of the regions that tends to drive the agenda, followed by Pando and finally Madre de Dios.

Nevertheless, Mendoza, who has been involved in MAP since its founding, said the initiative has made strides.

One tangible accomplishment is a recent letter drafted by MAP members to be sent to the Inter-American Development Bank, Corporación Andina de Fomento and Brazil's National Economic and Social Development Bank, which are financing the paving of the Interoceanic Highway.

The letter requests US\$38 million for mitigation of the project's indirect impacts. Experts at the meeting said that the \$17 million fund set up as part of the financing package is insufficient to develop programs to address the migration, prostitution, increased crime, land speculation and secondary environmental impacts of the project.

"The population is not prepared to deal with this new economic corridor," Mendoza said.

The MAP forum also called for a broader study of the environmental impacts of a series of dams proposed for the Madeira River in Brazil. Although the dams will mainly be in the state of Rondônia, experts said the effects on water flow and fish migration are likely to be felt in Acre, Pando and Madre de Dios. Acre will probably also be affected by the migration of laborers working on the project.

With deforestation, climate change and other problems pressing on the Amazon, the challenges seem to be growing faster than either budgets or proposals for addressing them. Nevertheless, Mendoza remains optimistic.

Besides discussing joint problems, the three regions are sharing solutions, he said. When forest fires ravaged the region in 2005, MAP organized cross-border civil defense cooperation in Pando and Acre and held workshops to teach small farmers how to keep fires from getting out of control.

And the "Children's Forest," an environmental education program started in Madre de Dios, has become part of the official curriculum in Acre.

"These are things that take time, but they are happening," she said. □

CHILE

Interview with Chilean humanist leader Tomás Hirsch

“We need to build a real democracy”

Two-time presidential candidate **Tomás Hirsch** of the Humanist Party has kept himself incredibly busy since the 2005 elections, when he won 5.4 percent of the popular vote. In addition to traveling extensively throughout Latin America and Europe, the outspoken political leader also found time to pen a new book entitled “*El Fin de la Prehistoria: Un Camino Hacia la Libertad*” (*The End of Prehistory: A Path Toward Freedom*). In the following interview **Latinamerica Press** Chile correspondent **Benjamin Witte** talks with Hirsch about the left in Chile and the region.

What is the significance of the title of your new book?

The title is a wink to Francis Fukuyama who wrote a book called “The End of History and the Last Man,” which always seemed to me to be completely lacking in vision. To say that human history has ended because a certain economic model has been installed, or because certain political projects, such as communism or real socialism, have failed, seems to me to show a real lack of vision about the human process. What we have today instead is violence as a form of social organization. Violence in all of its forms: political, economic, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, psychological, educational, generational.

How is that violence you talk about manifested here in Chile?

In Chile violence is manifested in a system that boasts excellent macroeconomic figures but one of the worst levels of income distribution on the planet. That is violence. It's not physical violence, but rather economic violence. When you have a country that has the kind of accumulated wealth Chile has today, with international reserves like it's never had before, incredibly high copper prices, soaring exports, but that isn't capable of distributing that wealth, of guaranteeing fundamental human rights to Chilean families, that's violence.

And to put an end to this violence?

It seems to me there are three fundamental things that are necessary. First, we need to build a real democracy, a democracy in which every person is a true protagonist in the social process. This goes way beyond the issue of the binomial voting system in Congress. This is about popular initiatives such as plebiscites, revoking mandates and popular consultation on issues. Second, we need mechanisms for redistributing wealth now. Let me emphasize the word *now*... If not, we're looking at a boiler that's going to blow. A third fundamental aspect is having a media that really has the interests of the people at heart. Not what we have today, which is a media that serves the interests of certain economic monopolies.

How exactly do you propose redistributing the country's wealth?

There are a number of possibilities. First, the country has certain fundamental resources that just shouldn't be in private hands, even less so in the hands of multinational companies. The country is wasting its most important resources. Copper, for example, should be in the hands of Chileans. What's more, it was in the hands of Chileans. It was nationalized. And we shouldn't forget that the nationalization was passed with votes from the right. They all agreed. The re-privatization of copper now amounts to losses of between US\$12-16 billion per year. There's nothing else to call that except stupidity.

You also have to have a pension system that doesn't just perpetuate the same poverty people suffer during their working years. I'm not saying anything new here. This isn't my invention. Today, the countries that are best able to redistribute wealth aren't the ones that have gone out of their way to follow a neo-liberal model. The Northern European countries, Australia, New Zealand, Australia — the countries that have the top distribution levels — have all applied policies where the state has a big role to play in carrying out distribution.

Can you talk a bit about where the Chilean left stands these days?

It seems to me that in both Chile and the rest of the world people are asking questions about what it means to be on the left, about what the left's role is... Today there is a system throughout the world, or at least in the West, that is more or less a two-party system, divided between the right and social democrats. They go by various names. In Chile's they're called the Concertación, in Argentina Kirshnerism, for [ex-President Nestor Kirchner] etc.

Generally speaking, people tend not to want the right in power. And so the social democrats come up with what's truly a type of blackmail. They say, “If you don't want the right, then you have to vote for us. We're the ones that'll save you.” The people then vote for the social democrats, who end up governing on behalf of the political right, upholding their model but with slight touch ups. And hundreds of millions of people live with this permanent system of blackmail, which is called the “lesser of two evils.”

There's another part of the Latin American left that could be referred to as “no longer



Tomás Hirsch

BENJAMIN WITTE

“I've seen people who are seeking new paths. They can't be classified as the traditional left. They're humanist movements.”

— Tomás Hirsch

“The Red Cross situation is discrimination with another face.”

— Maycol Morales Pita

an option.” With the fall of the real socialist systems, the fall of the Berlin wall, the fall of the Soviet Union — that [traditional] left is no longer an option. That project, that dream is no longer possible. As a result important sectors of the Latin American left have ended up accepting the leadership of the social democrats. They’ve decided the best they can do is exert a slight influence...

But at the same time, I’ve seen in Latin America a resurgence, an awakening of people who are seeking new paths. They can’t be classified as the traditional left. It has more to do with new generations, or indigenous peoples, or women. They’re humanist movements. Not necessarily part of my Humanist Party, but humanist movements nevertheless. There are the Zapatistas, for example. In some countries they’ve even formed governments — [Ecuador’s Rafael] Correa, Evo, [Venezuela’s Hugo] Chavez. They’re not of the traditional left. And finally there are small groups that are looking to build something. It seems to me that’s the situation. □

COSTA RICA

Bryan Kay in Talamanca

Indigenous discrimination

Country’s isolated indigenous communities forgotten by the state and even international organizations, some members say.



Timoteo Jackson outside his home in Watsi, also a Bri Bri welcome center.

Héctor Sánchez stops his taxi in the middle of a country road deep inside Bri Bri country and ushers inside a client who has waved him down.

The young man, a member of the Bri Bri indigenous group, is heading into town and joins another two fares the taxi driver has already picked up en route.

Sánchez drives the mile or so to the municipal capital — also called Bri Bri — and drops off his fares, one after the other.

The young man, the last to disembark, pulls out a 10,000-colon note (about US\$20) to pay the mere 500 (about \$1) fare.

Sánchez waves him away. “Later, there’s no hurry. *Adios*,” he says. It’s a gesture seldom, if ever, witnessed in the bustling capital, San José.

But Sánchez is in Talamanca, the southeastern region of Costa Rica that is home to the native Bri Bri and their protected reserve, an area where he made his home 15 years ago.

He may be a white Costa Rican, but he could not be further removed from the heavily Westernized culture of urban Costa Rica.

He was attracted, he says, by the area’s tranquility. The Bri Bri, he adds, welcomed him with open arms, treating him as an equal.

That privilege, say members of the Bri Bri, is not one often afforded in San José, especially by the government, especially to them.

The Bri Bri have long campaigned for equal rights and a better deal from state coffers.

Community leaders recount dozens discrimination allegations, from simple mistreatment in everyday activities such as taking a bus, to cash supposedly destined for Talamanca never arriving, including donations said to have come from European Union countries for new ambulances. They also point to the disparity in quality of services

between their region and elsewhere. Talamanca is one of the poorest cantons, or districts, — if not the poorest — in the country, according to economic indicators.

But despite their efforts, the Bri Bri, along with other, smaller indigenous groups in the area, have recently recorded yet another alleged affront to their peoples.

This time they have identified the perpetrator as the administrator of the local Red Cross, an organization which is supposed to serve the public in times of need, and, ultimately, emergency.

The Bri Bri have a list of complaints before the Public Defender of Inhabitants, a central government body, detailing incidents which, they claim, include abuses, discrimination and mistreatment.

In one example, a member of the community who sought the assistance of an ambulance for his wife was told one was not available after calling the local service operator.

But when he arrived in Bri Bri, which houses the Red Cross building, he saw one parked outside the local school.

Another complaint alleges that international donations earmarked for indigenous groups in Talamanca were never received by the supposed beneficiaries.

The administrator denied he was to blame, but he did not write off the allegations, and said it was part of a campaign of persecution by a small band of people.

But Timoteo Jackson, a Bri Bri indigenous community leader, said the Red Cross incident is just the latest in a long line of discriminatory acts against his people.

"We have had this problem [with the Red Cross] for many years," he explained. "There is so much discrimination for us. "When I go to Ecuador and say I am a Bri Bri of Talamanca they are surprised and show respect."

Saray Ramirez Vindas, a San Jose-based journalist and a Bri Bri, said she has suffered some despicable acts of discrimination. She explained how on one occasion she was asked to leave a restaurant/bar purely because of the color of her skin. A staff member even made the suggestion she was a prostitute and ordered her - and her colleague from the United States - to vacate the premises quietly.

"It has happened to me so many times," she said. "You know when something might be about to happen because you are stared at and studied. "When I see someone who looks like a Bri Bri or other indigenous, I always make a point of saying hello or helping them."

Part of Talamanca's downfall is that it is practically cut off from the rest of the country. According to Jackson, there are around 14,000 indigenous Costa Ricans in the area, but many do not speak Spanish.

The region stretches inland from the Caribbean coast over mountains covered by thick jungle. Its rolling valleys are carpeted with regimented lines of banana plantations, one of the primary areas of employment. Vehicles heading from the coast to the heart of Bri Bri country must first negotiate an uneven dirt track through the hilly terrain, climbing and descending as the contours of the land unfold.

A complaint was lodged about four years ago about the state of the roads in Talamanca, yet their primitively prevails today.

Hidden among the trees the Bri Bri co-exist peacefully with their lush surroundings, many of them in traditional thatch-roofed houses built on stilts.

Sociologist Maycol Morales Pita, himself a Bri Bri, says he has been on the receiving end of the prejudice shown towards native Costa Ricans.

The nearest hospital is in the port city of Limon, about a one hour or more journey over patchy road surface.

"The Red Cross situation is discrimination with another face," he said. □

COLOMBIA

Susan Abad in Bogota

The left firms up

Opposition Alternative Democratic Pole party determined to reach the presidency in next election.

Colombia's left was handily defeated in last year's presidential election, but it is steadily rebuilding itself. After an important win in the October regional elections — the Alternative Democratic Pole continues to grow and establish itself as an alternative to the conservative power.

The party won more than 3.6 million votes at the national level, compared to 2.6 million votes in the presidential elections of 2006 for their candidate Carlos Gaviria (*LP, July 12, 2006*) and 2.4 million votes in the regional elections in 2003. It won one governor's post, 22 congressional seats, 20 mayoral races, and 378 town councilors' posts.

"What stands out is that the Pole maintained the mayorship of Bogota, which is considered politically to be the most important one in the country, even confronting President [Álvaro] Uribe," said Gaviria, the party's president. He was referring to the controversial support Uribe gave to his party's mayoral candidate, Enrique Peñaloza,

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA / THE CARIBBEAN

Climate change and human development. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) presented its Human Development Report 2007/2008 on Nov. 27.

The report, "Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World," warns that "the poorest countries and most vulnerable citizens will suffer the earliest and most damaging setbacks, even though they have contributed least to the problem."

The report also identified five areas of human development that are expected to undergo setbacks: agricultural production and food security, water shortage, rising sea levels and susceptibility to climate change, decline in human health and the collapse of ecosystems. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA / THE CARIBBEAN Human Development Index 2007-2008*

Country	2006	2007-2008
Argentina	36	38
Chile	38	40
Uruguay	43	46
Costa Rica	48	48
Cuba	50	51
Mexico	53	52
Trinidad & Tobago	57	59
Panama	58	62
Brazil	69	70
Venezuela	72	74
Colombia	70	75
Dominican Rep.	94	79
Belize	95	80
Suriname	89	85
Peru	82	87
Ecuador	83	89
Paraguay	91	95
Guyana	103	97
Jamaica	104	101
El Salvador	101	103
Nicaragua	112	110
Honduras	117	115
Bolivia	115	117
Guatemala	118	118
Haiti	154	146

*Average based on income, education, health and life expectancy, where 1 is the highest level.
Source: UNDP

PERU

Cocaine production increases.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, almost one third of the cocaine consumed globally comes from Peru. Last year the country produced 280 tons of cocaine, 139 tons more than in 2000 and 8 percent more than in 2005.

In 2006 the cultivation of coca leaves rose 7 percent from the previous year, and increased from 48,200 hectares (nearly 119,105 acres) to 51,400 hectares (127,021 acres). Peru is the second largest coca leaf and cocaine producer after Colombia.

Jorge Valencia Jáuregui, director of the Supply Control unit of the national anti-drug office, DEVIDA, the government division responsible for leading anti-drug policies, admitted to the newspaper *La República* that "there is a tendency to increase cocaine production because of demand. For that reason we need the support of consumer countries in the fight against drugs. We can't improve the situation alone."

According to DEVIDA, the majority of cocaine production in Peru goes to Argentina and Brazil, where it is later transferred to Africa and then Europe.

Only 10 percent of Peruvian cocaine makes it to the United States, who offers the most support to Peru in the fight against drugs. For 2008, the US government has announced a cut in their support, amounting to approximately US\$100 million annually. —LP.

and the president's criticism of Alternative Democratic Pole candidate Samuel Moreno, days before the elections.

In a clear political interference — prohibited by the constitution — Uribe said that "Dr. Peñaloza has a very clear idea of how Bogota must preserve quality of life in the future" and attacked Moreno until the very day of elections when, upon submitting his vote, recommended that citizens "avoid the triumph of candidates supported by guerrillas."

Uribe and his administration have repeatedly accused the Pole of having links to guerrillas.

"The government says that whoever is not with Uribe is with the FARC," said Alternative Democratic Pole Sen. Jorge Robledo, adding that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia are against his political party. "We lack any relation to guerrillas, we are against them."

The project VoteBien, or Vote Well, promoted by a citizen's group of media and non-governmental organizations, also assures on their Web site that the FARC will actually be hurt by this opposition party's recent success, "because it confirms that the left can access power without needing to resort to arms. In other words, the Pole's wins by democratic means are the de-legitimization of the armed conflict."

Gaviria says that the recent regional elections "are an acid test for the Pole" because these are the moments when "the vices of traditional Colombian politics intensifies: the buying and selling of votes, elections intimidated by force, corruption at the voting booths. The Pole has another way of doing politics."

"The Pole's strength is based on the fact that it is the party that has taken on most seriously the challenges of the Political Reform of 2006 [which eliminated microparties] and has assumed internal democratic mechanisms to take decisions on its candidates that other hopefuls abide by," said Elizabeth Ungar, director of the Visible Congress Project in the Universidad de los Andes.

She adds that "this prepares [the Pole] in order to not succumb to an eventual division," alluding to the exchange of words last September between the Pole Sen. Gustavo Petro and Gaviria which hinted at a rupture of the leftist party.

A supposed crisis surged after Iván Márquez, a top FARC official, described Petro on the group's Web site as an "unwise sniper" and accused him of serving the "Colombian oligarchy."

Petro then called the FARC "ignorant" and said he considered them one of the factors of political degradation in Colombia. With this, Gaviria criticized the congressman for giving answers without consulting the party.

"It was not a crisis. They were discussions on different points of view that allowed the country to see with clarity that we have mechanisms which permit us to process and overcome our differences in a democratic way, and thus we gave an example of what it is to maintain our unity despite our differences," assured Gaviria.

The circumstances and the growing voter support hint Gaviria that the Pole will be the principal contender against a pro-Uribe coalition in the May 2010 presidential elections, in which, "if some voices who call for a new constitutional reform impose, Uribe could seek a third term."

In this setting, Ungar thinks that while the Pole is indeed growing, its role for 2010 will depend on the pro-Uribe coalition candidate. She is cautious to say that "if the Pole manages to consolidate itself as a serious democratic opposition to President Uribe, it could maybe eventually not get to the presidency, but do a serious and respectable campaign any way."

"The challenge for the Pole in the next three years in Congress is to demonstrate that the bloc doesn't only work united, but also for the consolidation of a political project," he said.

Gaviria says that "the very government has understood that we will be its direct contender."

"That's why they are permanently making us a target of their attacks, because they know that the Pole is the opposition force that has the most opportunities to get to office in 2010," he said. "If in the 2006 presidential elections we managed to obtain 23 percent of the electorate, with 6 or 7 million votes that we plan on obtaining in the 2010 elections we will have all the possibilities of winning the presidency." □

PERU

Larry Luxner in Chiclayo

Cafeteros go organic

Coffee farmers find environmentally-friendly farming increases profits.

José Olmedo Pérez Rodas, 45, struggled as a coffee farmer for 10 years. But in the last four years, the 45-year-old father of five children discovered that growing certified organic coffee can lift *campesinos* like himself out of poverty.

"We have learned that we can do things in an environmentally friendly way, and this

will bring us additional income," the farmer said. "Thanks to organic coffee, my son now studies agribusiness in Lima. That's something other farmers can't afford."

María Justina Llatas Muñoz, 44, was born in Cajamarca, Peru, to a family of potato growers. But Cajamarca — environmentally degraded by overpopulation and a proliferation of chemicals used in agriculture — offered little opportunity, so she got married and moved to Moyobamba, in the neighboring jungle department of San Martín.

Today, Llatas owns 22 hectares (54 acres) of farmland, six hectares (15 acres) of which are dedicated to organic coffee.

"I've been able to do some projects already, thanks to organic coffee farming," she said. "I've built a new stable for 12 cows, and they are delivering milk which gives additional income. Since I have a well-run stable with concrete floors, I can collect the manure in a better way and this goes back to composting."

Pérez and Llatas are among 1,170 or so farmers benefiting from Pronatur, a nonprofit organization that promotes organic, shade-grown arabica coffee, based in the northern port city of Chiclayo.

Jan Bernhard Riggs is general manager of Pronatur, an umbrella organization for 35 regional and sub-regional associations run largely by the *campesinos*. The team consists of 13 full-time people including agricultural engineers, a sociologist, a "gender equity promoter" and field technicians.

Peru exports close to 98 percent of its coffee production, in large part because Peruvians are the lowest per-capita consumers of coffee in Latin America, Bernhard says. Certified organic coffee production is around 600,000 bags a year, equivalent to 15 percent of Peru's total coffee production of 4 million bags.

"But 80 percent or even 90 percent of that is organic by default, because the people cannot afford fertilizer or pesticides," said Bernhard. "If they could afford to buy them, dragging them eight hours on a mule through the mud into the *fincas* would end up costing three times as much, so the return doesn't pay off."

Peru exports 60 percent of its organic coffee to Europe, and the rest to the United States, according to Raúl del Aguila Hidalgo, president of the Junta Nacional de Café, or JNC, a Lima-based group that represents Peruvian coffee producers.

"What we're trying to do is share our vision of what organic coffee is, and what we can hope for in terms of production and marketing," said del Aguila Hidalgo, noting that Peru has nearly 25,000 organic coffee growers. In 2005, the country exported US\$305 million worth of coffee, of which \$60 million was organic-certified coffee.

"There are no fixed prices, but depending on quality, organic coffee normally sells for \$0.05 to \$0.35 cents per pound over normal coffee," he said.

The four departments producing most of Peru's organic coffee are San Martín, Amazonas, Cajamarca and Lambayeque.

Pronatur's growing area lies in the Altomayo region, on both banks of the Mayo River, and on the eastern slopes of the mighty Marañón River at an altitude of 1,300 to 2,000 meters above sea level.

"We're only talking about organic-certified, which means taking care of the environment, water sources and social economy," he said. If small farmers are certified organic today, this doesn't mean only that they're not using pesticides. It's a whole complicated setup of environmental behavior and socio-economic development, which involves health-care, training and schools."

Bernhard says the average size of the farm Pronatur represents is 3 hectares (7.5 acres.) The organization works in tandem with Asociación de Productores Agroecológicos a farmers' association and together they account for 50,000 hectares of Amazon highland rainforest belonging to ethnic communities, as well as 2,840 hectares of coffee, 84 hectares planted with mangoes, limes and other fruit, and 46 hectares of peas, beans and other legumes for export.

According to Bernhard, Pronatur's annual revenues total around \$10 million, of which \$8 million come from coffee exports. At least 90 percent of that goes directly back to the farmers, he said.

The concept of fair trade continues to be Pronatur's guiding light, but Bernhard doesn't have too many kind words for the Germany-based Fairtrade Labeling Organization International (FLO).

"We're fed up with Fairtrade, because they're putting plantations into the fair trade system. How can a small coffee grower compete with all the new products FLO is coming up with? How can we compete with economies of scale?" he said.

"The initial vision and mission of the founders of the fair trade movement was to help small growers and their products. These were the people who developed this very little niche market and found some buyers. But as this movement grows and demand picks up, transnationals come in and see there's a buck to be made."

Bernhard says big producers like Dole, Nestlé and Chiquita "are misusing the investment made by small growers who have limited capacity to become big growers. There's a geographical burden which you cannot overcome. You cannot build a highway over the Peruvian mountains. You cannot get electricity where there are no waterfalls. We work with mules. There are serious limitations. Not a single small grower in Brazil will be able to compete with the large Brazilian plantations." □

inbrief

- The presidents of **Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay** and **Venezuela** officially launched on Dec. 9 the Banco del Sur, whose principal objective is to finance infrastructure projects in **South America**. The bank will have a base capital of some US\$7 billion and its headquarters will be in Caracas.

- The **Bolivia** government announced on Dec. 4 that it reached its goal of eliminating coca producers this year by destroying 5,774 hectares (nearly 14,268 acres) through a process of voluntary eradication. Bolivia is the third largest coca leaf producer after Colombia and Peru.

- An association of knitters from **Bolivia** and a meat processing cooperative from **Peru** won the First Regional Competition of Women Fighting Against Poverty, which took place on Nov. 30 in La Paz, Bolivia. The event, organized by the Andean Development Corporation and the International Federation of Agricultural Development, also saw participation from Colombian, Ecuadorian and Venezuelan representatives.

- Income continues to remain concentrated in **Brazil's** wealthiest classes, according to a study by the LatinPanel Institute. The study revealed that the income of the two top classes grew 7 percent this year while in the lowest two of the five economic classes, which include sectors in poverty and extreme poverty, the increase was 2 percent.

- President Fidel Castro, 81, was nominated again as presidential candidate for the legislative elections in **Cuba** on Jan. 20. Castro, who in July of last year temporarily delegated his responsibilities to his brother Raúl due to health problems, has governed Cuba as prime minister since 1959 and as president since 1976.

"One day an administrator from the building next door came over. She was angry because the children's presence in the street decreased the value of her condominium."

— Hernán Fernández

ARGENTINA

Paolo Moiola in Buenos Aires

Protective walls

Street children find solidarity in a world of indifference.

Almost all big cities in the world have the phenomenon of street children: a tragedy often involving drugs, sexual abuse, theft and police violence. At one Salesian-run Buenos Aires center, lay workers welcome girls and boys who are forced to grow up too quickly.

The Miguel Magone "Santa Catalina" Center serves as a refuge for children who live on the street, providing them with shelter, food, and education. In Buenos Aires, between city and province, there are several thousand street children, though there are no exact figures. Daniel Blanco, a young Salesian teacher says there are children as young as five or six years old.

The center is organized in two shifts — day and night. "This is a housing center," Blanco explains. "For those who want to continue and create a different life other than one of the streets, there are homes for a prolonged stay."

"In order to work together," says Blanco, "you must establish relationships built on mutual trust between kids and teachers." The teachers are young, but highly motivated and enthusiastic, and share a visible mutual trust with the kids.

Gonzalo Orta is 34 years old and has been working with Salesians since he was 15. He is not a specialist — he calls himself a "soccer trainer" — but has always had an inclination to work with children. "I have been fortunate," he says, as two small children stand hugging him. "Even though my parents are separated, my family has always been with me."

Elisa Molina can't say the same. She is only 23 years old, but looks twice her age. She never met her father and her mother died of AIDS when she was still a little girl. Then she encountered the street, drugs, a husband who died very young and two kids.

"Poxirán [glue] was offered to me for the first time when I was 8 years old. I started using everything. They hospitalized me again and again for all the drugs I had in my body. But I never tried crack. Crack is vicious. It lasts a second and immediately you want more. You get anxious. In the slums, one hit costs just one peso [US\$0.33]. In other areas, it is sold for five pesos by people who buy it in the slums. I can immediately tell if kids are using Poxi or crack."

Street life is difficult, especially for girls, but Molina succeeded in getting out.

"Now I'm doing well. I'm relaxed, although my situation is not easy with two kids. I can't imagine what my future will be. But I don't want my kids to grow up without a mother. I don't want them to face what I did. I would like to stay here, in the city center. I would like to keep helping people get out of their plight, like I did."

"The Buenos Aires police are very violent," says Hernán Fernández, 23, one of the young social workers. "They've probably maintained the same repressive way of acting that they learned during the 1976 coup. They're aggressive. For example, in the morning, when the Metropolitan [Cathedral] opens at 5 a.m. the children who sleep below are woken by the policemen's blows."

Meanwhile, the center's neighbors have long taken steps, such as complaints and petitions to have the center closed down.

"What bothers them most is to have these children, badly dressed and perhaps with a bag of Poxirán in hand, next to the house," Fernández said. "If they were farther away, it wouldn't matter, but they don't tolerate the children being on their doorstep. The truth is that the majority of the residents don't know the children's situation, they don't understand their motives in life, they don't know the purpose of the center. One day an administrator from the building next door came over. She was angry because she said the children's presence in the street decreased the value of the apartments in her condominium."

The media has also been an obstacle. With the neighbors' appeals, the sensationalist media has also taken an interest in the Miguel Magone Center.

"An important television channel — América TV — filmed the center for a weekend, when it was closed," said Fernández. "They asked the children questions who were outside the door. Since they couldn't enter, they showed images of other places. They told a mess of lies: that the place didn't have electricity, it was dirty, there was nothing to eat, there were no representatives. Incredible! Some kids felt responsible or guilty for the television showing. And our volunteers felt horrible indignation on seeing the work that we pour our heart and energy on defamed."

The Miguel Magone Center opens at 9:30 p.m. The iron door is the border between a night in the open and a night with a shower, hot food, classes, a clean mattress and protective walls. But not everyone can pass this border. In the doorway is Adrián Keinrath, firm but polite. He questions the children outside, pushing to enter: he must be sure of their condition.

"We can't allow children who are high on crack to come in. They are too altered, too violent. Sadly, we aren't equipped for that emergency, which is a growing emergency, if you consider that crack costs less than marijuana and causes a bigger 'high'," he explains. □

PERU

Latinamerica Press

United States approves FTA

Democratically-controlled Congress satisfied with labor, environmental issues and approves trade pact.

The United States Senate approved the free trade pact with Peru 77-18 Dec. 4, the final step in the controversial agreement's passage since negotiations began in May 2004.

US President George W. Bush pressured the US Congress hard to pass the deal before Christmas break. The administration has made such bilateral agreements a central part of its trade policy, but it appears unlikely that similar deals with Colombia and Panama will pass before Bush leaves office in early 2009.

Peru and the United States signed the agreement in April 2006, and Peru's unicameral Congress approved the pact in a late-night session in June of that year.

But the agreement was held up by the US Congress. When the Democratic Party won control of both houses of the US Congress in the November 2006 election, the agreement was held up by Democratic lawmakers who feared it the bill was lacking sufficient labor and environmental protection.

Critics have slammed the trade agreement for its lack of symmetry — they say that the monster economy of the United States, especially its heavily subsidized agricultural industry, would dwarf the Peruvian economy, despite its eight consecutive years of economic growth.

"...What the US wasn't able to do regionally, for instance the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, the FTAA, they'll be able to do bilaterally, one by one, locking in these countries into trade rules that aren't necessarily beneficial to the people," said Vicki Gass, a senior associate on rights and development at the Washington Office on Latin America, a US-based think tank.

In June, Peru's Congress passed a series of amendments to appease Democratic lawmakers on environmental and labor protection.

"I think there were some advancement in the labor and environmental clauses, it's a little stronger, but ... in the case of Peru, even with the new labor regulation, you have 80 percent if not more of the population working on subcontracting or in the informal market. They don't enjoy labor rights. This is what was seen in the CAFTA+DR countries," she said, referring to the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America and the Dominican Republic.

"I think in many ways, the labor rights issues is a red herring because it ignores the other issues starting with the impact on agriculture and the end of democratic governance," she added.

Gass said the bill breezed through the Senate, and was passed in the House of Representatives for political reasons, not economic ones, particularly the 2008 presidential election, with Democratic lawmakers eager to win support from big business.

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), another Washington-based think tank warns that the new deal is just a repetition of NAFTA, which in the nearly 14 years since it has gone into effect has devastated the Mexican agricultural industry (*LP, Nov. 14, 2007*).

"...It is clear that Mexican farmers were not ready to compete with a Washington subsidized, 'factory in the field' US-style agricultural economy," Manuel Trujillo wrote in a recent COHA report.

"The Bush Administration is either too narrow-minded or grossly uninterested with the negative aspects of the recent history of US-backed FTAs in the region to claim that any refusal to approve the pending FTAs with Colombia and Panama would be a slap in the face for democracy in Latin America." □

"The labor rights issues is a red herring because it ignores the other issues starting with the impact on agriculture and the end of democratic governance."

— Vicki Gass

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Printed Matter
IMPRESOS

VÍA AÉREA - AIR MAIL

VOL. 39, N° 23 — DEC. 12, 2007