

GUATEMALA
Louisa Reynolds
in Guatemala City

The forgotten masses

Indigenous Guatemalans face an uphill battle against racial discrimination.



Five Guatemalan indigenous languages are on the path to extinction.

Since the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, ending Guatemala's 36-year-long civil war, the country's political establishment has emphasized its commitment to building a new multicultural state in which the country's ethnic diversity is respected. However, all the government has done is pay lip service to racial equality while indigenous people continue to suffer discrimination and are denied fundamental human rights such as self-determination and the right to receive education in their own language.

Statistics on infant mortality, access to education and healthcare reveal huge disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalans. There are 23 indigenous groups in Guatemala (21 Mayan groups plus the Xincas and Afro-Caribbean or Garifuna people). Guatemala's 6 million indigenous people comprise 60 percent of the population. But according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 87 percent of indigenous people live in poverty and 24 percent in extreme poverty; infant mortality rates reach 49 for every 1,000 born alive compared to 40 among ladino (non-indigenous) Guatemalans; 34 percent of indigenous people are malnourished compared to 11 percent of ladinos, and 41.7 percent of indigenous people are illiterate compared to 17.7 percent of ladinos.

At-risk from natural disasters

When natural disasters strike, indigenous communities are the most affected and so far the government does not appear to have learned from past mistakes or to be making a serious effort to put together disaster prevention programs.

The government came under strong criticism from indigenous leaders and human rights organizations after it was slow in putting together a reconstruction plan when Hurricane Stan hit the country in late 2005. Indigenous villages in the western highlands were hit hardest and hundreds of peo-

ple perished or lost their homes and livelihoods, sinking even deeper into poverty.

In its recovery efforts, the government prioritized the areas where the economic interests of the ruling elite were hit and showed a lack of political will to provide disaster relief for rural communities and to improve living conditions in indigenous communities to reduce the impact of future disasters.

The Guatemalan government has also ignored indigenous and *campesino* organizations' opposition to the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR) as well as this sector's concerns over the environmental impact of open-pit mining and the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams (*LP*, Nov. 28, 2007).

Today, 11 years after Guatemala ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 on indigenous rights, the National Assembly has yet to approve the legislation required for the pact to become part of Guatemalan law. The government has used this as an excuse to declare that "popular consultations" or indigenous plebiscites on a number of issues including open-pit mining are non-binding.

Indigenous leaders fear that the new UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved last year (*LP*, Sept. 19, 2007) which asserts indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, autonomy and self-government, as well as the right to preserve their own judicial, economic and cultural institutions and the right to be consulted on any decisions that impact their welfare, might suffer the same fate as the document is not legally binding and there are no sanctions for states that violate indigenous rights.

"The Declaration cannot be seen entirely as a success. We believe that it has many loopholes and that instead of strengthening indigenous peoples' demands for autonomy and self-determination, it strength-

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LOUISA REYNOLDS

BOLIVIA

Land distribution. One hundred families control 25 million hectares (nearly 62 million acres) in Bolivia, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

This is five times more land than that managed by two million Bolivian *campesinos* who work small, over-farmed plots amounting to 5 million hectares (over 12 million acres).

Consequently, each land-owning family owns an average of 250,000 hectares (617,500 acres) while a *campesino* family only has one hectare (under 2.5 acres) to use for production.

The eastern department of Santa Cruz is a clear example of the disparity in land distribution.

According to the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), only 15 families in Santa Cruz have 500,000 hectares (over 1.24 million acres) of fertile land close to the markets.

—PÚLSAR.

ens the nation-state and the status quo," says Mayan academic Kajkoj Ba Tiul.

Another unresolved issue is agrarian reform and land evictions increased under the Óscar Berger (2004-2008) administration. According to Amnesty International, 911 land evictions were recorded up to October 2004, a figure that increased to 1,025 in December 2005. A national dialogue on rural development collapsed in August 2005 due to the government and the private sector's lack of political will to meet *campesino* demands, particularly with regards to land tenure and expropriation.

Little progress has been made on cultural rights. The Mayan Languages Academy has declared that five languages risk extinction because the state has not taken the necessary steps to defend indigenous identity. The five languages at risk are: Sipakapense, spoken by 344 people in the villages surrounding Sipakapa, in the Northern department of San Marcos; Itza, spoken by 123 people in the department of Peten, near the Mexican border; Tektiteko, spoken in the Northern department of Huehuetenango; Chorti, spoken by 105 people in eastern Guatemala; and Mopan, spoken by 468 people in the municipality of San Luis in Peten.

MEXICO

John Ross in Mexico City

Zero hour

As NAFTA tariffs drop to nothing, agrarian apocalypse looms.

At the stroke of midnight this past Jan. 1, some 100 farmers and day laborers from both sides of the Mexican border with the United States met on the Cordoba Las Americas bridge that connects El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, to mark the demise of Mexican agriculture.

In accordance with the timetables set by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed by Mexico, the United States and Canada 14 years ago, as of Jan. 1, 2008, all tariffs on corn, beans, powdered milk, sugar and 200 agricultural products were reduced to zero, setting in motion a doomsday scenario that farmers' organizations here say will inevitably lead to crisis in the Mexican "campo" or countryside, mass abandonment of unsustainable plots, increased hunger, and even armed rebellion by the nation's beleaguered small farmers.

Strung across the roadway, each protester carried a letter of the alphabet in his or her hand but despite the palpable fear and loathing afoot out in the Mexican countryside as the tariffs plummet to nothing, the farmers could barely muster enough troops to spell out "*Sin Maiz No Hay Pais*," or "Without Corn, There Is No Country."

Despite the midnight deadline, the imme-

According to José Canahuati, president of the the language academy since the Law on Languages was passed in 2003, "the Executive branch has failed to provide the necessary legal framework for its implementation thus rendering it ineffective."

Bilingual education is seen as the most effective way of preserving Mayan languages but has been assigned a tiny percentage of the state's budget. There are currently 3,597 nursery and primary schools in urban areas as opposed to 27, 735 schools in rural areas, a ratio of 1:8. However, 83,933 teachers are monolingual and a mere 6,178 are bilingual, a ratio of 13:1. For every quetzal (US\$0.13) spent by the Ministry of Education, only six Guatemalan cents are assigned to the Bilingual Education Section.

Mayan linguists and activists also point out that as well as increasing the scope of bilingual education, the curriculum itself must be changed. Lolmay García, from the Francisco Marroquín Linguistic Project added that "bilingual schools do not fulfill indigenous expectations" because the hegemonic content of the national curriculum, filled with stereotypical images of indigenous people, is merely translated into indigenous languages. □

diate impacts of this premeditated apocalypse may be not be felt for a while — at least until the spring planting season when farmers have to calculate how many hectares they can afford to sow. Unlike the United States, farm subsidies are a thing of the past here, stripped away years ago in the rush to NAFTA.

Price of maize skyrockets

Reduction to zero tariffs is not a steep drop. Incremental reductions over the past 14 years had eliminated 90 percent of barriers to US corn by 2007.

Lavish subsidies for US corn growers allowed them to ship their product to Mexico below cost and still make a killing. This is being augmented by high ethanol subsidies as maize climbs to record prices on US commodity markets. Corn hit an all-time record US\$177 per metric ton in mid-2007, but has slid because of high inventories.

Meanwhile, the uptick in world corn prices ripples out with tortillas topping out at nine pesos (\$0.9) the kilo on New Year's Day here — tortilla prices in Mexico have risen 126 percent under NAFTA from 1994 to 2007 despite — or because of — massive corn imports from the United States (44 million tons in the same period). The tortilla remains the household measure for basic food prices in Mexico (*LP, March 7, 2007*).

According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization or FAO, the world has only 11 weeks of consumable corn reserves left, the lowest inventory since record keeping began. Corn prices will remain unstable until producers can sort out the relationship between food cropping and biofuels, the FAO cautioned in a recent report. Low reserves and high prices are a sure formula for social up-

heaval, underscores the UN organization, pointing out that grain riots broke out in Morocco, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal last year.

Migration continues to rise

The migration of impoverished subsistence farmers from southern Mexico that swelled the Mexico City misery belt in sprawling slums like Nezahualcoytl was the first concrete evidence of the evisceration of the “campo,” ventures Harvard professor John Womack in a recent e-mail. Womack is the author of the definitive biography of Emiliano Zapata, the farmer-general who remains emblematic of the *campesinos*’ struggle for land.

NAFTA has only accelerated the stampede from the countryside and into the migration stream. By the trade treaty’s 10th anniversary in 2004, NAFTA had driven 1.2 million farmers off the land, according to a Carnegie Endowment evaluation of the pact’s impacts issued that year. Since each farm family averages six people, the total number of expulsees from the *campo* hovers around 6 million.

In 1993, just before NAFTA became fact, Mexico’s Agriculture Ministry contracted UCLA professor Raúl Hinojosa to calculate the fallout amongst poor farmers. The researcher’s worst-case scenario was the diaspora of 10 million *campesinos*. Now, with the reduction of NAFTA tariffs to zero, that “goal” is just around the corner.

During ex-President Vicente Fox’s 2000-2006 term, 2.4 million Mexicans, 70 percent of them reportedly displaced farmers, migrated to the United States despite the formidable barriers erected by Washington to keep them out. US anti-immigration pundits like Lou Dobbs and Republican and Democratic presidential hopefuls that beat up on undocumented Mexican workers might do better to pin the tail on the correct donkey — the North American Free Trade Agreement.

According to CONAPO, Mexico’s Council on Population, 29 million Mexicans and Mexican descendants now live in the United States, 2 million more than those living in the Mexican *campo* from which so many of them



Corn is the basic staple for Mexicans.

have fled. Ironically, those 27 million who remain on the land back home are sustained by the \$22 billion in remittances that those who have gone north send back — Mexico’s second source of US dollars behind \$100 barrel petroleum — which is to say the Mexican agricultural sector is supported by those who have abandoned it.

One of the most lethal blows from zero tariffs will be a sped-up abandonment of their plots by small corn farmers and their immersion in an already-swollen migration stream, a tale that does not presage a happy ending. Rural youth have little option but to turn to drug cropping. “It’s the only sector where there is any profit,” writes National Autonomous University researcher Simón David Ávila Pacheco.

Mexico produces no cocaine and is a “trampoline” for springboarding Colombian cocaine into the US. NAFTA trade actually opened new routes for the transfer of the Colombian export across the border. Mexico does manufacture and export tons of methamphetamine or “speed” but that’s a non-agricultural item.

Increased cropping of marijuana and poppy in the impoverished outback is guaranteed to increase militarization of the countryside. President Ernesto Calderón has sent 30,000 troops into the *campo* in a permanent war on drugs that cost 2,000 Mexican lives in 2007 alone.

Violence has been pandemic in the Mexican *campo* ever since the European Conquest. □

PERU

Ties to Plan Condor? Former *de facto* president, Gen. Francisco Morales Bermúdez (1975-80), was included in a list of 140 ex-dictators, ministers and heads of intelligence services in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Peru who collaborated in Plan Condor, the repressive alliance of the Southern Cone dictatorships in the 1970s and 80s.

At the end of December, Italian judge Lusianna Figliola ordered the arrest of those accused for the disappearance of 25 Italians during Plan Condor.

Though the Peruvian military regime could not have participated directly in Plan Condor, it allowed Argentine military officers to kidnap four dissidents in Lima between 1977 and 1980, including university profes-



Gen. F. Morales Bermúdez

sor Juan Carlos Maguid, Noemí Esther Gianetti de Molfino, María Inés Raverta and Julio César Ramírez — the last three members of leftist group Montoneros.

Maguid, Raverta and Ramírez are still classified as disappeared, while Gianetti de Molfino — member of rights organization Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo — was found dead in Madrid in July 1980, one month after being kidnapped on Peruvian territory.

Though Morales Bermúdez, 86, has admitted he knew about the presence of Argentine Montoneros members in the country, he claims that his government never formed part of Plan Condor. However, a document from 1978, declassified by the US Central Intelligence Agency reveals that Peru and Ecuador were also members of the network. —LP.

BRAZIL

Deforestation increases in Amazon. More than 6,000 km² (2,300 square miles) of forest has disappeared in the last four months of 2007, advised Brazilian scientist Carlos Nobre, of the government's Spatial Research National Institute (INPE), in a recent seminar in Washington DC in the United States.

According to INPE, who monitors the Amazon, 17 percent of the Amazon's surface has already been destroyed. From 1994 to 2004 alone, 210,000 km² (81,000 square miles) of forest were cut down (*LP*, Feb. 21 and Mar. 21, 2007).

Environmental organizations say the increased price of primary materials has given rise to illegal logging in order to open land for agriculture and livestock.

Infrastructure projects, such as road and hydroelectric construction (*LP*, Oct. 31, 2007), are also contributing to deforestation.

"The infrastructure is associated with an aggressive and progressive change in the use of land," Nobre confirmed.

Forest protection is crucial in combating global warming. Around 20 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere is a result of deforestation. —*LP*.

ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Quito

The good with the bad

Correa increases social spending but blocks protests.

With full control over the political system, but slow economic growth, President Rafael Correa began the new year claiming that "it will be very hard — the same people as always will dispute everything in order to put an end to revolutionary change."

In his first year in office, Correa's government concentrated on resource distribution — either directly to the poorest sectors or through emergency decrees to speed up public procurement — as well as the weakening of powerful economic and political groups.

In his annual address to the nation, presented on Jan. 15 before the Constituent Assembly, marking his first year in office (*LP*, March 7, 2007), Correa mentioned direct social investment, such as the development welfare program, including a US\$30-voucher distributed on a monthly basis to Ecuador's poorest people, particularly mothers. He also mentioned \$3,600 vouchers for home construction.

Though he informed that the country had grown 4.4 percent in the "non-oil" economy, he could not ignore an Ecuadorian Central Bank report, which indicates a 2.6 percent increase in gross domestic product —the lowest in Latin America.

Inflation and recession

According to the central bank, the increase in money circulation through the human development vouchers provoked an increase in household consumption amounting to 6 percent of the gross domestic product. However, this also put pressure on price indexes, causing 3.3 percent inflation, which is higher than the growth rate, thus sparking economic recession.

"A process of 3 percent annual inflation is catastrophic in a dollarized economy that lacks domestic production," confirmed assembly member Diego Borja of the Democratic Left party, following the president's report.

Despite the unflattering economic figures, Correa's popularity continues to linger around 60 percent, allowing him to take on policies opposed by the business sector.

The tax reform — which expanded taxes, particularly on inheritances and luxury goods — was spurned by business leaders. Other controversial policies have similarly been opposed by equally powerful sectors. The land transportation sector, which was subjected to a much stricter Transit Law, must now have insurance against accidents, and private foundations that manage public goods or funding will be affected by a series of controls and the elimination of profits on these goods.

No more social protest

In his report, Correa defended the need to apply greater control over tax evasion, contraband and corruption in the public sphere, calling on citizens to respect the law: "No more strikes, no more violence. Everything through dialogue, nothing by force."

In this way, Correa has already given signs of his decision to control opposition protests.

On Nov. 30 in Dayuma, in the eastern Amazonian province of Orellana, the army attacked strikers who demanded asphalted roads, regularization of electricity, potable water, transportation and environmental protection measures. Dayuma — even when surrounded by oil activity — suffers from poverty, frequent oil spills and a lack of access to basic needs.

The Dayuma strike was harshly repressed by the army and police. Afterward, Correa apologized for the excesses committed and asked the assembly to pardon 22 of 26 inhabitants accused of terrorism and sabotage during the strike.

On Dec. 27, a march headed by Guayaquil mayor, Jaime Nebot — a fierce Correa critic of the Social Christian Party — was similarly quashed. Nebot's march began in Guayaquil and went toward Montecristi — where the assembly is being held — in order to protest for what Nebot considered "an attempt against municipal authority and particularly against the city of Guayaquil," in reference to the central government's announcement to dismantle the foundations controlling Guayaquil's public services.

The march was forcefully repressed in La Cadena, on the border between the Guayas and Manabi provinces, where protesters were prohibited to continue due to "a lack of circulation permits," according to the explanation of Guayas governor, Camilo Samán.

These harsh responses may be considered warnings of what the government is willing resort to when it encounters opposition, in accordance with its "National Development Plan," which outlines a 4.8 percent economic growth for 2008 through the exploitation of natural resources, in line with past governments.

For now, government efforts are evidently focused on centralizing economic control and political action, with the aim of channeling the majority of available resources toward social investment, which in 2007, according to Correa, "was for the first time greater than the resources allocated to the external debt."

The government will also face the dilemma of communities' rights in zones where natural resources are found and the need to exploit resources in order to meet the demands of the poor majority in Ecuador. □

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

Program for disarmament is a success

Over 70,000 firearms have been surrendered in exchange for money.

An average of 500 Argentines a day surrender their firearms in a government civil disarmament program that began on Aug. 1, 2007. The program offers different incentives to those who come forward voluntarily to trade arms for money in the official drop-off locations — governmental agencies, sport clubs, nongovernmental organizations.

The Program for Voluntary Surrender of Firearms, executed by the Ministry of the Interior through the National Arms Registry, or RENAR, aims to “decrease the use and proliferation of arms; to reduce the number of accidents, violent acts and crimes brought on by access to and use of arms; to make society more sensitive to the risks implied by the mere existence of arms; and to promote a culture that does not possess or use firearms,” states Law 26.216, approved on Dec. 20, 2006 and implemented on Jan. 11, 2007.

Money and incentives

According to the Justice Ministry’s most recent national statistics, 2,628 people were killed by firearms in 2006, representing 29 percent of all non-natural deaths.

However, national statistics are not updated and only register deaths caused by firearms, failing to measure the use of firearms in other crimes, such as robberies and kidnappings.

“Argentina differs greatly from the violence rates of other South American countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela, but it is important to stay alert because even without having serious social problems in the country, we are seventh in Latin America for deaths caused by firearms,” said sociologist Julio Waiselfisz, author of a study prepared for the Organization of Ibero-American States.

On top of paying between US\$33 and \$142, on a scale beginning with 22-caliber revolvers and going up to 9 mm pistols, the law offers complementary incentives to promote the voluntary surrender of arms, such as amnesty for those who do not have a permit or legal registration of the arm at the time of turning it in.

Andrés Meiszner, director of RENAR, ex-

plained that “the overwhelming majority of those who respond to the initiative are of legal age, overall women who are beaten or inherit the arms from their husbands and who, on surrendering the arms, tell us that the program established by the law has offered them a solution, as they did not know what to do with the revolvers in their homes before.”

One woman who received a check for 450 Argentine pesos (\$142) for the surrender of a 9 mm pistol, tearfully explained that the gun belonged to her husband, but that she no longer wanted it in the house. “When he gets crazy, he grabs it and threatens me, even when the kids are present — he doesn’t even care about the kids. It scares me a lot, maybe one day he’ll accidentally fire and kill me.”

Along with the Program for Voluntary Surrender of Firearms, the law aims to distance children from a culture of violence and prohibit the “fabrication, sale, trade and importation of firearm replicas,” as well as to instruct national authorities in “promoting campaigns to sensitize and abandon the use of these toys in children’s games.”

Good results

In the first five months since the law went into effect, authorities collected more than 70,000 firearms, much more than what RENAR had originally estimated. Consequently, President Cristina Fernández has decided to postpone the program’s conclusion, originally scheduled for Dec. 31, 2007, to the end of 2008. She has also added \$3.4 million to the program’s budget.

“Before starting, we estimated that by March of this year we’d be receiving around 40,000 arms, and now it looks like we will maybe triple our initial goal by that time,” said Meiszner on announcing in January the campaign’s second phase in summer vacation spots and, especially, in the provinces where the program has yet to be enforced.

“The experience gathered in these months indicates that the program arrived at the perfect time. The majority of those who come to the drop-off locations report dramatic situations— it is evident that there are many people who need to solve the problem of having a firearm in the house,” said Carolina Cóncaro of the Argentine Disarmament Network.

According to official information, just under half of the arms surrendered had been registered with RENAR at some point, while others still had their documentation in order. But Meiszner warns that “in spite of the program’s success, we are still far from reaching better possession standards.”

In a population of more than 36.4 million, there are more than 1.2 million firearms legally registered in the hands of civil society, and authorities estimate another 2.5 million firearms on the black market, meaning there is a firearm for one in every 10 inhabitants in Argentina. □

“Many people need to solve the problem of having a firearm in the house.”

— Carolina Cóncaro

GUATEMALA

Adoption law. On Dec. 31, Guatemala’s Adoption Law took effect. The legislation seeks to put an end to the profitable international adoption business managed by a network of lawyers and notaries (*LP, March 21, 2007*), which sees profits of around US\$200 million each year. The cost of each adoption is around \$40,000.

According to the Attorney General’s Office in Guatemala, 5,110 adoptions took place between Jan. 1 and Dec. 3, 2007, 90 percent to US families.

The law establishes a National Adoption Council, with representatives from the Foreign Ministry, the Supreme Court and the President’s Secretary of Well-Being, which will oversee the adoptions.

Lawyers have announced that they will present proof of the law’s unconstitutionality. It is the second time they have resorted to this measure to protect their interests.

In 2002 Guatemala joined The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption, but a year later, at the request of a local group of lawyers, the Constitutional Court ruled that the convention was unconstitutional. —*LP*.

COSTA RICA

Bryan Kay in Playa Junquillal

Leatherbacks at risk

Local community leaders and organizations team up to spread importance of endangered animal.

The numbers of Pacific leatherback turtles, the charismatic giant marine turtle are falling rapidly. In the last 20 years, an estimated 90 percent of them have disappeared — many of their nesting sites are under threat and their safety in the heavily-fished Pacific Ocean has diminished drastically.

Some may say the leatherback is fighting a losing battle to survive, but according to biologists in Costa Rica, home to one of the most important nesting sites for the Pacific leatherback, a few recent victories have been recorded.

Biologists with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), activists and members of beach town communities are in the midst of a four-pronged fight to save the species.

Carlos Drews, the coordinator of the WWF's Marine Turtle Conservation program in Latin America and the Caribbean, says the species' population crash can be pinned to four major threats: accidental or incidental fishing, egg poaching, beachside developments and climate change.

Drews, a Colombian biologist, illustrated the leatherback's demise with a glaring statistic.

"In the last three decades the numbers we have seen arriving at Playa Grande [the main Pacific nesting site for the leatherback] has gone from 1,800 to 50-120," he said

The main threat is from by-catch or incidental capture of non-target species, which claims the lives of 50,000 marine turtles every year.

In a bid to reduce the by-catch of endangered species, more than 250 global fishermen met at the World Fisheries Forum in the Costa Rican port town of Puntarenas in November and vowing to tackle the problem. One method currently being deployed is to change the type of fishing hook from a 'J' shaped instrument to a circular one. Tests have shown by-catch of turtles can be reduced by as much as 90 percent with the apparently kinder hooks, without affecting fishing levels.

Starting small

But one of the WWF's proudest achievements involves a small project in the tiny northwestern beach town of Playa Junquillal, Guanacaste, near the symbolic Playa Grande, known as the home of the leatherback due to its importance as one of the most important nesting sites in the whole of the Pacific.

The community-based initiative, which sought to transform poachers into protectors, saw turtle egg poaching undergo a crash of its own, from 100 percent to a near zero, the WWF said. Drews described the community effort as a "model" for other communities.



Menor (left) and Jaime with an olive ridley turtle that has recently spawned.

Known as the Pacific Leatherback Conservation Project, local youngsters and student researchers have been working for two years to halt egg poaching, according to Gabriel Francia, the biologist who leads the project.

He has enlisted a small group of volunteers dedicated to protecting the turtles, carrying out patrols of the beaches around Junquillal around the clock.

Despite the relative success, Francia lamented a recent surge in turtle egg poaching in the area, which has been linked to an influx of people working in the area's burgeoning construction developments.

"These people don't have children in schools, they don't have any commitment in the area," said Francia.

One of the key planks of the project is work in the local schools. Francia said the hope is that children take the message about the dangers of turtle egg poaching home to their parents.

New customs

Biologist Valerie Guthrie, another of the project organizers, said they cannot completely rule out local residents as responsible for the recent climb since eating turtle eggs is a new custom in the Junquillal area.

But she said moves were now being made to work in conjunction with the construction companies to disseminate the same message.

Francia, however, was scathing in his criticism of the developments being thrown up in the greater Guanacaste area.

Plush condominiums and apartment buildings are starting to dominate parts of the coast. As these developments go up in areas near turtle nesting sites, said Francia, newly-born young become disorientated by the bright lights, halting their development and threatening populations.

Francia said there is no place for the encroaching buildings when nature is under threat. He said the planners who allow such developments to get the green light also threaten Costa Rica's reputation as a country dedicated to ecological preservation.

"The ratio of those who respect the turtles to those who don't is probably still 50-50."

— Rainer Frommlet

Meanwhile, members of the public say they are noticing the difference the project has made. German hotel owner Rainer Frommlet said the project had been successful, but reckons around half of local residents continue to flout the law.

“The ratio of those who respect the turtles to those who don’t is probably still 50-50,” he said. “But before it was probably 70-30 against.”

Reformed poachers Jaime and Menor Jen, two of the local volunteers, blame much of the residual poaching on alcoholics who steal the eggs to support their addiction.

“The problem with alcoholics is they take them in order to get alcohol,” said Jaime. “They sell them for 2000 or 3000 colons (\$4-\$6) for 100.”

During a recent patrol of the beaches at Junquillal, they told how they had been unaware of the damage they were causing to marine turtle populations until the project began.

The project also works with the olive ridley and the black turtles and as the Jen brothers spoke of their fondness for the creatures, an olive ridley emerged from the sea to spawn.

The pair waited patiently as the turtle laid 106 eggs in a nest it had burrowed in the sand, before collecting and replacing them in another spot where poachers will be less likely to find them.

They carry out the patrols every night, but claim they have no intention of returning to their old ways. “We learned about the problems in the sea and the numbers. Plus, they are beautiful,” added Jaime. □



The CIP collects all potato varieties.

PERU

Hildegard Willer in Lima

Andean potatoes for the world

Innovative projects encourage native potato production.

When the International Potato Center, known as CIP for its initials in Spanish, was founded in 1971, there was no doubt that the most suitable place for it was in Peru. There are more than 5,000 potato varieties, the majority of which are still grown in the Andean highlands, where the tuber was born some 7,000 years ago.

David Tay and Alberto Salas are two of 60 researchers who work in the CIP in Lima, where varieties of tubers from all over the world are collected, researched, classified, conserved and improved.

Tay, originally from Malaysia, first arrived in Peru 28 years ago to research potatoes. Now he is in charge of the conservation and classification of CIP’s genetic resources, with unwavering interest.

“For a yellow potato, I’d gladly reject my plate of rice,” Tay affirmed.

When at the beginning of the 1970s the so-called “green revolution” promised solutions to food security problems in developing countries, industrialized nations and multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, founded international research centers coordinated by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). In this way the World Fish Center in Malaysia, International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines and the International Center for Maize and Wheat Improvement in Mexico were founded, as well as the CIP.

Who are the owners?

The heart of the CIP is its germplasm bank. In two refrigerated chambers, more than 5,000 potato species, both native and genetically improved, are conserved in test tubes. Each one has a genetic passport.

With more than 120 natural enemies — including bacteria, insects, viruses and fungi — potato germplasms must necessarily be conserved. Furthermore, as a result of temperature increase due to global warming, the number of harmful insects has also increased.

Ana Panta, the germplasm bank’s head biologist, assures that the bank’s genetic resources are available to anyone who needs them.

“*Campesinos* come here with their ‘sick’ potatoes, we clean them and they can take with them a clean seed,” she says.

Other researchers from universities and government or private institutions also use the bank.

“As a biological resource, the *campesinos* who grow the potatoes are their owners. As genetic material, the owner is the Peruvian government,” explains Isabel Lapeña, lawyer specialized in biodiversity at the Peruvian Society of Environmental Law.

One exception would be the genetic resources of the CIP. The Convention on Biological Diversity, signed in 1992, establishes that “governments have sovereign rights over

LATIN AMERICA

Lower classes hardest hit by demands for bribes.

Low-income families in both developed and developing countries are the class most affected by bribes, according to the Global Corruption Barometer 2007, published by Transparency International (TI) in December.

The study "has made it clear that too often, people must part with their hard-earned money to pay for services that should be free," said Huguette Labelle, TI president.

TI found it is the low-income sector that is most often faced by a demand for bribes, in both rich and poor countries. "This in turn means that corruption acts as a regressive tax that increases income inequality," the report states.

In Latin America, the police sector is most likely to seek bribes, followed by the judiciary.

More than 63,199 people in over 60 countries — nine in Latin America — were interviewed for last year's study.

LATIN AMERICA Respondents who paid a bribe to obtain services

Country	%
Dominican Rep.	28
Bolivia	27
Peru	18
Panama	13
Venezuela	12
Argentina	5
Colombia	nd
Ecuador	nd
Guatemala	nd

Source: Transparency International

their own biological resources." But since the CIP's genetic resources were formed before 1992, the CIP refers to the previous agreement, which states that genetic resources pertain to humanity in general.

Red light to transgenics

One controversial issue is the research of transgenic potatoes, which are modified with other organisms' genes. In July 2007, the CIP presented the "revolution" — a new genetically modified potato variety that is resistant to potato moths, one of the most harmful insects to the potato.

According to CIP policy, genetic engineering helps developing countries to improve their production and consequently helps eliminate poverty — an opinion that meets strong resistance in Peruvian civil society.

The Action Network on Agricultural Alternatives (RAAA) in Lima warned that the transgenic potato variety — "revolution" — could contaminate the native species and threaten biodiversity.

"The CIP has a two-sided policy," said Ymelda Montoso, of the RAAA, "on the one hand, to conserve the species, and on the other, to develop transgenic potatoes. Is this really the role of an international organization?"

Due to the accumulating criticism, the CIP had to back away and reassure public opinion that the transgenic potato would not be released in Andean countries.

Market for native potatoes

The current concern over commercial abuse of native Andean potato varieties is more rather hypothetical. The reality is that there is no market for native potatoes, which is why the *campesinos* in the high Andes who grow them do not receive significant profits.

The Andean Potato Project, an agreement between the CIP and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, seeks to change this situation by introducing native potatoes to the Lima market as a gourmet product for wealthier consumers. The project gives incentive to small businesses so that they use the native variations for bagged potato chips ("Jalca Chips"). The project also pays the Andean potato producers above-market prices.

The "Jalca Chips" come in all different colors, like purple and yellow. "T'ikapapa," another gourmet potato product is sold in the best supermarkets in Lima.

Before conquering the Lima market, T'ikapapa had already conquered the world. In December, the British BBC and US magazine *Newsweek* awarded T'ikapapa first prize in the competition "World Challenge 2007," which was conducted in association with Shell Oil.

The United Nation's declaration of 2008 as International Year of the Potato will also contribute to the native potatoes' increased diffusion. □

VENEZUELA

Andrés Cañizález and Elsa Piña in Caracas

More money, more poverty?

Consumption soars, but unequal distribution persists.

There is more money in the hands of the poorest Venezuelans, causing consumption to soar, but fundamental issues — such as a lack of shelter and other basic needs — are still far from being resolved.

Once President Hugo Chávez's government took full control of the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) following a December 2002-January 2003 oil strike, the company's priorities were rearranged. According to their website, US\$13 billion was pledged in 2006 to the nation's social development. In fact, it is common to find announcements advertising that PDVSA will finance events ranging from children orchestras to food programs.

Luis Pedro España, head of the Poverty Project at the Andrés Bello Catholic University, says that thanks to the oil bonanza, the country is living an illusion, just as it did in the 1970s.

"There are people who consume more, but only because PDVSA has more income. When the oil market suffers a cold, we ourselves will die of pneumonia," assured España in a recent interview.

Network against poverty

According to the government's National Institute of Statistics, Venezuela has seen a spectacular reduction in poverty. Households living in poverty reduced from 54 percent in 2003 to 27 percent in 2007, while families in extreme poverty went from 25 percent to less than 8 percent.

David Velásquez, who was minister of Social Participation and Social Development until the beginning of this January, believes that government policies are responsible for the achievements.

"A network against poverty is developing. It is possible to reach the goal of Zero Misery [extreme poverty] in 2001 and Zero Poverty in 2021," he remarked.

Furthermore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean gave Venezuela second place (after Argentina) as the country with the most successful policies for reducing poverty in 2007.

However, it is obvious for Mercedes Pulido, former minister of Social Development, that while Venezuelans have higher incomes,

“What we have, so to speak, are poor people with more money.”

— Luis Vicente León

“basic problems continue without being resolved.”

“If income alone is measured, there is undoubtedly a positive change, but this does not resolve the structural problem of poverty. What we have, so to speak, are poor people with more money,” commented Luis Vicente León, director of Datanálisis, a market and politics research firm.

According to the Human Development Report 2007-2008 issued by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), there is a serious situation of unequal distribution in Venezuela: the poorest 10 percent must share 0.7 percent of the country's gross domestic product, while the richest 10 percent control 35.2 percent of the GDP. For UNDP, a useful indicator for measuring income distribution is the Gini coefficient, which grew from 44.1 in 2006 to 48.2 in 2007 on a scale of zero (perfectly equal) to 100 (perfectly unequal).

The president of INE, Elías Eljuri, disregarded the UNDP report, which he branded as ridiculous.

Social emphasis

Following the defeat of the Dec. 2 referendum — when Venezuelans voted against the proposed constitutional reform presented by Chávez, which included indefinite presidential reelection (*LP*, Dec. 12, 2007) — President Chávez announced that more emphasis should be placed on social problems.

Specifically, Chávez mentioned that his government should reinstate some of the social programs he launched a year before the 2004 referendum, when it was decided whether Chávez would stay in power or not. The programs include free medical attention and education as a part of “21st Century So-

cialism” promoted by Chávez (*LP*, Aug. 25, 2004 and Jan. 24, 2007).

In the 2008 budget approved last November by Congress, 4 percent —US\$2.5 billion — was designated for the social programs, referred to as “missions”, having been bolstered by the price of oil, which currently borders \$100.

There are 20 missions in all, which — according to Pulido — are non-systematic due to their lack of institutionalism, are exclusive since they demand political affiliation with the Bolivarian process, and lack control.

Ratified for another seven years at the beginning of January, Comptroller General Cldosvaldo Russián admitted difficulties in supervising how public money is spent on these programs.

For Aura Gil, 35-year-old student at the Ribas Mission, a secondary school for adults, the government is doing what's right so that “the poor move forward.”

In less than two years, Gil completed her primary education and managed to combine work with studies. The government gives the equivalent of \$139 monthly grants to participants. “Those who receive this grant really need it,” said Gil.

Meanwhile, there was 22.7 percent inflation in Venezuela in 2007, one of the highest in the region according to the Venezuelan Central Bank. However, the impact was greater for the poor — as even the BCV admitted — since there was a 30 percent increase in prices of food and drink, where the poor spend more.

Venezuela has a population of 28 million and the current minimum wage is equivalent to \$286. The Social Analysis Center, which for the past 15 years has calculated the basic food basket for a five-person household, estimated it last December at \$1,178 per month. □

inbrief

- In **Argentina**, the Cordoba province pardoned *campesinos*, rural activists and a priest who have been accused of removing the fence around a field inherited from their ancestors, which was taken over in 2005 by a businessman who had illegally acquired the land.
- Costa Rican authorities deported more than 9,000 Nicaraguans who tried to enter **Costa Rica** illegally between Dec. 21 and Jan. 6. The migrants had intended to look for work in the coffee, fruit and sugar cane harvests that begin in January and February.
- The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities in **Ecuador** (CONAIE) elected Marlon Santi as their new president on Jan. 13, who will replace Luis Macas. Santi, recognized for his fight against oil companies, will serve until 2010.

- Social Democrat Álvaro Colom was sworn in as president of **Guatemala** on Jan. 14 for a four-year term. Colom, who won a runoff vote Nov. 14 against retired general Otto Pérez Molina, is the sixth president to be democratically elected since the end of the armed conflict in 1986.



Álvaro Colom

- **Venezuela** started 2008 with a new currency: the strong bolivar is intended for controlling inflation, which soared last year to 22.7 percent. The new currency removes three zeros from the former, which will set the exchange rate at 2.15 bolivars per dollar.

NICARAGUA

Interview with Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Ariel Bucardo

“First priority is domestic food production”

The program Zero Hunger (“Hambre Cero”) is an integral part of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), that has returned to power after 16 years and is promising a fight against extreme poverty and food insecurity.

José Carlos Bonino, LATINAMERICA PRESS collaborator, has met with **Ariel Bucardo**, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry in Nicaragua, to talk about this program and the effects of US and EU trade agreements on the Nicaraguan agricultural sector.



Ariel Bucardo

(LP, May 16, 2007) with the goal that people no longer ask for food. There have been many programs to combat poverty and hunger that give food away to the people, but this makes families dependent and even more impoverished.

We are handing out capital goods to poor families so that they produce; the government's first priority is domestic food production and afterward, exportation. We have changed the conceptions of previous governments, which focused all efforts on exportation. We have chosen the path that leads us first

to guaranteeing food for Nicaraguans, national food security.

How would you describe the agricultural infrastructure in Nicaragua?

Nicaragua is a country of small-scale producers; we have almost 200,000 small and medium sized producers and almost 1,300 are mass producers with more than 350 hectares [870 acres] of land. The majority are producers with land measuring between nearly 14 and 35 hectares [35 and 87 acres]. This guarantees that, while there is a tendency toward large concentrations of land, the distribution of land in Nicaragua is balanced.

On the other hand, we have a structural problem: a producer of [870 acres] in Nicaragua with the existing technology produces the same as a producer of [174 acres] in El Salvador.

Program does not give away food

What changes has the current government made concerning food security?

It is still very early to talk about the changes in food security since we have inherited a decade and a half of neoliberalism. Consequently, it will take more time to make changes in the infrastructure of the nation's food system.

What we can assure is that there are governmental policies that lead us to hope there will be a better food supply in the future, overall for Nicaragua's *campesinos*, who are among the poorest.

In the last 16 years in Nicaragua, many economic resources have been spent, including the national budget and international cooperation for the fight against poverty. The result has been negative because each day the poor are poorer while the rich grow richer. This means that all the resources spent on the fight against poverty have somehow found their way back to the elite, who has administered the distribution.

Today for a change, we are working on food production, carried out by those who will consume it, overall in the rural sector. We are currently working on the Zero Hunger program

How has the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR) affected the agricultural sector?

CAFTA-DR has already been in force for a year (LP, Nov. 29, 2006) and we do not believe it has a positive impact on the agricultural sector since it is a pact that was created under very unequal terms with the United States. Nicaragua is a country with very outdated technology in comparison with the United States: we have electrical blackouts; we don't have an irrigation system, machinery, or roads; and we have a *campesino* population that is almost completely illiterate.

On the other hand, the United States subsidizes its producers and it is very difficult to compete with the advanced technology they have. We would like to have a trade agreement that would at least allow us to compete under equal conditions, but this is not the case with CAFTA-DR.

What role do the European Union Association Agreements play?

I see countless mysteries surrounding this issue. We aspire to have good trade relations with Europe, but I am not convinced that [outside countries] can achieve the conditions necessary to enter the European market, as it is one of the most protective of its agricultural production in the world.

If they don't give us preference, we would like for them at least to eliminate their subsidies, protection of their production and non-tariff barriers, and for them to allow Central American countries to compete in these markets under equal conditions.

More than just trade relations

What do you think of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's promotion of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA)?

ARGENTINA

Eight oppressors condemned.

Former military commander Cristino Nicolaides was condemned to 25 years on Dec. 18 for human rights violations during the military dictatorship (1976-83).

Nicolaides, 82, formed part of the military junta that ruled the country between 1982 and 1983, presided by former general, Reynaldo Bignone, who is now under house arrest for crimes against humanity.

The ruling, which was celebrated by human rights organizations, also affected former military officers Pascual Guerrieri, Carlos Fontana, Waldo Roldán, Luis Arias Duval, Santiago Hoya, Juan Carlos Gualdo and former policeman Julio Simón (aka “Turco Julián”), who were sentenced to between 20 and 25 years for the disappearance of five militants of the leftist group Montoneros between 1979 and 1980.

Other former dictators, such as Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-81) and Uruguayan Gregorio Álvarez (1981-85) face trials for crimes against humanity, committed during Plan Condor — the repressive coalition between the dictatorships in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay in the 1970s and 80s (LP, Dec. 26, 2007). —LP.

More than a trade agreement, we hope that it is a policy oriented toward fair trade and fair investment. We want to develop a strategic alliance in which solidarity moves these poor or emerging nations' interests, rather than competition or economic opportunism, such

as what usually happens in trade agreements.

The intention is to make allies so that we see ourselves as one single nation with equal treatment, which is a dynamic we are already seeing in the oil issue. □

ARGENTINA

Paolo Moiola in Buenos Aires

Help without intermediaries

Martial arts teacher devotes his life to spending time with street children.

Commonly seen in the subway, a train station or sheltered in a doorway, there are many children who have become masters at survival in the streets, living amidst drugs, police and threatening circumstances. Fortunately, these children don't always have to face this precarious life alone.

Martial arts teacher Mario Julio Sotelo, 47, dedicates much of his time and energy to helping street children directly, without intermediaries. Sotelo has spent time in Costa Rica and the United States, but now works as a courier and volunteers teaching martial arts to kids in the Miguel Magone Center (*LP, Dec. 12, 2007*). "In my own small way, I also try to help street kids," he says.

Open House

"This is my humble home, only a step above the *ranchada* in the street," warns Sotelo, as if to excuse it. The term *ranchada* refers to an improvised shelter made by street children: the place where they meet, sleep and establish their daily schedule.

In the *ranchadas*, the children "decide their activities," Sotelo explains, "activities that often include robbery; there are few groups who live on recycling," he said, referring to those who collect recyclable items from the trash to exchange for money. "They also use drugs in the *ranchadas*."

Sotelo says he works with street children because he feels the "need to do it," as he too was once on the street. "Since I was an orphan, I grew up in an institute and didn't know my parents. I learned to survive in an institute that, all things considered, was a respectable place."

Sotelo's house is open to everyone. "I repeat," he insisted, "this is a little *ranchada*, it's not a real house where there are beds and everyday comforts. I have what's essential. I live with my son. I have three forks: one for me, the other for him and one for the visitor, who today is Maxi." Maximiliano, 16, sits and listens. "I have known Maxi for years," Sotelo continues, "but only recently has he

started living with me. He helps me in my courier job."

In the harsh hands of the police

"When I was little," said Maxi, "I was with my dad for seven years. Later with my mom for two years, before she died of AIDS. I didn't want to be with my relatives, so I chose the street. It's been six years since I've seen any of them and I don't have any desire to see them."

In the street, Maxi added, "you learn good things and bad things. The good thing is you learn to live with other people; the bad is learning to do drugs and steal."

Several times Maxi has been in the hands of the police. "I cannot say that all policemen are bad. Some bring you something to eat, while others keep you for the whole day without even giving you a glass of water."

One time, Maxi was with a friend who had a small dose of marijuana in his wallet. "As I had no [police] drug record, I said it was mine, for my personal use. I was in the police station for 11 hours without even being allowed to go to the bathroom or make a phone call."

"I'm not a bad person," Maxi continued. "Even though people think that as soon I approach them to ask for some change. They protect their bag, their cell phone. But not all of us are the same, as Mario knows."

María's *ranchada*

Many people, including families with kids, sleep under archways.

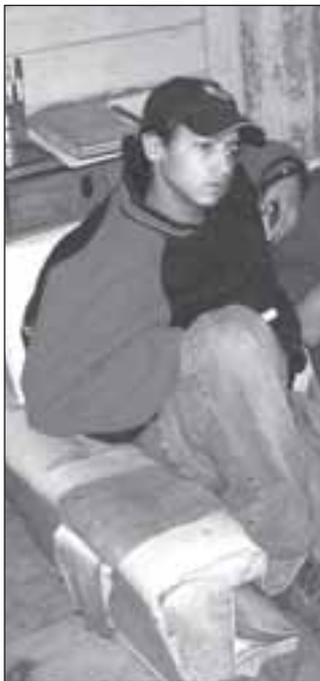
The beds are improvised, but they at least have blankets. There are bags and sacks all over, filled with personal items. Someone has collected cardboard boxes to sell or use as a shelter and there are various shopping carts, used to transport belongings.

Martín, 13, is one of the occupants. "I am alone, so I came to María's *ranchada* since she's a friend," he says. During the day, Martín earns change through juggling in the streets.

"I'm from Buenos Aires. I've lived in the street since I was 9 years old. My mom lives with my step-father and little sister, but I haven't seen them for a long time."

Martín's hands look like those of an elderly carpenter. "They are marks left by Poxirán," Sotelo explains, referring to the glue that many street kids use to get high.

María's *ranchada* is in the corner of the archway, in front of shop windows. María holds a newborn in her arms: the son of her daughter, who is still a minor. Her other son, Víctor, uses drugs and had his foot amputated after falling off a train. María says she is 29 years old, but Sotelo explains that she does not know her real age. □



PAOLO MOIOLA

Maxi at the home of his tutor, Mario Julio Sotelo.

Young people on the fringes of society

Unfinished basic schooling forces youths to accept unstable jobs.

Seven million young Brazilians and nearly 800,000 youngsters in Argentina swell the ranks of a veritable army of Latin American youths who neither work nor study — a phenomenon that threatens to continue reproducing poverty, say experts.

In Brazil, those who do not work or attend school make up nearly 20 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24, according to a study on youth development drawn up by Argentine sociologist Julio Jacobo Waiselfisz.

Jorge Werthein, director of the Latin American Technological Information Network, which commissioned the report, said the cause of the situation is “structural and historical inequality” which is “a reality throughout Latin America.”

Due to the lack of prospects, young people have no problem saying, for example, that “I prefer to be involved in drug trafficking, even if I die young, because that way I’ll have the things that other people have, like a motorcycle or brand name tennis shoes,” says the study.

“That is what we are unfortunately seeing in many countries, and reproducing in others in Latin America, with the emergence of gangs,” said Werthein.

His study also found that young whites in Brazil attend 1.5 years more of school than young blacks.

But Werthein is not completely pessimistic. He noted that programs developed in Brazil over the last few years have led, for example, to progress toward universal primary school enrollment, which has climbed to 97 percent, and in the fight against illiteracy among the country’s youths, which has plunged to 2.4 percent.

Education is the key

The expert said it must be a top priority for the region to implement long-term education plans, with a 30 to 40-year horizon, as Argentina has begun to do.

Guillermo Pérez Sosto, one of the authors of the report “Decent Work and Youth”, believes the only effective way to bring about change is by eliminating the causes of the problem, through preventive actions aimed at keeping young people in school. For example, he said, by ensuring that there are guardians or tutors who track them down when they start skipping class and who take an interest in their problems, as well as by combating teen pregnancy and drug use.

“If the educational system was better at holding on to students and the labor market was less precarious, it would be easier for these boys and girls,” he said.

Though successful programs have been carried out to improve the situation, “they do not address the underlying problems,” he said.

As an example, he mentioned a plan that began to be implemented jointly in 2006 by Argentina’s Education Ministry and the Toyota carmaker. The strategy focuses on training and insertion in the labor market for unemployed secondary school drop-outs.

While they underwent training to work in the Toyota factory, the participating youngsters received 900 pesos (US\$300) a month, and when the training course was over, they were hired by Toyota at a monthly wage of 2,400 pesos (\$800).

But out of 2,600 youngsters who applied for the 300 spots in the program, only 60 passed the psychological tests and were found to have the required learning ability, he lamented.

In Mexico, meanwhile, three out of 10 young people between the ages of 20 and 29 are unemployed, and one out of four of these are not studying either, according to the 2006 national survey on employment.

Support programs for young people have also been implemented in Mexico City, which has a population of 20 million and has been governed by the leftwing Party of the Democratic Revolution since 1997.

One of the programs created “social guardians” in neighborhoods where unemployment and youth violence are at their worst. Their task, financed by the city government, is to get young people involved in different community, sports and cultural activities. □

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