

COLOMBIA

Henry Mance in Bogota

Beyond the handshakes

Some worry that accord that ended Andean crisis was too hasty to last.

The diplomatic crisis that had threatened Andean economic and political stability was resolved on March 7 with a theatrical reconciliation of the presidents of Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Nicaragua at a summit of the Rio Group in the Dominican Republic. However, it is unclear whether the settlement will lead to political progress in the region.

Discord flared following a Colombian nighttime military offensive against a camp of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, in Ecuadorian territory on March 1. A key member of the guerrillas' ruling Secretariat — alias "Raúl Reyes" — was killed in the raid. The violation of sovereignty led Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and later Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega to break off diplomatic relations with Colombia. The two Andean nations mobilized troops towards their borders with Colombia. In response, Colombia presented documents allegedly found on Reyes' laptop that the Ecuadorian government had tolerated the FARC's presence in its territory, that the group funded Correa's 2006 election campaign, and that Venezuela's Chávez had financially supported the guerrillas.

"The fact that some agreements have been reached is very important," says Luis Evelis Andrade, president of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia. "But the problem of the borders isn't just one of armed conflict, but of neglect. States should make their sovereignty real by paying attention to the people who live in border regions, rather than waiting for a violation of international law."

At least 10 indigenous groups live in the border regions of Colombia, in which violence has heightened over the past decade as drug eradication policies and military offensives have pushed illegal armed groups from the center of the country.

"As indigenous peoples, we don't have borders. We do have a deep commitment to peace and we watched [the diplomatic crisis] with great concern," Andrade commented.

A new twist

Thursday's diplomatic denouement marked a swift and unexpected turnaround. At the start of the summit, Correa had warned: "My Dominican friends, be very careful. If President Uribe thinks that there is another Raúl Reyes in Santo Domingo, he'll come and bomb you." However, following various hours of negotiations, Correa,

Chávez and Ortega all shook hands cordially with Uribe. "With [Colombia's] promise not to assault a sister country again and its apology, we can move on from this most serious incident," said Correa.

However, it remains to be seen whether the agreement leads to a reactivation of Chávez's role in the release of hostages held by the FARC. Around 700 people are currently held by the guerrillas (*LP*, Feb. 6, 2008). Chávez's intervention has secured the release of six hostages after his role as an official mediator for a more general deal was revoked by Uribe last November. The Venezuelan leader responded to the death of "Raúl Reyes" by labeling him "a good revolutionary."

"Chávez's role is kind, but also damaging. His attitude towards the FARC, and his way of supporting them, is worrying," says Edwin Uribe of the Bogota-based nongovernmental organization Redepaz, which advocates a peaceful solution to Colombia's armed conflict. "It'd be interesting if he played a role as long as the rules of the game are clear to him."

According to Edwin Uribe, "The relationship Chávez has with the FARC is one that no other state has and it could make him indispensable. However, there are other states that have been strengthening their position, not just on behalf of Ingrid Betancourt, but for all the hostages. And [President] Uribe would prefer any state other than Chávez [as a mediator]."

Controversial approaches

Beyond the hostages, Chávez's attitude towards the FARC — and Uribe's (later rescinded) threat to prosecute him for genocide — have added to an already simplified discussion of violence in the region. In this context, more sophisticated approaches to the FARC have been overshadowed, including studies by José Fernando Isaza, the rector of Bogota's Jorge Tadeo Lozano University, which argue that the increased mili-



The regional crisis eclipsed a massive protest on March 6 in favor of the victims of violence and "Against Forgetting."

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LATIN AMERICA

Region lags in income distribution. Despite economic growth this decade, Latin America continues to have the worst income distribution in the world, according to the Annual Economic and Development Report 2007-2008, published on Feb. 22 by the Andean Development Corporation.

At the presentation of the report, "Opportunities in Latin America: Toward a Better Social Policy," the institution's head economist, Miguel Castilla, said that "although poverty has reduced in almost all countries in the region and there is greater access to basic services, like education and health, Latin America has the worst income distribution in the world."

Castilla also said that unemployment and underemployment as well as large informal work sectors still persist (*LP*, Feb. 6, 2008), including in those countries that have achieved important recoveries in their economic activity.

The report emphasizes the importance of improving social policy to be more efficient in completing objectives.

"Social improvements should be permanent and continued over time, with a long-term vision," he said.

"To do that, public policies directed at increasing human resources should be implemented and this way break the cycle of intergenerational poverty that keeps repeating, as well as create quality jobs, guarantee greater access to basic services, facilitate economic activity and try to give pensions with greater coverage to senior citizens." —*LP*.

tarization in Colombian society has failed to reduce the lack of economic opportunities on which guerrilla recruitment is based.

"At the beginning of January, the freed hostages were the only thing that was happening in Colombia. In February, the only problem was the FARC," says Edwin Uribe, referring to the media's recent focuses. "Many serious problems like drug-trafficking and guerrilla recruitment are being made invisible by daily events."

Indeed, the ongoing high-level diplomacy overshadowed a key attempt to counter this simplification of the conflict — the mass pro-victims demonstrations on March 6. The marches were organized by the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes to complement the unprecedented anti-FARC mobilizations of Feb. 4, in which an estimated 2 million Colombians took to the streets.

While the turnout of tens of thousands of citizens in Colombia and in up to 20 cities around the world exceeded some expectations, the march's impact was undoubtedly lessened by the ongoing regional tension. Media support for the demonstrations was

also muted, with newspapers giving priority to the diplomatic crisis and stepping back from detailed examination of victims' stories.

More discord to come?

Some commentators have argued that the swift resolution of the diplomatic crisis will encourage further discord. Referring to the lack of hemispheric condemnation of Colombia during the crisis, Alfredo Molano, a Colombian commentator, said, "Uribe got the attack on Ecuador for a bargain price." For León Valencia, a former guerrilla, the problem goes to the heart of the Uribe government's anti-FARC discourse: "A serious error has been not understanding that the countries of Latin America haven't bought the anti-terrorist agenda."

In contrast, Edwin Uribe is more optimistic. "The friends of war say that negotiation [between the government and the FARC] is not needed, but there's another part of the country which is tiring of war. And that makes one think that the country is moving once again in favor of peace, as it was at the end of the 1990s." □

ECUADOR

Luis Ángel Saavedra in Quito

Ecuador's northern border: the FARC

An absence of Colombian authorities allows guerrillas to control border with Ecuador.

The Colombian military's March 1 massacre of Colombian guerrillas and three Mexican students on Ecuadorian soil opened up new dimensions about a complex reality of security along the border, an issue Ecuador has been familiar with for years.

Since 2005, there have been 17 incursions of the Colombian army into Ecuadorian territory. One of the most serious occurred in early November 2007, when Colombian helicopters bombed camps of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, in the Ecuadorian village of Yanamaru, in the eastern jungle province of Sucumbios, which borders Colombia.

The previous Colombian incursions had killed at least six Ecuadorians near the San Miguel River, which separates Sucumbios from the Colombian department of Putumayo. Even though Colombian officials had admitted the operation in the Binational Border Commission, the neighboring country did not repair the damages or pay reparations to the victims' relatives.

Toxic fumigation

Ecuador and Colombia had also become embroiled in a tense standoff over the Colombian government's aerial fumigations of coca crops — an eradication tactic it had used since 1999 (*LP*, Feb. 9, 2006).

"The planes crossed the border and fumigated in our territory," Froilán Canticuz, director of the Awa indigenous community in Mataje, denounced before the Interinstitutional Committee Against Fumigations, an Ecuadorian umbrella group of human rights and civil society organizations. "We had to put signs up above the trees so they knew they were in Ecuador."

According to the committee, the fumigations damaged crops and the health of the residents along the border, especially in the jungle province of Sucumbios and the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas. There was a slow exodus from these provinces to other cities, especially the Amazon city of Lago Agrio.

This was in addition to the thousands of Colombians who fled their country's internal armed conflict. According to the government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are some 250,000 Colombians living in Ecuador who are eligible for refugee status. Ecuadorian authorities have 50,000 requests for refugee status and less than 20,000 have been accepted.

PARAGUAY

Remains of disappeared persons. On March 10 in the southern Paraguari department, a judicial committee including attorney Víctor Maldonado and anthropologist Eduardo Cañete found two bodies suspected of being individuals who disappeared during the Alfredo Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989).

According to the Truth and Justice Commission — responsible for investigating human rights violations during the Stroessner regime, as well as crimes committed by the state until Oct. 6, 2003 — the remains probably belonged to *campesinos* Juan Dios Salinas and Albino Vera, who disappeared between April and June 1976, when they were members of the *Ligas Agrarias*, or Agrarian Confederation.

The Truth and Justice Commission, which is currently investigating 400 disappearance cases, said that the rural workers disappeared in the time of greatest repression from state security against the *campesino* movements.

The organization Family Members of Arrested-Disappeared and Murdered Persons in Paraguay estimated between 3,000 and 4,000 as the number murdered during the dictatorship.

"We must work meticulously in order to find out these persons' identities," said Cañete.

—PÚLSAR.

In 2002, the Interinstitutional Committee, or CIF, requested that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights provide protection to these border communities. After the March 1 offensive by the Colombian military, the CIF urged the Ecuadorian government to file a claim against Colombia before the International Court of Justice in the Hague for the damages it allegedly caused by the fumigations.

Ironically, neither the fumigations nor the attack have forced the Colombians to take control of the 700-kilometer (438-mile) border. Ecuadorian Defense Minister Wellington Sandoval recently said that "Ecuador's northern border is the FARC."

FARC territory

Many Ecuadorian villages near Colombia are either bordering FARC controlled territory or are near a FARC base.

With the absence of the Colombian state in that area, those who want to carry out any activity in the border area must speak with the FARC: small-scale traders from Ecuador who cross over the border need its permission; village authorities and Ecuadorian parish leaders must speak with the guerrillas to regulate activity near their borders. Even nongovernmental organizations that work in the area and want to hold meetings in Colombian territory must have permission from the FARC, according to reports from the International Peace Observatory, the CIF and the Regional Human Rights Advising Foundation, organizations that work constantly along the border.

ARGENTINA

Andrés Gaudin in Buenos Aires

Repressors still terrorizing

Human rights violators and important witnesses disappear mysteriously.

Murders, suspicious suicides, kidnapping, hundreds of death threats, concealment of witnesses and evidence. All are tools used by some ultra-right wing military officers with links to the 1976-83 Argentine dictatorship. They are trying to obstruct justice in human rights trials, hoping to escape without a conviction.

Eighteen months have passed since the disappearance of Jorge Julio López, a key witness in the trial of former Buenos Aires police chief Miguel Etchecolatz, who was sentenced to life in prison in 2006 for running 20 death camps (*LP*, Oct. 18, 2006), and now the murder of an officer in a navy prison, the suspicious suicide of another officer in an air force hotel and numerous death threats seem to show that human right violators keep a powerful network active.

Trade with the FARC is also notorious.

"They come and buy products from the *campesinos*; that doesn't mean that the *campesinos* are part of the FARC," said Paco Chuji, president of the Sucumbios Federation of Organizations of Kichwa Nationality.

This dynamic has led the Colombian government to adopt the theory that the FARC receive support from Ecuador and launch strikes from within Ecuador, an idea that would involve Ecuador in the Colombian conflict.

Since 1998, the implementation of the US-backed Plan Colombia has led Ecuador to position more troops along its border.

"It costs us US\$300 million a year to guard the border that Colombia doesn't guard, and it's not enough. No one helps us," said Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa.

On the other hand, Ecuador's military presence has changed daily life for the indigenous communities along the border, those who feel the brunt of the conflict, who have to suffer mistreatment by soldiers. One example is what happened in Yanamaru on Nov. 5. After a Colombian incursion, the Ecuadorian army robbed some food and domestic items, according to a report presented to the Sucumbios Public Defender's Office.

"Things will not be solved with more soldiers," said Chuji, but the military presence along Ecuador's border with Colombia will continue for a while to come unless Colombia resolves its conflict with negotiations, or if the FARC no longer controls the border. □

"It's terrorizing what is happening, and you have to look at the big picture: in a prison they took a former police chief — a murderer — out for a walk because they said he was depressed," said Claudio Pandolfi, a lawyer for two victims of dictatorship-era police repression. "No one ever knew anything about López; the Navy poisoned one of its own, and now there is a 'suicide' in a military hotel. It seems these people aren't be afraid at all of democracy or official discourse."

Pandolfi and human rights organizations now say they are worried about recent reports that similar events are taking place. The issue has even become an important issue for President Cristina Fernández, whose government and that of her husband, Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), have had a clear stance against human rights violations.

Macabre message

On Dec. 10 of last year, Héctor Febres, a former prefect of Argentina's coastguards and one of the most sadistic repressors of the dictatorship, who was a central figure in

GUATEMALA

First trial for disappearances. After five years of delays, the trial of Felipe Cusanero Coj, a former army collaborator accused of participating in the disappearance of six Maya Kaqchiquel *campesinos* between 1982 and 1984 in Choatalum, in the central Chimaltenango department, began on March 10.

Cusanero was a "military commissioner," a position occupied by civilians who were allowed to carry arms and have communication channels with top military officials in order to give them information on supposed guerrilla collaborators during the 1960-1996 civil war.

The trial originally began in 2003, when family members of the victims reported Cusanero to the Attorney General's Office. However, the defense managed to prolong the trial until the constitutional court gave the green light for the lawsuit last June.

Prosecutor Albert Clinton announced that he demanded between 25 and 40 years of prison for Cusanero for the deaths of Lorenzo Villa, Alejo Culajay, Filomena López Chajchaquin, Encarnación López, Santiago Sutuj and Mariano Augusto Tay Cajtí.

Cusanero's defense lawyer, Mario Smith, said at the hearing that the trial must be declared void since forced disappearance only became a crime in 1996. However, the National Reconciliation Act — approved in the Peace Accords of 1996 that put an end to the civil war — established that statute of limitations is not applied in cases of genocide, torture and forced disappearance. —LP.

the trafficking of newborn babies in detention centers, was found poisoned with cyanide.

It was too strange to be a coincidence, many said; it was the day Cristina Fernández took office.

On more than one occasion Febres had told his relatives that he felt abandoned by his fellow comrades. This led for them to fear that when the time came on Dec. 13 for him to testify in the baby trafficking case, he could mention the names of other officers, implicating them in this and other crimes. Instead, he died three days before.

"For fear of incriminating his buddies, their jailers opted to give Febres a special treatment: he wasn't off by himself in a cell but in an apartment with a cell with a, mobile telephone, two computers, a television and VCR. There are photos of him and his wife summering in an Atlantic coast beach," said Estela de Carlotto, president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo rights organization.

Less than three months later, on Feb. 25, Army Lt. Col. Paul Alberto Navone, a former intelligence agent, was found dead in an air force hotel in the Cordoba province. Like Febres, he was scheduled to testify three days after his death, also in a trial for baby-trafficking in a military hospital in interior Argentina. Authorities are still investigating his death.

Strange suicide

"Everything pointed to induced suicide because the former intelligence agent could have compromised many repressors. Navone knew a lot about where the newborn children went from that hospital and the fate that their mothers faced," said Marina Barbagelata, the lawyer representing the family

of Raquel Negro, a woman who was kidnapped in 1978 who, according to testimony from two fellow prisoners who were set free, gave birth to twin boys.

"I would doubt that the deaths were suicide," Carlotto said of the two suspicious deaths. She added that the organization "worries a lot about people who disappear from this world without being able to speak. Many are military officers who are dying and have a story to tell, who know the fate that our children and grandchildren faced, and who can implicate those who just today are their so-called jailers."

Carlotto referred to former coastguard officer Juan Antonio Azic, who was tried for child-napping. He tried to commit suicide by shooting himself in the head in July 2003 and is currently in psychiatric care. She referred also to Army Col. Emilio Anadón, the former director of La Perla death camp in the central Cordoba province who died of a shot to the head in September 2004 in an apparent suicide while in house detention.

In López's case, it was uncovered in mid-January that five days after he disappeared the police called off a search based on a tip from Buseta, even though body sniffing dogs had indicated to police a house where days later bloodied clothing was found. It is still unclear who gave the surprise order to call off the search.

"Since López's disappearance, we have counted 250 to 300 death threats received by witnesses that must testify in trials of crimes committed by military genocides, to which we can add 'suicides' and the disappearance of witnesses as if by the art of magic, all indicating that the repressors are organized and are coordinating," warned Guillermo Germano, an expert in human rights law. □

CENTRAL AMERICA/MEXICO

Central America Report

Plan Merida under fire

United States proposes Plan Merida, a sweeping anti-drug program for Central America and Mexico.

The US State Department's annual Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) released on Feb. 29 says that Central America's geographical location between Colombia and Mexico, large areas of sparsely populated jungle and unguarded coastlines have made the region the Number 1 trans-shipment route for Colombian cocaine and heroin smuggled into the United States via Mexico.

The report said despite an increase in cocaine seizures in Costa Rica and improvements in Guatemalan police, widespread

corruption continues to be a common denominator and the main obstacle to fighting drug-trafficking.

David T. Johnson, Assistant secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, upon presenting the report stated that US President George W. Bush "has asked Congress to fund a new security cooperation initiative with Mexico and the countries of Central America to combat the threats of drug trafficking and transnational crime in Mexico and Central America."

The Bush administration has requested US\$550 million in supplemental assistance for Mexico and Central America for 2008. Although details of the proposed 2009 figures are not yet available, if they track proposed 2008 spending, nearly 70 percent of the funding will go to military and police related assistance.

“Drugs are used to undermine some regimes that the US doesn’t like.”

— Ricardo Vargas

However, critics have compared the proposal — which is still awaiting congressional approval — to the controversial Plan Colombia, under which US troops were stationed in Colombia. Several Democrats in Congress have also complained that the proposal has been put forward in a highly non-transparent manner.

A new scenario

Mexican cartels have become increasingly powerful and it has even been suggested that they are displacing Colombian mafias in the United States.

According to Mexican drugs expert Eduardo Pizarro León-Gómez, the Colombian mafias are losing their power whereas the Mexican cartels are growing. “Unfortunately for Mexico, the Colombian mafia is losing the most profitable slice of the pie,” he wrote in January for the Mexican magazine *Contralínea*.

“Colombian drugs are shipped via the Pacific route to the Central American and Mexican mafias, which then ship the cargoes to the US or transport to Brazil and there to the European market. This means that Colombia gets 20 percent of the profits and the Mexican, Central American, Brazilian and Russian cartels get the remaining 80 percent. The Colombian mafias are weakening and the Mexicans are strengthening.”

Pizarro adds that the consumption of cocaine in the United States has decreased as the consumption of synthetic drugs is rising whereas the use of cocaine in Europe, particularly in the former Socialist bloc is on the increase.

This, says the analyst, could gradually weaken the Colombia-Guatemala-Mexico route as the Colombia-Venezuela-Brazil-Africa-Europe route becomes increasingly important.

However, Ricardo Vargas, associated researcher with the Transnational Institute disagrees with Pizarro and argues that “although the Mexicans have specialized in trafficking drugs to the US this does not mean

that the Colombians are losing control. What is happening is that the cartels are diversifying.”

According to Vargas, cocaine use in the United States has remained stable since 2000 but this does not mean that the market is shrinking: “In Europe there is currently an increase in consumption, particularly in Spain, the UK and Switzerland. This has broadened the market but it doesn’t mean that the US market is receding.”

Political tool

Vargas points out that the US-led counter-narcotics strategy has been tainted by politically motivated double standards as political enemies are branded as “narco-states” but the United States turns a blind eye to drug trafficking in friendly regimes that are often just as corrupt.

This year’s INCSR states that Venezuela is “one of the key transit points for the drugs trade due to its high levels of corruption and weak judicial system” after Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez ordered the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to leave the country in 2005 and accused agency staff of spying.

Guatemala, on the other hand, whose former President Oscar Berger was an important US ally, was praised for improvements in its law enforcement institutions even though drug seizures have not significantly increased there in recent years.

Vargas says that the “US uses drugs as a part of its security policy. One of the factors that encompass the anti-drug fight is politics since drugs are used to undermine some regimes that the US doesn’t like.”

He added that the United States is acting like a global referee in the fight against drugs, tending to change the rules where it serves its interests.

“If there were a more democratic body in terms of participation of other governments in the hemispheric policies maybe things would be different,” he said. “This can no longer be seen in terms of consumer countries versus exporter countries.” □

PERU

Military official sentenced.

On March 5, for the first time in a US court, a human rights case from Peru was decided, in the sentencing of retired Peruvian army Maj. Telmo Hurtado — responsible for a *campesino* massacre in 1985. The Florida court ordered him to pay damages of US\$37 million to two survivors.

After being under army protection for 17 years, Hurtado — known as “Butcher of the Andes” — fled to the United States in



Telmo Hurtado

2002 when he was sought by Peruvian judicial authorities to respond on his participation in the murder of 69 *campesinos*, including pregnant women and chil-

dren. The massacre took place in Accomarca, in the southern Ayacucho department, during the internal war that devastated the country between 1980 and 2000.

In April 2007, when he heard that Hurtado had been arrested by authorities in Miami for being in the United States illegally, the legal council of Teófila Ochoa Lizarbe and Cirila Pulido Baldeón — survivors of the massacre — filed a civil lawsuit against the military official through US human rights organiza-

tion Center for Justice and Accountability.

Ochoa and Pulido saved their lives by hiding from the soldiers. Both were 12 years old and lost their mothers and siblings in the massacre.

For human rights organizations, this has been an important precedent and a message to human rights violators who think that by fleeing they can escape justice from their home countries. The next step will be Hurtado’s extradition to Peru to be ruled upon. —LP.

GUATEMALA

Rommel Gonzales in Guatemala City

A new executioner country?

Wave of violence causes Congress to revive death penalty.

In the early morning of June 29, 2000, Tomás Cerrate and Amílcar Cetino received the highest punishment — the death penalty — for having murdered Isabel Botrán in 1997 while she was kidnapped. That morning Guatemalans woke up more at ease, imagining that the violence and series of kidnappings that overwhelmed Guatemala at that moment had faded away.

Cerrate and Cetino were protagonists in bringing about catharsis in a population plagued by crime and insecurity. However, the solution was more complicated than the problem.

Then-President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004) sent his whole family out of the country for fear of retaliation by kidnapping groups that the recently executed criminals belonged to. A few weeks later before Congress, Portillo resigned his duty of deciding whether or not to grant pardons to those condemned to death.

In 2002, the constitutional court legally suspended the death penalty after determining that the law authorizing it did not specify who could give pardon. The executions were overlooked.

Public support

Now, nearly eight years later, Guatemala once again faces this issue. On Feb. 12,

Congress passed a legislation that restores the president's power of giving or rejecting pardon petitions presented by those condemned to death. If the pardon is granted, the convict must serve 50 years — the maximum prison sentence established in Guatemalan criminal law. The proposed law directly affected 41 people currently on death row.

Once again, a wave of crime brought about this decision — which many analysts think is rushed, lacks legal understanding and violates international compromises. In February in a little over two weeks, 11 public transportation drivers and assistants were murdered for having denied paying extortion money to gangs operating from prison.

In a telephone survey carried out by local newspaper *Prensa Libre*, two days after the law was passed, more than 97 percent of Guatemalans said they backed the death penalty and only 2.6 percent disagreed with it.

Nery Rodenas from the Guatemalan Archbishop's Human Rights Office said: "This measure is a step backward for the country since we should find a new way to face crime with justice and due process that does not force someone to decide on the life of another person."

On the other hand, Roxana Baldetti, head of the far right-wing Patriot Party — the party that pushed the legislation, headed by former

presidential candidate Otto Pérez Molina — explained that "the application of the death penalty will alleviate the wave of violence that has unleashed over the last few weeks, exceeding the few actions the government has taken to contain it. It will serve to dissuade criminals who have the country on its knees because now they know that the law will be strictly applied."

Amnesty International sent an open letter to President Álvaro Colom, who entered office Jan. 8, asking him not to pass the death penalty and to instead look for "more efficient and lasting" solutions to overcome the public security crisis that affects Guatemala.

Sebastián Elgueta, of Amnesty International, reminded Colom that in December Guatemala voted for the abolition of capital punishment in the United Nations, which contradicts the decision that Congress just made.

Likewise, various political analysts agree that the death penalty violates the American Convention on Human Rights — signed onto by Guatemala — whose fourth article establishes that countries who had the death penalty and then suspended it cannot go back to enforcing it.

Frank La Rue, former secretary of the Presidential Human Rights Commission, wrote in his *Prensa Libre* opinion column that to reestablish the pardon recourse is a necessary step, but only in order to reach a new, more humanitarian national policy.

In turn, Nineth Montenegro, congresswoman with the center-left *Encuentro por Guatemala* party — the only party who voted against the law and who was represented by Rigoberta Menchú in the 2007 presidential elections (*LP*, Sept. 19, 2007) — asked the government as well as Guatemalan citizens to reflect on the issue.

"It doesn't serve any purpose to make the punishments harder or to encourage a culture of death without a justice system, police force or Attorney General's Office that function well or that work effectively," she said.

Presidential Veto

Though Colom vetoed the legislation on March 14 on the grounds that it was unconstitutional and said that "the death penalty is not a deterrent to violence," the norm will now go back to Congress for the final word.

The decision surprised many since Colom initially declared that would not pardon any of those condemned or override court sentences.

Legislators now have the option to accept the veto and draft a new bill or may override it if 105 of its 158 members vote against the veto, in which case it would be published as a law in official newspaper *Diario de Centroamérica* and immediately enforced.

The Patriot Party announced that it will find the votes necessary in Congress to get the bill passed. Meanwhile Vice President Rafael Espada called on legislators to accept the veto and not reactivate the death penalty.

"To combat violence with violence is not the cure for a society's evolution," Espada told *Prensa Libre*. "The perpetual loss of liberty in a penitentiary system is a better punishment." □



ROMMEL GONZALES

Guatemalan society plagued by violence.



JENNY MANRIQUE

People displaced by violence comprise most of this village in Soacha.

COLOMBIA
Jenny Manrique in Bogota

A country of exiles

Displacement affects more than 3 million Colombians.

In the poorest neighborhoods on the outskirts of Bogota, the country is re-settling. Coming from the richest lands in Colombia, where subsistence products feed many mouths, thousands of families have had to move to improvised shacks, built on unstable land that occupies an immense labyrinth.

The multiple accents no longer talk only of a war extended to all corners of the country, but a collective sadness brought on by forced

displacement — already recognized by the International Criminal Court as a crime against humanity. Near 25,000 exiles are now living in the Altos de Cazuca, in the capital's southeast district of Soacha, now the biggest recipient of this population along with neighboring Ciudad Bolivar.

This conflict, in addition to murders and kidnappings (*LP, Feb. 6, 2008*), has also produced 3 million internal refugees in the last two decades, with an annual rate of around 200,000 people, according to the governmental program Social Solidarity Network. The majority of these refugees are escaping threats or from being caught in the crossfire in areas fought over by more than one armed group, where the word “state” comes off as a joke (*LP, May 30, 2007*).

Caught in the crossfire

Mara, as she asked to be called, knows better than anybody what it means to be part of the civilian population in the middle of the conflict. The 37-year-old is originally from a town of some 5,500 inhabitants, close to the Cauca municipality in the northwestern Antioquia department.

Her house was surrounded by a river of rivalries: just crossing it would warrant an encounter with members of paramilitaries and a few steps to the other side would mean a run-in with guerrilla fighters from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). There her husband worked driving a small boat, or *chalupa*, that served as public transportation between the two banks.

“We survived on that. He made some 700,000 pesos [US\$350] a month working 10 hours a day. It wasn't enough because when one is poor, nothing is ever complete, but we at least owned a house,” said Mara, who was working then as a mother leader in the government program Families in Action, which benefited 144 mothers who received a subsidy for their children's education.

“Once, a group of people hired him to go to the other side of the river and on crossing, there was another group of people, armed, who told him not to move until he received a new order. It seems that this group had killed a few people, so their family members took it out on my husband because he supposedly should have known that he was transporting murderers,” she said.

“That's why the guerrillas came to my town looking for him and he had to flee to the jungle,” she added. “Then they took my son, they were going to kill him ... but he also escaped. They retaliated against us and came in my home with rocks, sticks and arms, screaming, ‘damn killers, come out.’”

After hiding for several hours, they managed to leave at night to go to Cauca in a car that a family member got for them. They went to the house of Mara's mother, who lives in precarious conditions and could only offer a floor to sleep on. In the middle of last year, they managed to go to Bogota thanks to tickets sent by Mara's sister.

She finally met someone from the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who helped

A scourge that doesn't stop

- **3 million** have emigrated internally because of violence in the last 20 years.
- A record **414,000** emigrated in 2002, the first year of Álvaro Uribe's government.
- **200,000** annually have abandoned their homes in the last five years.
- *Emigrees' departments:* Antioquia, Valle, Tolima, Meta, Caqueta
- *Receiving cities:* Bogota and Soacha, Medellin, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, Cali, Villavicencio.
- *Threat origin:* FARC **88 percent**, National Liberation Army (ELN) **28 percent**, paramilitary groups **17 percent**, ex-paramilitary and drug-trafficking groups as well as common crime **84 percent** (the figure goes over 100 percent because in various cases there is more than one threat origin).

Sources: UNHCR and Social Solidarity Network. Figures from September 2007.

BOLIVIA/PERU UN against coca leaf.

The United Nations International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) called on Bolivia and Peru to create and carry out education programs that lead to the elimination of chewing coca leaves and other uses of the coca leaf that have non-therapeutic purposes.

In its 2007 report presented on March 5, the INCB states that the only licit uses of the coca leaf described in the 1961 Convention are medical or scientific or preparation of a saporific agent extracted from alkaloids.

However, authorities from both countries say that the suggestion goes against the United Nations 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which establishes that the measures adopted to avoid illicit coca leaf cultivation, destined for cocaine production, "shall respect fundamental human rights and shall take due account of traditional licit uses, where there is historic evidence of such use, as well as the protection of the environment."

Bolivian President Evo Morales said that "to abolish what is known in Bolivia as 'acullicu' [chewing] is an attack against the indigenous peoples of the Andean region."

Peruvian Foreign Minister José García Belaúnde said that his country will continue to respect "the traditional use of the coca leaf," including chewing, using it as medicine, in rituals and its legal industrialization. —LP.

her get a change of clothing and told her how to get the emergency humanitarian aid offered by the government — some \$100 a month per family — including three months of rent and food, usually a long time after the first move.

Violent parallel power

Painful stories like Mara's are found in the Altos de Cazuca, with 30 neighborhoods and available land, mostly illegal, without any mention in the District Land Ordering Plan. The precariousness of the infrastructure causes the cost of rent to waver between 50,000 and 100,000 pesos (\$25 and \$50) per month, including services — very little compared to other sectors in the city.

All of this deregulation has brought about a violent parallel power. Daniel Rendón, 38, who arrived to the area in 1998 and César Plata, 36, who has been there eight years are

CARIBBEAN

Inter Press Service/Latinamerica Press

Is ALBA more than a storm in a teacup?

Chávez program enters the Caribbean.

When he visited Jamaica last year, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez urged Caribbean Community (Caricom) countries to join his Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), seen as an alternative to the fizzled US-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Chávez said that ALBA would provide a "socially oriented" trade bloc rather than one strictly based on the logic of deregulated profit maximization, and would use more effective mechanisms to eradicate poverty within the hemisphere.

He dangled the proverbial carrot, saying that there were significant benefits to be had from the planned expansion of oil refineries, bauxite and alumina facilities, and petrochemical industries under his new initiative. There would also be significant medical assistance. Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua have already signed on.

One of the key aspects of ALBA, which Chávez first proposed during a summit of leaders from the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) in 2001, is the Petrocaribe initiative, under which several Caricom member states buy oil at below market prices.

Trinidad and Tobago had previously been the main supplier of oil products to the 15-nation Caricom, and had even es-

both witnesses of this. Both men are members of Soacha's Table of Dialogue, Management and Development (MIGD, for its initials in Spanish), that defends the rights of displaced people.

They arrived after fleeing from the northern Uraba region in times when there was a cooperative in Soacha with a registry in the Chamber of Commerce that offered 16 by 12-meter (52 by 39-foot) lots costing up to one million pesos (\$500).

Despite legislation recognizing displaced persons as being entitled to special rights for their condition as victims, the attention this population receives is almost entirely dependent on international cooperation.

"The people's attitude is: you poor displaced people, take these pants and this old shirt. And we are people who lived better than anyone who now looks at us with pity," said Rendón. □

established a multi-million-dollar regional development fund.

Possible risks

Prime Minister Patrick Manning said that Trinidad and Tobago's capital, Port of Spain, had agreed to waive the various Caricom regulations to allow countries to take advantage of the Venezuelan offer. But his administration "made it quite clear" that it would have had no problems with Petrocaribe if Caracas had decided to use the existing Trinidad and Tobago Point a Pierre refinery to produce the products for sale to the region.

Manning has warned his Caribbean colleagues not to come calling on his door if the Petrocaribe initiative goes sour.

"Once you become the dominant supplier, as Venezuela will become under Petrocaribe... a responsibility also goes with that to provide energy security to the region. Trinidad and Tobago will be unable to do that in circumstances where we are no longer the dominant supplier," he told a news conference over the weekend.

"That is the risk Caribbean countries run and Trinidad and Tobago has made it quite clear that is going to be your risk," Manning said.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Antigua and Barbuda have signed the principles of ALBA but have yet to ratify the pact. However, in January, Dominica become the first, and so far the only Caricom nation to do so, with Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerit deflecting criticisms by saying that his government would pursue a proactive foreign policy.

"Dominica remains as committed to the Caricom and OECS [Organization of Eastern Caribbean States] as we ever were and will ensure even as we pursue the tremendous potential of ALBA that we remain true to our Caricom partners," Skerit said in a radio and television broadcast ahead of the March 7-8 Caricom inter-session summit in the Bahamas.

Vaughan Lewis, the former director gen-

“There is no contradiction in being part of ALBA and being part of Caricom.”

— Ralph Gonsalves

eral of the OECS, to which Dominica, Antigua and St. Vincent and the Grenadines belong, believes that Dominica and others who give their support to ALBA regard it as just another avenue for obtaining economic aid which is not available within the regional integration grouping.

Lewis, a professor of international relations at the University of the West Indies, said that in the last few years Dominica, for example, has had to follow a rigid International Monetary Fund (IMF) program that had failed to adequately promote development on the island.

Caricom concerns

Former ACS secretary general Norman Girvan has dismissed arguments within the region that Dominica's move into ALBA could undermine Caricom.

“This is by no means the first time that a Caricom member state has acted in a way that might be at variance with its regional commitments and responsibilities. Back in the early 1990s, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago each acted unilaterally in attempting to qualify for ‘NAFTA [North America Free Trade Agreement] Parity’ treatment by the United States by signing certain bilateral economic

treaties with that country. I don't hear people talking about that,” he said.

Girvan also said that several countries also broke ranks with their regional counterparts in the 1990s by negotiating separately with the United States on the infamous drug interdiction “Shiprider” agreements, and then later in 2002 through the controversial agreements to give US personnel immunity from prosecution under the International Criminal Court.

“These were egregious examples of failure to follow a unified Caricom policy and I don't hear people talking about that either.”

St. Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves, who has been chairman of Caricom, has declined to ratify the ALBA agreement, saying he could not “go and do something unless all the juridical arrangements are in place.”

But he wanted to remind the Caribbean that when Chávez came to power, trade between Washington and Caracas was valued at US\$19 billion and “last week it was \$34 billion.”

“Man cursing but man trading, so what happens to me?” he asked, adding: “There is no contradiction in being part of ALBA and being part of Caricom.” □

URUGUAY

Pablo Long in Montevideo

Fighting child prostitution

Campaign focuses on temporary workers and tourists.

An official study's finding that child prostitution “is not a marginal phenomenon, but part of Uruguay's social weave and sexual practices,” has motivated President Tabaré Vázquez's government to launch a campaign this summer aimed at raising awareness among children, adults and key sectors, such as tourists and temporary workers in border areas.

“Child prostitution is a denied and hidden social practice, but is always present and exists because there is a large demand from the adult world that takes advantage of children and adolescents who greatly lack emotional and material needs — food, housing, clothes — and who want money and drugs,” said Susan Rostagnol, coordinator of the “Histories in Silence: Child and Teenage Prostitution” report, presented last December.

Rostagnol belongs to the nongovernmental organization Uruguayan Network of Autonomies (RUDA, for its initials in Spanish) that carried out the study along with the state-run Child and Adolescent Institute of Uruguay (INAU) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The campaign against child sex abuse has two very specific goals: one is to increase responsibility at the adult level and the other

at the level of children and adolescents, in order to develop extremely careful behavior, especially in mass use of the internet, explained Luis Albernaz, social researcher and one of the designers of the campaign, headed by INAU.

“The problem of child prostitution, sexual abuse and pornography, in addition to the issue regarding trafficking of minors, is not just in our country, but the entire region,” said Victor Giorgi, INAU president. “Thus we have also proposed to start the 14 Sister Cities Project that we are developing within the Southern Common Market [MERCOSUR] along with Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.”

INAU makes rapid assessments of the situation, through which it has been able to verify that temporary jobs, worker mobility and tourism are determining factors in the rise of child and adolescent prostitution.

“Today our concern is centered on truck drivers and ports on the Uruguay River, bordering with Argentina, where we have discovered a rise in this kind of prostitution,” Giorgi said.

Demand rises

“The minor goes into prostitution because of the demand; there is no recruitment, except in specific cases. But behind the mi-

statistics spotlight

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN

Gender Equality Index. On Feb. 28 at the 52nd session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, Social Watch — a network of social, economic and gender justice organizations — presented its Gender Equality Index 2008.

Social Watch coordinator, Roberto Bissio, said that the report “clearly shows that income alone does not guarantee gender equality.” Countries with high income per capita, like the United States and Great Britain, have the same level of gender equality as Colombia and Uruguay.

The report ranked 157 countries — 28 from Latin America and the Caribbean — on a scale where 100 equals absolute equality between men and women in education, economic participation and empowerment. —LP

LATIN AMERICA/ CARIBBEAN Gender Equality Index

Country	2007	2008
Colombia	75	75
Uruguay	68	75
Argentina	70	72
Panama	69	71
Ecuador	72	71
Cuba	66	70
Brazil	73	69
Peru	65	69
Honduras	61	69
Venezuela	67	68
Costa Rica	66	68
Paraguay	61	67
El Salvador	69	67
Bolivia	66	66
Dominican Rep.	65	66
Chile	62	62
Jamaica	61	61
Mexico	61	60
Nicaragua	52	52
Guatemala	50	49

Source: Social Watch

nor’s willingness to do this, so to speak, there are very difficult life situations: kids who come to sell their body after experiencing different forms of violence — severe poverty, sexual abuse, absence of positive family ties and lack of self-esteem,” Rostagnol explained.

“In terms of children and adolescents, the demand often exists before the offer. The profile of those who turn to this form of prostitution also reveals surprising realities: to start, our study shows that clients are not a small group of perverts, but a large number of adult men who resolve part of their sexuality in this way,” said the RUDA study.

Though the investigation only includes Montevideo and the metropolitan area, the data obtained coincides with reports coming from other parts of the country, such as the border area, including the four most important cities bordering Brazil, all of which are part of the 14 Sister Cities Project: Bella Union, Rivera, Rio Branco and Chuy.

“Here in Rivera we have already passed the phase where minors participated sporadically in orgies; now there are nightclubs specialized in this and whose principal customers are tourists, though it is not necessary to go to these houses to find under-age prostitutes. It is enough to go to the International Plaza — half in Brazil and half in Uruguay — where 12 and 13-year old girls offer themselves,” said schoolteacher Fernanda Cabrera.

The INAU awareness campaign will continue in the long-term and will extend over all Uruguayan territory, though it will focus on specific populations, such as tourists and workers with low job stability — truck drivers and temporary workers — “because it has been detected that these are traditional clients of child prostitution,” Giorgi said.

Internet dangers

With the beginning of the school year in March, the government focused on schools — students, teachers and parents — advising to pay close attention to the Internet that, “despite being an interesting study aid, is a key element in child prostitution and contains a lot of inappropriate material — especially pornographic — for the personal, intellectual and emotional development of minors.”

Children are told that when they surf the Internet, they should never reveal the identity of their teachers, their school or themselves when they participate in virtual encounters, and they are urged to follow a key rule: “Treat your Internet friends in the same way you treat your other friends. Don’t allow them things that you wouldn’t allow your current friends.”

The RUDA study, which has greatly fueled this campaign, collects the dramatic tales of children who have fallen victims to prostitution and sexual violence. One of the most powerful testimonies came from 17-year old Verónica — on the street since she was nine — who after giving birth, expressed thanks to her doctor that it was a boy, “because, as you know, we girls are born to suffer.” □

CORRECTION:

The first paragraph of the article “Costa Rica: Growth without equality,” published in the March 5, 2008 edition of *LATINAMERICA PRESS* says “The number of those living in poverty and extreme poverty lowered by 16.7 and 3.3 respectively.” The phrase should read that these levels were lowered “to” rather than “by.” We apologize for any confusion this error may have caused.

inbrief

- According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), only 32 percent of 570 million inhabitants in **Latin America and the Caribbean** have access to university, a figure far from the 55 percent who have access in industrialized countries.

- On Feb. 29, the government of Spain authorized the extradition of former naval official Ricardo Cavallo to **Argentina** to be judged for crimes against humanity. In 2003 Cavallo was deported to Spain from Mexico, accused of executing and torturing left-wing activists during the Argentine military dictatorship (1976-1983).

- A court in **Brazil** decided in early March to outlaw the single-crop farming of eucalyptus in the São Luiz de Paratinga municipal-

ity, in the state of São Paulo, until a study is carried out to investigate the environmental impact of these plantations.

- On Feb. 25, the president of **Guatemala**, Álvaro Colom, announced that he would declassify military archives from the 36-year civil war that ended in 1996. According to the Commission for Historical Clarification, the conflict left 200,000 dead and 50,000 disappeared, 93 percent of these cases committed at the hands of government forces.

- Nine workers from the Yanacocha mining company in **Peru** became seriously intoxicated on Feb. 27 due to an oil spill that occurred while they were cleaning the China Linda quarry in the northern Cajamarca department.

Loosing faith in Ortega

Nicaraguans grow impatient with socialist leader as poverty persists and food prices rise.



Ricardo Antonio Amador is one of the Nicaraguans who still supports Ortega.

Nicaraguans appear to be losing faith in Sandinista President Daniel Ortega, according to the latest opinion poll, published last month in leading national newspaper *La Prensa*.

The socialist leader swept back to power in 2006 promising hope for Nicaragua's poor — around 80 percent are said to live below the poverty line, on less than US\$2 a day, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

His return to the presidential palace was after a more than 15-year absence (*LP*, Nov. 15, 2006). He first governed Nicaragua in 1979 when the Sandinistas ousted the previous US-supported Somoza regime. Ortega was in office until 1990.

The recent poll showed that Ortega's popularity had plunged to just 21 percent, down from 61 percent in February 2007, a month after he re-took the reins.

A campaign slogan, which still adorns a giant billboard in the center of the capital Managua, reads: "Rise the poor of the world!" It now appears decidedly stale one year on in the wake of his apparent dramatic fall in popularity.

Many ordinary Nicaraguans, the kind he wooed with promises of free healthcare and education, seem disillusioned.

Taxi driver Dennis Rocha believes Ortega is more preoccupied with rhetoric than substance. "We don't have the roads, we don't have the buildings, we don't have the jobs," Rocha said, referring to Ortega's campaign promises. "There's no progress."

Saray, who only gave her first name, from Rio Blanco, a northern rural town, says the poor are likely to rise against Ortega.

Disappointment expressed

"He has changed nothing. Food prices are rising. People are leaving all over the place, to Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica or even the United States if they can," she said, shortly before boarding a bus to take up a job lined up by a family member in neighboring Costa Rica.

As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) arrived in town in late February on a two-week inspection of the economy, linked to a \$100 million loan agreement, concerns from the IMF over a lack of disclosure of aid provided by Hugo Chávez and Venezuela cast some doubt over the finality of the IMF loan package.

Yet while firing broadsides against the United States from such places as the pulpit of the United Nations in New York and standing in solidarity marches with Chávez, in the background Ortega has cooperated with the United States, giving a lie to the public shows of defiance.

In one deal under the US-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), he was said to have maintained good relations with an American textile firm building a multi-million dollar plant in the country.

Also, less a month after launching a ver-

bal volley at the US Drug Enforcement Agency, Ortega met with anti-narcotics officials from the United States in February in a bid to find new ways to work together to fight the scourge of illicit substances.

But then, as the meeting with the IMF got underway, more than 1,000 workers marched in protest outside the Central Bank venue over supposed IMF pressure on the government to resist salary increases.

All the while, Nicaragua continues to be riddled with poverty and, for many, hope has all but evaporated.

Ortega promised "zero unemployment" and "zero hunger" but critics say little progress has been made. Hostel worker Ángela López claimed little has changed. "The talk about free education and free health — this was good," she said. "But there are still so many kids who can't get to school and access to free university education is bad."

According to economic indicators, Nicaragua continues to be the fourth poorest in Latin America, according to the UNDP. And the financial forecast is bleak. The IMF inspected an economy that last year posted an inflation rate of nearly 17 percent, the highest in Central America and some 7 percent more than in 2006, according to preliminary figures. Similarly, economic growth in 2007 was just 3.4 percent, down from 4.2 percent the previous year, though others point out Ortega inherited many of the problems.

Local economist Néstor Avendaño told the press that in order for the country to see a real reduction in poverty, growth must hit 8-10 percent. But recent predictions for 2008 were around half that.

Venezuela's importance

Much of Ortega's hopes seem pinned on Venezuelan aid and oil. Shortly after he took power, Nicaragua joined Venezuela and Cuba in the left-leaning ALBA bloc of countries designed to offset US influence. One plan would see a \$4 billion oil refinery built in Nicaragua with cash from the South American country.

An incident last August saw Ortega at loggerheads with US-owned Esso, which owns Nicaragua's only existing refinery. Reeling from an energy crisis — blackouts plagued the nation last year — and an inability to get his hands on oil promised by Chávez, Ortega briefly took control of the refinery site under the guise that Esso owed almost \$3 million in back taxes in order to attain some of the Venezuelan oil.

Despite such incidents, Paul Trivelli, US ambassador to Nicaragua, has said it is clear that Ortega wants to court both sides. "Our relationship is a reasonable working relationship," he told local media last year. "So in that sense he continues to sort of walk that line." As the political games continue, the poor of Nicaragua are still waiting to see the campaign promises materialize.

For 26-year-old Ricardo Antonio Amador, a part-time bar hand, however, Ortega remains the savior of the poor. "Ortega will change things for the better. I've even seen him stop his car to give poor people clothes and food. I've seen it more than once." □

Ten more months of tariff preferences

United States approves extension of ATPDEA until December.

On Feb. 29, US President George W. Bush signed the extension of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) that offers tariff benefits to exports from Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

Some 6,200 products from the four Andean countries, including textiles, asparagus, flowers and jewelry, will continue to enter the United States free of tariffs in exchange for programs contributing to the war on drugs.

This is the third extension of ATPDEA, which went into force in December 2001 for a period of five years, replacing the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) approved in 1991 for a period of 10 years. On reaching the end of its term on Dec. 31, 2006, the ATPDEA was renewed until June 30, 2007, and later extended again to Feb. 29 of this year. Evidently, the expiration period can no longer be renewed.

For Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador, the initiative will allow them to receive the preferential tariffs for a few more months. For Peru, the measure will smooth the path for the free trade agreement with the United States — ratified by US Congress in December (*LP, Dec. 12, 2007*) — that will go into force on Jan. 1, 2009.

According to Tom Casey, US State Department deputy spokesman, almost two million people in these four countries benefit from ATPDEA.

And after the ATPDEA?

The White House as well as the State Department called on US Congress to ratify the trade agreement with Colombia, signed by both countries in February 2007 (*LP, Sept. 6, 2006*), which is at a standstill since the democratic majority is demanding that the Colombian government improve the human rights situation and that violence against union leaders stop.

However, with presidential elections around the corner on Nov. 4, it is unlikely this issue will enter the legislative agenda. Charles Rangel, democratic Congressman and chairman of the House Ways and Means, reiterated the importance of remembering that this is a very political year due to the up-coming elections.

Bolivia and Ecuador, who have no plans to negotiate free trade agreements with the United States, are asking for more long-term trade agreements.

"Bolivia wants to have a longer reaching agreement," said Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca. "The United States is an important market not only for Bolivia, but also for the world."

Ecuadorian Foreign Minister María Isabel Salvador told the local newspaper *El Comercio* that the country's agenda "goes beyond the ATPDEA." Salvador affirmed that a proposal had been sent to the United States "in order to initiate a dialogue about the long-term and not just on trade. We think that there are other social issues that are equally important."

The US government, however, warned that the 10-month extension of the ATPDEA will show whether Bolivia and Ecuador have made progress in their treatment of US investors.

Another problem that could affect exports from Andean countries to the United States is the downturn in US economy.

In fact, between January and September of last year, the Andean Community countries exported only US\$4.4 billion to the US, almost half of the \$8.5 billion exported in the same period in 2006. The majority of Andean exports now go to Central and South America, Europe and Asia. □

"The United States is an important market not only for Bolivia, but also for the world."

— David Choquehuanca

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