

CUBA

Lucila Horta in Havana

Changes ahead?

Raúl Castro assumes presidency, as island speculates on what's to come.

For the first time since the 1976 creation of the National Assembly, Fidel Castro did not run again as the sole candidate to the Cuban presidency. In a message published on Feb. 18, he announced that he would not accept to be re-elected as the country's president and chief of the armed forces.

On Feb. 24, 614 lawmakers, who were elected in January, were sworn into the Sixth Legislature, which nominated Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother, as president for a five-year term. Raúl Castro had been serving as interim president for the last 18 months, when his brother stepped aside for health reasons (*LP, Aug. 23, 2006*).

Ending speculation both on the island and abroad about the role Fidel would play in the future, Raúl asked lawmakers to authorize him to consult with Fidel on the major foreign affairs and military strategies. The assembly approved the motion unanimously.

"It was predictable that Fidel would participate even tangentially in important decisions," said Luis René Fernández, a researcher with the Havana University's Center for Studies on the United States. "His ability to predict and anticipate delicate situations is proverbial ... Fidel always was a talented strategist. He stands out as one of the heavy-weight strategists in the current world."

"It's calming to know that Fidel will continue ... giving advice, because the age that is coming is very strong, and our country will enter in decisive moments with the changes to come," said Nidia Díaz, a foreign policy analyst from Cuba.

Changes announced

In one of his first moves, the president asked the legislature to suspend the functions of central government administration offices — 27 ministries and four other institutes — because "today requires a more compact and functional structure, with a fewer number of bodies and a better distribution of functions to fulfill," he said.

This reduction, said the younger Castro, 76, is aimed at cutting down "the huge number of meetings, co-ordinations, permits,



Fidel Castro ruled Cuba for 49 years.

"It's calming to know that Fidel will continue ... giving advice."

— Nidia Díaz

regulations and many etceteras ..."

He says that these will allow for more concentration in certain decisive economic activities and a better use of human resources.

Most Cubans welcomed these announced changes. Excessive bureaucracy, leading to slow paperwork for even the simplest transactions, is a major complaint of Cubans. Eliminating intermediary steps in the economy and services is likely to be welcomed by the island's 11 million inhabitants.

An easing of the obstacles in daily life is a central part of the proposals presented by citizens after Raúl Castro called last year for a national debate on the future of Cuban socialism (*LP, Sept. 19, 2007*).

Among the measures he proposed are increases in agricultural production and sale, an issue debated heavily in each province and which is already being partially implemented.

Last December, while he was still acting president, Castro warned that actions will continue to be taken as quickly as possible to allow for land and resources "to be in the hands of those who are capable of producing efficiently, so they feel supported, socially recognized and receive the material retribution they deserve."

An increase in food production will allow for a drop in prices, and economists say that it is essential to introduce flexibility for those who are a part of such an important sector.

An end to the rationing book?

Raúl Castro hinted that the rationing book may be completely eliminated. Through this card the basic food basket is distributed to the citizens, and though insufficient for a month of food consumption, it is composed of almost free products.

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"Maintaining this plan of subventions is irrational and unsustainable," he said, referring to the rationing book, which is a daily part of Cubans' lives.

This was a major issue for Fidel years before he fell ill. It has provoked little debate, because it has been assured that nobody would be left unprotected.

Some experts say that it is more rational to subsidize people than products, giving each a stipend for what they require, or free food to low-income workers in neighborhood community cafeterias, as it is done now, than maintaining symbolic prices on goods that are given away both to those who lack re-

sources and those who have too much.

Castro also said that he plans to analyze measures to eliminate the country's dual currency: the Cuban peso — used to pay salaries and purchases — and the convertible peso to purchase unrationed products (*LP, May 4, 2005*). He says it will be phased out gradually to avoid any brusque effects to the economy.

Raúl Castro also called on the legislature to implement a salary stimulus, that corresponds to each person's educational background and contributions to society, since now, for example, a taxi driver or restaurant owner can earn the same as an eminent surgeon. □

VENEZUELA

Andrés Cañizález and Elsa Piña in Caracas

Food shortage

Price controls and currency change spark crisis.

Even though oil costs around US\$100 per barrel, and the Venezuelan capital of Caracas is full of latest model cars — many of them luxury vehicles — finding milk, eggs and other basic food products are increasingly difficult. Local markets sell a variety of imported olive oils, but no domestically-produced vegetable, corn or soy oil.

According to the Venezuelan Teachers Federation's statistics unit, the first problems with food distribution in the country began in late 2006.

Luis Rodríguez, executive director of the National Supermarket Association, says that the issue is a structural problem, a result of price controls and the currency parity that President Hugo Chávez established in February 2003.

The products that are now in shortage have had the same price as they did five years ago. The US dollar is blocked in 2.15 bolivars. For many industries, there is no logic for the products to continue to be fixed with prices from five years ago, but the gov-

ernment refuses to raise them.

"On top of this we have government threats against the private companies," Rodríguez said. "It's a situation that has demotivated the industry."

Venezuela is also experiencing rampant inflation. From 2003 to 2007, the cost of life doubled.

On Jan. 1, in an attempt to control inflation that last year reached 22.7 percent (*LP, Jan. 23, 2008*), the government revalued the national currency to eliminate three zeroes in the denominations.

"In the last two years, the minimum wage has significantly increased, which has given buying power to the poorest classes, but the private sector was not prepared for that," added Rodríguez.

While for many, the key is increasing national production, Eduardo Gómez Sigala, president of the Venezuelan Industry Confederation, pointed out that there are only 7,000 food companies in the country, 5,000 fewer than in February 1999, when Chávez first assumed the presidency.

Importing country

Venezuela is a large importer. During the first oil boom in the 1970s, it became even more so, and now 80 percent of the food products consumed in Venezuela are imported or are produced with imported ingredients.

Meanwhile, the government blames the private sector for the shortages.

COLOMBIA

Four hostages freed. "I'm living again," exclaimed former lawmaker Gloria Polanco when she was reunited with her children in Caracas, Venezuela, Feb. 27, after she was freed by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which held her captive for more than six years. "I had been dead in life."

Polanco was freed along with fellow former congressmen Luis Eladio Pérez, Orlando Beltrán and Jorge Eduardo Gechem, in a deal brokered by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Colombian opposition Sen. Piedad Córdoba.

Along with the Red Cross, the Venezuelan government led an operation to pick up the former hostages in the Colombian department of



Gloria Polanco

Guaviare, in thick jungle, and air lifted them to Caracas.

Clara Rojas and Consuelo González, who had also been held hostage by the FARC, were handed over to Venezuelan and Colombian authorities and the Red Cross on Jan. 10 (*LP, Feb. 6, 2008*). The FARC has been holding some 40 people hostage — including former French-Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three US contractors — whom they consider can be used in a prisoner exchange with the government.

The Colombian government has refused to accept a humanitarian agreement to exchange the hostages for hundreds of imprisoned rebels. —IPS/LP.

PERU

Defending isolated indigenous peoples. London-based indigenous rights organization Survival International (SI) launched a campaign on Feb. 6 to protect indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation in Peru.

The organization estimates that there are 15 native peoples living in voluntary isolation in Peru who are severely threatened by illegal logging and oil exploration, the latter of which is being promoted by the Peruvian government (*LP*, Oct. 17, 2007).

Survival International called on the international community to pressure Peruvian authorities to take measures so that these peoples' rights are respected and to ban any form of natural resource extraction on their land.

The organization said that a potential encounter between the indigenous residents and oil companies could have serious consequences.

"Both the Indians and the oil workers would be at grave risk from such an encounter; the Indians from catching potentially fatal diseases such as influenza, and the workers from the very real danger of retaliation by the Indians, who would see their presence as a threat," said Survival. —*LP*.

Director of the government-run National Consumers' Defense and Education Institute, Samuel Ruh, said in a Feb. 15 press conference that there "are sectors that want to destabilize the country, making people believe that there is a food shortage, when in reality, the supply is guaranteed. The institution fined 3,000 businesses over the last three months for price speculation.

According to Ruh, "the country can be satisfied because the government is taking steps against speculation." Despite his statements, however, Ruh was fired on Feb. 18, three days later, from the position he held for nine years.

There seems to be an alternate reality. According to surveys by the pollster Datanálisis, half of Venezuelans blame the government for food shortages, a significant change from November when only one-third of respondents blamed the government.

On the other hand, the government has tacitly recognized that its previous initiatives for popular food supply failed, since in January it tapped the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) to intervene in the food market. With an initial investment of \$150 million, they will import — mainly from Argentina and Brazil — basic food products.

The government says the distribution network, named the Venezuelan Food Production and Distribution, will sell the products at government-regulated prices, targeting the middle class. Since 2004, the Food Markets

network, or *Mercal*, has operated (*LP*, June 30, 2004), which sells subsidized products, but is known for its monstrous lines.

Demand trumps supply

The new distribution network announced it will distribute 24,000 metric tons of food a month, and *Mercal* says it will increase its supply from 130,000 to 160,000 metric tons soon. But the demand is much more, estimated at some 900,000 metric tons a month to meet the country's needs.

For Elizabeth Borges, a 46-year-old cleaner and the head of her household, the shortage has become tortuous. About 70 percent of her monthly income of just over \$400 goes to food for her and her two children, aged 11 and 14.

Previously, she would do a food shopping once a month, but she now spends more time to buy food, visiting several stores to compare prices. She has paid \$16 for a kilogram of powdered milk, three times the regulated prices, "because my children needed it."

Felicia Barrera, a 42-year-old administrator, complains that her food expenses, for her, her husband and two children — aged 4 and 9 — by January, came to \$465.

"To do the shopping now is a whole operation, to go from one place to another, looking for products that are needed. You call your friends and relatives to get information about where to find something," she said. "Never in my life have I been in such a situation." □

COLOMBIA

Jenny Manrique in Bogota

Justice in jeopardy

Human rights lawyers face threats.

On Feb. 27, it will be ten years since Jesús María Valle Jaramillo was shot by three hit men in his office in the center of Medellín, Colombia, ending his life and his work in defending human rights in the northwest Antioquia department.

Valle had reported military and paramilitary officials' involvement in the Aro and Granja massacres in the municipality of Ituango in 1997 and actively endorsed the protection of people who had been displaced or put in a vulnerable situation.

A decade later, with his struggle still alive in the memory of those who knew him and with a condemnation from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Colombian state for the military's participation in his death, the situation for human rights lawyers in the country is still bleak.

Murders and impunity

The Eduardo Umaña Mendoza Colombian Association of Defense Lawyers claims that the murder of its members continues at

the same rate as impunity. There were 26 lawyers murdered in 2005 and 23 in 2006. Already by September of last year, the number of murders reached 12.

Lawyers without Borders-France, with the help of the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers Collective, found that 70 murders, 8 disappearances and 11 exiles had taken place between 1990 and 2004.

In order to make the situation more publicly visible, 10 missions have been carried out in Colombia by the American Association of Lawyers and Lawyers Without Borders-Quebec since 2003, most recently in September 2007. For a week, international delegates met with professionals and their respective organizations in different regions of the country in order to denounce instances of persecution, harassment and crimes committed against Colombian lawyers as retaliation for their legal defense work.

"We received testimonies from places where the hand of justice does not exist, and in addition to the lack of state protection, we find that a lack of membership weakens these organizations in the defense of its own members," said Argentina lawyer Ernesto Moreau, head of the mission.

BRAZIL

A guide to emigration. The Brazilian Labor Ministry published in January a series of guidelines, including required paperwork, rights and obligations, for Brazilians who are planning to live outside of the country.

It also includes information about problems they may encounter when arriving to the other country.

"It's important for the emigrant to be informed as much possible about the country they are going to move to or visit, mainly about their immigration policies," the pamphlet states.

The government also aims to inform potential emigrants about health systems abroad and required vaccines, visas, emergency numbers and the danger of entering another country clandestinely as well as the risk of falling victim to the people trafficking market.

According to the Labor Ministry, some 4 million Brazilians live abroad. Police figures show that the number of Brazilians who were deported or denied entry into other countries rose from 7,000 in 2005 to 13,580 in 2006. —LP.

This weakness in defending lawyers is so extensive that to date there is not a single open case in the Attorney General's Office or the Ombudsman. Though judicial authorities wash their hands by saying there have been no reports, there is an average of two politically-related murders per month.

Societal stigmatism

Ernesto Moreno Gordillo, member of the Colombian Association of Democratic Lawyers' board of directors and defense lawyer for several political prisoners, said that after being wounded by five shots in November 2005, "an investigation was opened for the crime but till now there have been no new findings." While he received help from the Quebec lawyers, he claimed the Attorney General's Office did nothing, even though he went in person to present the facts of his case.

The report also mentions that since defense lawyers are commonly identified with their clients' cause, they have been stigmatized in society, including by the Colombian government.

"President [Álvaro] Uribe constantly suggests that lawyers are delinquents and terrorists because they are accomplices to guerrilla forces, especially if they protect political prisoners. It generates an attack on the protection given by lawyers, which violates all hypotheses that this is a trustworthy justice," explained Moreau.

The most severe presidential stab came in July of last year, after the Supreme Court ruled against the Justice and Peace Law — approved in 2005, permitting the disbanding of paramilitary groups and reduction of their sentences to eight years of prison — on the grounds that the crimes committed by the self-defense groups were not political nor seditious, and therefore cannot be given am-

nesty. Uribe responded by saying that the highest court had "ideological slants in their decisions."

Unprotected victims

Persecution extends throughout the entire country. In the area including the Santander, Norte de Santander and Costa Atlantica departments, under paramilitary control, lawyers have had to move to other areas or simply not take on cases that require defending the indigenous population, civilians persecuted for political reasons or guerrilla members.

In the south of Colombia, lawyers who assume the defense of those being displaced toward Ecuador — an estimated 400,000 Colombians are crowded together in the border zone (LP, Feb. 8, 2006) — are also persecuted. In this area, harassment most commonly comes from the police and armed forces.

Victims who participate in the trials against paramilitary members under the Justice and Peace Law are winding up defenseless since — on top of being displaced from other regions and not having legal counsel — lawyers prefer not to take on their cause so not to become a military target. Thus their right to truth, justice and reparation is denied.

For Leandro Despouy, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, "the most prominent tool that human rights violators use is to silence lawyers in their practice and this institutional degradation should be seen as an alert."

Despouy also asserted that lawyers have merely been seen as part of this problem, not as victims of persecution. "There is a process here that requires the state and armed forces to publicly accept responsibility and this must serve as an alarm so that Latin American lawyers defend their instruments of struggle." □

CHILE

Gabriel Canihuante in La Serena

Worst drought in 50 years

Agriculture emergency declared in various areas.

Authorities, farmers, *campesinos* and educators look for ways to face the worst drought of the last 50 years, affecting 144 of the 345 communes and eight of Chile's 15 regions.

In the center region of Coquimbo — officially Region IV, characterized as semi-desert — all of the 15 communes have been affected. The Agricultural Minister, Marigen Hornkohl, declared the area in agricultural emergency and announced a series of measures to ease the crisis, including state intervention in the administration of river water, which is private property known as "water assets."

In comparison with previous episodes, "this time the drought has been much stron-

ger, more unruly, more violent," said leader Jorge Villalobos, member of the Amplified Regional Campesino Counsel which was created at the beginning of this year by *campesinos*, small farmers and members of cooperatives, with the goal of drawing up, discussing and developing policies for a better quality of life for *campesinos*.

Villalobos explained that in the mountains there was very little snow and very little rainfall in 2007, causing the wells — supplied by phreatic, or ground water — to have little or no water.

"The situation has been aggravated because last year there were strong freezes that affected the agriculture," added Villalobos,

“Without comprehensive policies it is very difficult to bring about sustainable development that is expressed in everything that has to do with people’s quality of life.”

— Jorge Villalobos

who is also a member of the agricultural community *Olla de Caldera*, an ancient system of collective land-ownership whose principal economic activity is goat farming.

According to reports from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Coquimbo region is currently experiencing a “cycle of low rainfall that has affected the availability of water resources since 2006.” In 2007, rainfall was down by 56 percent and some communes even saw a decrease of 70 percent, according to official statistics.

To confront the situation, the central government has adopted a series of measures to support the *campesinos* and farmers in the country’s six central regions — Coquimbo, Bernardo O’Higgins, Bío Bío, Maule, Santiago Metropolitan and Valparaíso — including money for animal feed, training in efficient water use, suspending the collection of debts, offering soft credit and also generating productive projects such as forestation.

Productive project contest

This year the government invited drought and freeze victims to participate in productive project contests where public funds can be earned in order to reinstate their activities. For example, in the at-risk area a special contest was held for 850 million pesos to be given (close to US\$1.7 million) for the areas con-

sidered in agricultural emergency in the Coquimbo region.

“What’s needed is not contests but a serious and responsible program for the development of dry lands,” Villalobos criticized. “What the government should do is implement a public works program in different sectors and communities to provide future alternatives.” He suggests that these public works could include deepening wells, improving reservoirs, distributing seeds and plants, and improving the grasslands and irrigation systems.

“This must be done not only during droughts, but continually,” he said.

Villalobos further explained that various communities are already regulating their livestock — lower numbers and greater productivity — and applying forestation plans and improving their lands. The United Nations Development Program is also helping carry out a registry of all wells in the most isolated areas, even though other deficiencies persist, like poor management of water, since the majority of communities lack a modernized irrigation system.

In this region of the country the drought is permanent; however no definite solutions are proposed whenever the situation worsens.

Villalobos claims that “all the commissions that have been created since the return to democracy [in 1990] have only given proposals, but now in the Amplified Regional Campesino Counsel there will finally be more resolutions.”

Hopes for improvement have been brought about by this new body, through which grassroots organizations will have greater social control over official measures. Villalobos added that “without comprehensive policies it is very difficult to bring about sustainable development that is expressed not only through what it produces but in everything that has to do with people’s quality of life.”

Using good practices

At the XXIII International Book Fair in La Serena in February, academics from the University of La Serena along with teachers from the Punitaqui commune in the Coquimbo region presented an educational manual on water management for rural schools, entitled “Between Droughts: Educational drops and downpours on good practices.”

“This book is one of the products of a long process of participative action-research developed between 2006 and 2007 in the Punitaqui commune,” said anthropologist Elizabeth Jiménez, one of the professionals contributing to the project Water Conservation in Rural Communities in Region IV, financed by the University of Regina in Canada. Students and teachers of Belgium School and members of the Punitaqui Irrigators Association all participated in the manual’s creation.

“The children had the opportunity to express their feelings on how to take care of water,” said Ismenia Mundaca, language and communication teacher in Punitaqui’s Belgium School. “I hope this manual is applied in all rural schools in the region.” □

GUATEMALA

Free way to death penalty. In an effort to curb the current wave in violent crime, Congress approved the enforcement of the death penalty on Feb. 12, a measure that will affect 41 people who are now on death row.

The death penalty application in Guatemala had been suspended since 2002 when the Constitutional Court determined that the law did not specify who had the power to award clemency.

The new law establishes that, once sentenced to death, the convict could request that the sentence be commuted to life. The country’s president will have 30 days to decide whether to apply the death penalty or award clemency.

In a letter to President Álvaro Colom, humanitarian organization Amnesty International urged the government to look for more efficient and lasting measures to confront the current insecurity crisis.

In its letter, the organization noted that Guatemala voted for the abolition of the death penalty in the United Nations last December.

“The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. It is arbitrary, it has proven ineffective in reducing crime, and it perpetuates a climate of violence in which justice can never be truly achieved,” said Amnesty International. —LP.

Dignity Income in motion

Social policies provide subsidies for children and seniors.



Ceferino Chuquimia, in line to receive his government pension.

MARTIN GARAT

Since Feb. 1, Bolivian banks have been bombarded by long lines of senior citizens at their doors, waiting for the pay dubbed "Dignity Income," a new pension for all citizens over 60 years old.

The measure pays US\$26 to those who lack any sort of pension and \$20 to those who have another source of income and is said to benefit an estimated 700,000 senior citizens throughout the country.

Dignity Income was announced by President Evo Morales' government last November as a substitute for the Solidarity Bonds, created by former president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997 and 2002-2003). The previous bonds totaled \$230 annually and were only paid to citizens 65 years and older.

"The bond is important for me, I have no other income," said Juan Zuleta, 62, who had already been standing in line for two hours in order to receive the pension. He said he would use the money on food, clothing and to help his children with their studies. However, he admitted that the pension is not a solution for his family's fragile economic situation, but "emergency aid, a small boost."

"The income should be minimum wage. I want to work, but the situation is very difficult. There is no work," said Ceferino Chuquimia, 70, who was behind Zuleta in line. Despite his disagreement with the quantity given, Chuquimia confessed he was thankful to the government for the new pension.

Dignity Income is the second bond that the current government has created. The first was labeled "Juancito Pinto," after the 12-year-old boy who died in 1880 fighting in the War of the Pacific against Chile, and is directed toward children between five and 10 years of age who study in public schools. The pension is distributed at the end of the year when they finish classes in order to prevent drop-outs.

The \$26 education pension was decreed by Morales in October 2006. More than a million children benefit from the measure, financed by the income earned on natural gas exports, which has increased significantly after the industry's nationalization two years ago (*LP, May 17, 2006*).

Necessary but not enough

"Dignity Income and Juancito Pinto have an important impact on the most marginalized sectors. The poverty index will decrease, but not from 60 percent to 40 percent as Vice President Álvaro García stated," says economist Alberto Bonadona. "The pensions will also strengthen the domestic market, though not very significantly."

Some economists have suggested that the money used for the bonds would lower the poverty level more if they were used for investment and to encourage exportation. Bona-

dona, however, does not agree.

"You cannot demand a person who does not eat well — and who has not eaten well his whole life — to be productive," he said. "In Bolivia, hunger is endemic; there are no famines, but many people suffer from malnutrition their whole lives. If people can eat better as a result of the pensions, then it is a good use of money."

Bonadona also asserted the need to accompany the bonds with promoting national production and exportation.

"If nothing is invested in Bolivian industry so that we can export, we will not overcome poverty; very little will be alleviated with the bonds. And the current government does not have an economic vision that permits the creation of a competitive economy," he states.

Economist Rosa Talavera also considers the bonds to be positive, but suggests that the government should organize campaigns for more bond money to be invested in Bolivia.

"They should organize school supplies fairs with national products at the same time they pay bonds to the children. It is not good that the money is spent on toys or imported used clothing," she said.

Another problem, according to Talavera, is that government talk establishes a relationship between the bonds and the nationalization of natural gas.

"That reinforces the idea that it is possible to live from the sale of our raw materials. What we need is to foment a spirit of enterprise," she signaled.

Risks

Bonadona and Talavera both warn that Dignity Income could become unsustainable in the long run.

"There is a danger that within 10 years we will find ourselves once again absorbed in the discussion of how to finance it. If the price of gas goes down, the Dignity Income will no longer be viable," said Bonadona.

Talavera, on the other hand, believes that "the government committed an excess when it lowered the age to only 60 years. That instantly doubled the number of Solidarity Bond beneficiaries."

The bond's financing has yet to be determined. The government wants to use revenues from the sale of gas currently allocated to local governments, but governors — the majority opponents to the official party — defend their budgets tooth and nail.

"Dignity Income is a political move. Morales' Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) fights for the right to use profits obtained from the nationalization of gas according to its own criteria. But a good part of the income goes to local governments controlled by the opposition. By taking away this income, MAS looks to weaken the opposition," analyst César Rojas explained.

Dignity Income has additional political benefits for the government. According to Rojas, "the Solidarity Bond linked to a previous government is eliminated and replaced by a new one, a little more generous, which is linked to the current government. This generates constituency for Morales." □

"If the price of gas goes down, the Dignity Income will no longer be viable."

— Alberto Bonadona

MEXICO

Lorraine Orlandi in Oaxaca

Three times the suffering

Poor and disenfranchised, indigenous women take on fight for equality.

When Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza decided to run for mayor of her tiny Zapotec community in Oaxaca's mountains, the 27-year-old teacher had to confront a centuries-old patriarchal system. Now she is fighting a lonely battle to make women full citizens in her village and in hundreds like it across Mexico.

In a complaint before the National Human Rights Commission, Cruz charged the all-male town council in Santa Maria Quiegolani with violating her constitutional right to participate in the Nov. 4 election just because she was a woman.

"In my village ... every voter writes on a ballot the name of the person they want to govern for three years. But I was denied this right," she said in her emotional letter to the commission. "When the authorities realized that the men of my community were writing 'Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza' on the majority of ballots, they decided to suspend the assembly and they threw the ballots in the garbage."

Her fight has brought national attention to an inherent dilemma for women's rights in indigenous communities. Under traditional forms of government, recognized in Mexican law as "usos y costumbres" (practices and customs), indigenous women are often barred from voting or speaking at public meetings, participating in civic life and owning land. "They are confused about practices and customs — this is abuse," she said in a telephone interview from Oaxaca. "They have violated not just my rights as a woman but the rights of all the citizens of the community."

Her case prompted Oaxaca state lawmakers to propose a measure requiring indigenous governments to recognize women's equality, as set forth in Mexico's Constitution, and afford them voting and other rights. The bill is backed by controversial state Gov. Ulises Ruiz, who visited Santa Maria Quiegolani amid the debate, the highest-ranking official ever seen there.

A dilemma for rights groups

The issue is delicate even for rights organizations. Mexico's 13 million indigenous citizens — about 12 percent of the population — have been largely marginalized in poor, remote regions. Traditional indigenous forms of government, or *usos y costumbres*,

were granted legal status in Mexico six years ago, a recognition seen as a victory for indigenous movements across Latin America.

For rights activists, the debate is between those who espouse "the universalism of human rights and those that believe in more relativism," said Marianne Mollmann, of Human Rights Watch. "I came down on the side of universalism. I don't feel sorry about believing that everybody has the same rights. *Usos y costumbres* is not a human right; human rights are individual. One of those basic principles is equality."

Indeed some groups may be hesitant to take a stand against indigenous practices. Cruz says she has received little support from Mexican rights promoters.

The national rights commission has not yet ruled on Cruz's complaint, but in a statement in February the office acknowledged that traditional indigenous practices can give rise to rights violations.

"The case of Prof. Eufrosina Cruz ... is not unrelated to the social problem of discrimination and exclusion that affects women in indigenous communities where *usos y costumbres* are strictly applied in conflict with other national norms ...," the commission said.

Indigenous women may face mistreatment and even violence at the hands of relatives and neighbors. In one publicized case, Macedonia Blas Flores, a Nahuatl indigenous woman from the central state of Queretaro, was beset by villagers who rubbed chili pepper on her genitals as punishment for suspected adultery.

Violence not tied to tradition

Patricia Rosete, an official with the government's National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, says that such violence is not always based on tradition. It can arise from social ills rampant in indigenous communities, including alcoholism and poverty. Her office helps indigenous women like Blas develop strategies to stop abuse of women "through their own [indigenous] points of view and vision."

Community activists agree that Western feminist paradigms do not fit neatly into the cultural context and economic realities of indigenous worlds.

"Applying feminist proposals means tearing up many cultural beliefs and practices," Noemí Gómez said in an interview in Oaxaca city while visiting from her Mixe indigenous village of San Marcos Moctum. "It can cause serious conflict and division within the community."

When she was 17, suspicious village patriarchs sent Gómez to jail for campaigning to build a second corn mill in the village so women would no longer have to walk 7 kilometers (4 miles) each day to grind corn for tortillas. The all-male council accused her of misusing the money even before it arrived. Even-



LORRAINNE ORLANDI

Town fathers wanted Noemí Gómez to give up her land, since her husband (both in the photo) already had an area to farm, but she refused.

"[Applying feminist proposals] can cause serious conflict and division within the community."

— Noemí Gómez

tually the mill was constructed with about \$3,000 in federal funds.

Now a 30-year-old poet and farmer, she founded the rights group *Mujeres Olvidadas del Rincon Mixe*, "Forgotten Women of the Mixe Enclave," and has fought for and won land and voting rights for women within Moc-tum's patriarchal communal government.

As a girl, she attended village assemblies with her father and bristled at the sight of the women hiding behind their shawls. Only wid-ows had land inherited from their husbands, and even they were not allowed to vote or voice their opinions.

"As a child this troubled me, and I ques-tioned my father a lot about it," Gómez says.

Through her struggle, all Moctum women now have full citizenship — the right to vote, speak at public meetings, participate in community service and farm their own land, although many renounce those rights.

Almost two years ago Gómez married fel-low-villager René Orozco, a musician and teacher. Town fathers wanted her to give up her land, since her husband already had a piece to farm. She refused.

"Talking about human rights in indigenous communities, people think of women as self-sufficient. That is not the case for indigenous women," she said. "The indigenous woman suffers three times more — for being a wom-an, poor and indigenous." □

ARGENTINA

Fernanda Sáñez in Buenos Aires

Misogynist society

Nearly 100 women killed as a result of domestic violence last year.

On Oct. 10, 2007, Cristina Fernández became the first woman in Argentine history to be elected president by popular vote (*LP*, Nov. 14, 2007). While this initially boosted the confi-dence of women's rights organizations, Fernández's arrival has not seemed to bring any radical change in the conditions for mil-lions of women. Actually, crimes and attacks against women are on the rise.

Last year, the number of women murdered by domestic violence totaled 95 cases, and in just the first month of 2008, nine more women were murdered — figures that human rights organizations believe might be lower than the real ones. Despite the vast differences in age, social status and lifestyle, these women all shared the common fate of being murdered by their current or former male partners.

In the majority of cases, the crime was a "death foretold," meaning that it was not the result of an accident or "a sudden seizure by jealousy" — an expression used by defense lawyers in order to clear the charges against their defendants. Instead, the crime was the expected result of increasing emotional and physical violence that went on for a long time. Though many women file a police report, try to move away from their aggressors and re-build their lives, they end up dead.

Heightened machismo

According to Nina Brugo Marcó, president of the Women's Commission in the Buenos Aires Lawyers Association, "the entire judicial system is deeply misogynist and everything seems to be designed to minimize women's voice." Bills intended to defend women's rights, she said, are ignored by legislators

and never get passed. "There is not the least bit of gender awareness and the majority of lawyers do not call aggression towards women for what it really is: a violation of human rights" (*LP*, April 19, 2006).

Despite the Argentine's election of a wom-an president, the country still seems to back the idea that men are superior to women. To understand why this idea is prevalent, experts say, the first thing to be taken into account is that, beyond the "modern" façade that Argen-tines love to present to the world, the coun-try's society is still largely *machista*.

Apart from laws that fail to include a gen-der perspective, there are still strong beliefs toward women that translate first into discrim-inatory practices and may develop later into criminal acts. Thus, women who suffer do-mestic violence are often persuaded by the police to not file a report and simply fix the problem "within the family."

Psychologist Irene Meler claims that this heightened discrimination and inherited machismo has been fueled by the economic cri-sis affecting various sectors of society.

"The current unemployment tendency threatens the role of provider, which has been the masculine symbol of excellence in mod-ern times," she said. "Men, affected by in their feeling of masculinity, secretly long to be wom-en because that way they would be less pres-sured to be financially successful. But at the same time, the desire to be a woman is con-sidered dishonorable and inferior to a male." Therefore, she argues, violence toward wom-en has increased due to male jealousy of women — who supposedly do not have to face economic demands — and due to their in-ability to admit their feelings.

State apathy

In November of last year, Amnesty Interna-tional-Argentina launched the campaign "Do-mestic violence, a government problem" and presented a plan of action including 14 points against violence in the family. The plan in-cludes concrete suggestions on how the state can take on an active role in the reversal of this problem of blows first, death later, in or-der to highlight the importance of women's rights and raise awareness of the false con-ception that these rights are less important than men's.

"Today gender violence is an issue for debate in universities or academic forums, but in practice it has not figured into the political agenda."

— Nina Brugo Marcó

The United Nations defined femicide seven years ago, calling it “the murder of women as the extreme result of gender-based violence.”

In celebration of International Women's Day on March 8, the Women in Equality Group (MEI for its initials in Spanish) will give President Fernández an open letter voicing their concern for the different expressions of violence toward women, including “domestic violence, femicide, trafficking of women and girls, sexual abuse and exploitation, harassment at work.” The letter requests that gender violence be included in the human rights agenda since the state has done little up till now to address the issue.

LATIN AMERICA/CARIBBEAN

Inter Press Service

Men have gender issues, too

Study on masculinity contributes to gender perspective.

Although it may seem obvious, the need to involve men in the effort to attain gender equality is not clear to everyone in Latin America and the Caribbean, where quite a few people think it is an issue that mainly concerns the women's rights movement. The view that women are the only victims of the region's dominant patriarchal system hinders serious consideration of the inequalities inherent in social constructions of masculinity, which oppress men with their rigid hierarchies, pecking order and relationships of dominance and submission.

“Until we scrutinize men's social roles and the concept of masculinity, we'll just be drawing circles around the women victims of

the system,” said Julio César González, Cuban general coordinator of the Ibero-American Masculinity Network.

“We are in total debt with women victims of violence,” admitted Brugo. “Today gender violence is an issue for debate in universities or academic forums, but in practice it has not figured into the political agenda.” Though Argentina signed the Protocol of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women as well as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women, women are still dying as a result of domestic violence.

“So whether or not a woman is in power doesn't seem to change things,” said Brugo. “If there is no real gender awareness, as in this case, this factor is useless.” □

the system,” said Julio César González, Cuban general coordinator of the Ibero-American Masculinity Network.

According to its website, the regional network organizes regular “workshops with social workers, university students, police, prisoners, ethnic and racial groups, and local officials, with the common purpose of discussing major men's issues and problems, and proposing alternative ways in which men can change.”

“If we engage men in the debate, we will see that we are also victims of social constructions, although we in turn victimize women. There are inequalities among men as well, that is, violence is constantly reproduced and is constantly mutating in multiple ways,” González said.

Stereotypes and resistance

The university professor, who embarked on gender studies over 20 years ago, is Cuba's pioneer in masculinity research. When he put his ideas into practice outside academia, however, he encountered resistance from people clinging to the customary stereotypes. But he also developed more harmonious relations with his family and friends.

In his classes at the University of Havana, he finds that what makes the greatest difference is the opportunity to make personal and collective changes, “if there is sufficient motivation to do so. That motivation can come through reflection, a group experience, or something seen in the media or in some public place,” he said.

However, he warned, “an appropriate methodology must be used, otherwise workshops on masculinity can end up simply reinforcing ‘machismo,’” or producing a “sophisticated justification of inequality,” because of mistaken premises in the theory or methodology.

González acknowledged that in spite of the greater visibility of gender discourse in the me-

LATIN AMERICA

Deforestation still winning. Of every 100 hectares (247 acres) of forest lost worldwide between the years 2000 and 2005, nearly 65 (161 acres) were in Latin America and the Caribbean. In that period, the average annual rate was 4.7 million hectares (11.6 million acres) lost — 249,000 hectares (615,000 acres) more than the entire decade of the 1990s, according to a recent study.

The report “Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development — 5 Years After Its Adoption” evaluated the official commitments made by governments in 2002 to fight deforestation. It was presented during the 16th Forum of Environment Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in the Dominican Republic Jan. 27-Feb. 1.

Between 2000 and 2005, the proportion of total land surface covered by forests fell in the Mesoamerica region (southern Mexico and Central America) from 36.9 to 35.8 percent, and in South America from 48.4 to 47.2 percent. However, in the Caribbean it increased from 31.0 to 31.4 percent.

The principal cause of the increased pace of deforestation is the advance of the monoculture farming frontier, a phenomenon that did not carry as much weight in the 1990s.

But there is good news for forestry defense and reforestation efforts that have been highly successful in Costa Rica, Cuba, Saint Lucia and Uruguay, as well as the increase in the surface of protected natural areas in the region from 19.2 percent to 20.6 percent between 2000 and 2005, or 320,400 square kilometers (123,400 square miles). —IPS.

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

Insufficient drop in child mortality. Infant mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean has dropped significantly in recent decades, but much of the region is far from meeting the Millennium Development Goal of cutting the mortality rate of children under the age of five by two-thirds before 2015.

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), low income, adolescent maternity and lack of access to health services and sanitation are the main reasons for continued high rates of child mortality. —LP.

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN Mortality rate for children under 5 years of age (per every 1,000 live births)

Country	2005
Cuba	7
Chile	10
Costa Rica	12
Uruguay	15
Belize	17
Argentina	18
Jamaica	20
Colombia	21
Venezuela	21
Paraguay	23
Panama	24
Ecuador	25
El Salvador	27
Mexico	27
Peru	27
Dominican Rep.	31
Brazil	33
Nicaragua	37
Suriname	39
Honduras	40
Guatemala	43
Guyana	63
Bolivia	65
Haiti	120

Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

dia and in education, “men have not moved very far from their original position” on the issue.

“I see no real changes, either at the local or the global levels,” he said.

According to Isabel Moya, head of the state Editorial de la Mujer (Women’s Publishing House), “the roles of men and women in Cuban society today are often hybrid, with new practices existing side by side with the old ones.”

“This is an interesting time in Cuba, a period of reconstruction, but traditional values, value judgments and stereotypes about women still carry enormous weight. Fifty years [of socialism] is nothing compared to 500 years of patriarchal Judeo-Christian acculturation,” Moya added.

In five decades of socialist government, Cuban authorities have promoted full integration of women in areas previously considered exclusively male preserves, which has led to a gradual decline in the social acceptability of machismo as the norm.

Statistics from the National Office of Statistics indicate that women occupy 43 percent of the seats in the National Assembly (parliament), and account for about 66 percent of the technical and professional workforce. However, only 38 percent of top jobs in organizations and 27 percent of town councilors are women.

In search of equality

Tomás Rodríguez, a professor at the Technological University in Guayaquil, Ecuador, who is married to a Cuban, has tried to create “fully democratic practices, with equal responsibilities, rights and duties” in

his marriage and family life.

Rodríguez, 28, says he thinks it is important not to broach the subject of the battle of the sexes in a confrontational spirit, an approach which in his view is still all too prevalent.

“It isn’t about exchanging power roles, but about developing dialogue, openness, respect and, of course, equity,” he said.

“We are not aiming at a society in which women have the dominant role, nor at exchanging a machista society for one that excludes men or confines them to the home,” said Argentine journalist Carina Ambrogi. “We want equality, with differences that are freely chosen, not imposed.”

Ximena Cabral, a journalist and professor at the National University of Cordoba, in Argentina, said that “feminism is regarded as synonymous with radicalization, and not with a proposal that emphasizes politics, inequality, impunity, and all the other issues” raised by living in the strait-jacket of a stereotype.

Gabriela Romero, 33, also from Argentina, views the study of masculinity as promising, “because we think it is the way to draw men into this effort, but we cannot ignore the fact that women are more sensitive to gender issues, and in this area are definitely in the vanguard,” she said.

“We are not trying to achieve superiority for women over men, but to help all persons, men and women, find ways of being fully themselves in society, whatever their sexual orientation, race or disability,” said Moya, a well-known activist for women’s rights in intellectual and press circles on this island. □

COSTA RICA

Bryan Kay in San Jose

Growth without equality

Gap between rich and poor grows in the “Switzerland of Central America.”

Costa Rica portrays a face of prosperity. Recent economic indicators suggest a buoyant economy, with growth last year said to be 6.8 percent. Unemployment was down to 4.6 percent. The number of those living in poverty and extreme poverty lowered to 16.7 and 3.3 percent respectively. Salaries are increasing. Spending power was at a 10-year high. Foreign investment was rocketing. The evidence of the Costa Rica success story, many claim.

The latest annual State of the Nation study, conducted by a non-governmental organization, revealed that the richest 20 percent of the population increased their income some 20 times while the poorest 20 percent saw their earnings climb just 10 times in 2006.

The statistics compare favourably with

those of the country’s regional neighbors. Nicaragua, for example, saw its economy grow by just 3.4 percent last year, a nation in which around 80 percent of the population are thought to live on US\$2 a day or less.

But Miguel Gutierrez Saxe, the report’s coordinator, said the figures illustrating the gulf between the rich and the poor painted a stark picture of Costa Rica. “The poor today are poorer and rich a little richer.”

Despite the apparently widening gap between the rich and poor, the government says it wants to eradicate extreme poverty by 2010.

A string of social programs are in place in an attempt to tackle the country’s ills. One of the key areas in which the government has invested is education and payments to families where children are forced to leave school due to financial shortcomings.

High dropout rate

One program, Avancemos, or “Let’s Advance” plans this year to give economic aid to 140,000 poor youngsters in a bid to keep them

“95 percent of the children between one and three years old don’t have access to care services.”

— Xinia Miranda

in school, equating to an investment of some \$84.5 million.

As the schools returned after the summer break at the start of February, 50,000 of children between the ages of 5 and 17 were estimated to have failed to appear for the first day of classes. Many parents say they are taking their children out of school because they can’t afford to buy the uniforms and other materials needed.

María Arias González, from Siquirres in the country’s Caribbean zone, said the family’s \$114 monthly income was insufficient to keep two of her seven children in school.

“The uniforms and shoes that they use were from two years ago and now they are worn out,” she said.

Indeed, the most visible signs of poverty are among children. More than half a million children under the age of 17 are living in poverty, according to data from the University of Costa Rica and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

A quarter of children between the ages of 12 and 17 live in poverty, a figure slightly down from nearly 30 percent in 2006.

The state admitted the dangers that exist among youths mired in poverty, where a lack of opportunities has been shown to lead in some cases to drug addiction and criminal activity.

The government says it is working to provide opportunities in problem areas and create public spaces for games and activities to reduce the threat.

Elsewhere, plans have been put in place to build new homes for those most in need. The most recent project saw the government promise to deliver 2,000 houses for indigenous families who currently live in squalor. The beneficiaries live in the Caribbean area, some of whom are part of the Bri Bri indigenous group, perennially among the poorest in the country in quality of life indexes.

For some, the gulf between the rich and the poor is, paradoxically, just a stone’s throw away. One example is in the San Jose suburb of Escazu. Nowhere are the signs of the stark differences in quality of life more marked than here, said resident Gaudi Jiménez, a university graduate whose family falls somewhere in the middle of the class

divide. The wealthy here, many of them foreigners, live in plush mansions, condominiums and highrise apartment complexes while the poor live just a few hundred yards away in their shadows, surviving hand-to-mouth, in ramshackle homes of rough breeze block and corrugated iron.

Late last year, the Oscar Arias-led administration announced plans to hand responsibility for the annual counter-poverty budget — nearly \$403 million — to the Housing Ministry, led by Fernando Zumbado.

At least part of the country’s problem appears to have been that no single ministry bore responsibility for tackling poverty, an assertion confirmed by a government source. That appeared to change with the announcement the Housing Ministry would assume control of the poverty budget and Zumbado is now known as the housing and war against poverty minister.

No extreme poverty by 2010

Nevertheless, the signs the government is seeking that the 2010 target to eradicate extreme poverty can be reached continue to emerge. Costa Rica is said to have the second lowest unemployment rate in Latin America, after Honduras (*LP, Feb. 6, 2008*), according to the most recent figures from the International Labor Organization. Zumbado said the country’s economic growth was key to the creation of more employment opportunities.

Arias said last year he saw no reason why the government could not reach the landmark given the current rate of households leaving extreme poverty. The last yearly estimate saw 56,000 leave the realm behind — characterized by a lack of means to attain basic means of survival, such as food — a 2 percent drop on the previous official figure.

But strong warnings remain.

Speaking after figures showed the country’s youth to be among the country’s poorest, Xinia Miranda, a UNICEF spokesperson, said, “One of the challenges confronting Costa Rica is in the field of first infancy. Even though the country has made important strides, 95 percent of the children between one and three years old don’t have access to care services, early stimulation and a lack of permanent programs of parental upbringing.” □

inbrief

- The melting of the Antarctic ice cap has increased by 75 percent over the last decade, according to a study by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). In 2006, some 192 billion tons of the continent’s ice ended up in the sea. Approximately 70 percent of the world’s drinking water is

found in **Antarctica**.

- Bolivian President Evo Morales was re-elected for two more years as leader of **Bolivia’s** largest coca growers organization — the Six Federations of Coca Producers of the Tropic of Cochabamba. He has held the post for consecutive terms since 1996.

- The ecological organization Friends of the Earth in **Brazil** has blamed the World Bank for contributing

to the deforestation of nine Amazonian states by financing livestock farming projects there.

- The ruling Social National Unity Party in **Colombia** announced in early February that it will seek for current President Álvaro Uribe to run for a third consecutive term in the 2010 elections. It must first gather 210,000 signatures to submit a bill to congress for constitutional reform. If the reform is voted

down, party leaders will need to collect 2 million signatures to hold a referendum on the issue.

- In a Feb. 17 referendum, 90 percent of the residents in the Candarave province, in the southern department of Tacna, **Peru**, voted against allowing Southern Copper Corporation — with a majority owned by Mexico’s Grupo Mexico — to use their water resources for production.

Fissures over EU trade deal

Unknowns in trade pact generate uneasiness among potential signatories.

Soon after beating the Dec. 31 deadline last year, Caribbean leaders were patting themselves on the back for having achieved a "far reaching" Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Europe that they said would help ensure the future socio-economic development of the region.

But just a few weeks before the signing, some key governments appear uncomfortable with the final agreement, even though the region's top negotiator Richard Bernal insists it was the best deal possible.

"In any negotiation you don't get everything. The Europeans did not get everything, nor did we," said Bernal, who heads the Barbados-based Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM).

There has long been division within the Caribbean over the EPA, which Europe is also negotiating separately with the 79-member African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states, to replace a special export regime for cane sugar and other economically critical goods from these countries that had been in place since the mid-1970s.

Under the new agreement, the Caribbean will now have to open nearly 90 percent of its market to duty-free imports of EU products over the next 25 years. The new accord calls for 82.7 percent to be liberalized in the first 15 years and there will be a moratorium of three years on all tariffs except those on motor vehicles, spare parts and gasoline coming into the region.

Other duties and charges are to be kept during the first

seven years and then phased out in the following three years. Rice will not be among the commodities liberalized upon entry into force of the EPA.

But even as the ink was drying on the accord reached between the CARIFORUM countries — Caribbean Community and the Dominican Republic — and Europe last year, Guyana was particularly vocal in its opposition, with President Bharrat Jagdeo saying it was a "situation we were forced into."

"It was a systematic and well thought-out ploy by Europe to dismantle the solidarity of the ACP by effectively dividing the ACP into six negotiating bases with six agreements; playing one off against the other," he said, adding that Europe acted in bad faith in this regard.

"If Europe supported regional integration through lip service and financial flows, and encourages small states to come together in economic partnership agreements so they can have economies of scale, how is it that they don't want our products to qualify under the rules of origin that they have established now through the EPA?" Jagdeo asked. He warned that the EPA could now set the standard for other trade agreements with developed countries.

Many Caribbean academics, trade unionists and nongovernmental organizations have signed a petition critical of the regional governments for not fully informing the Caribbean population about "the far-reaching consequences of the legally and permanently binding articles of the agreement."

Former Caribbean diplomat Sir Ronald Sanders, who served as Antigua and Barbuda's high commissioner to London from 1995-2004, noted that, "We have an agreement that people are praising but very few people have seen. There are Members of Parliament and persons in government who have never read the agreement and have no idea what it says."

"I have read it and I still don't understand much of it, and I have been involved in trade negotiations for a long time," he added.

Another distinguished Caribbean economist, Prof. Clive Thomas, who is now director of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Guyana, argued that using a mixture of bullying, bribery, cajolery, intellectual dishonesty and plain bluff, Europe had been able to "work a monumental deception on the region." □

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