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Venezuela and Ecuador Send Troops to Colombian Border

Venezuela and Ecuador have both sent troops to their borders with Colombia and have expelled Colombian diplomats after Colombian military troops killed a top FARC commander, Raul Reyes, in Ecuadorian territory. The Colombian government has now said they have documents showing that Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa had commitments with the Colombian guerrilla group. Correa has now called for an emergency OAS meeting, while Hugo Chavez publicly lamented the killing of Reyes, whom he described as a "good revolutionary." The FARC has been identified as a terrorist group by countries worldwide, including Canada.

Youth Employment Strategies: Developing Human Capital in Brazil

Jenna-Dawn Shervill

Unemployment, informality and inactivity threaten the future of nearly 106 million young people in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), severely limiting the region's economic potential and ability to fight poverty. According to the 2007 International Labour Organization (ILO) report entitled "Decent Work and Youth in Latin America," not only do young people in LAC face an unemployment rate almost three times higher than that of adults, but they also represent 46 per cent of total unemployment. Even when a young person has an occupation, it is much more likely to be irregular and more precarious than that of an adult, a condition that affects two out of every three young workers in LAC. These trends are not showing signs of improvement, as youth unemployment rates are higher today than they were in the 1990s.

Not surprisingly, studies show that decent work – which includes concepts such as productive and safe work, labour rights, adequate income and social protection – is one of the main demands of young Latin Americans. In a recent study done by the Institute of Public Opinion at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, young people cited unemployment as their number one concern over others such as AIDS, violence, unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence and cancer. They also associated the meaning of "triumph in life" with "having a job one enjoys" and "being successful at work."

The issue of youth employment in Latin America is gaining importance on the international stage, playing a significant role in discussions at the 2005 Summit of the Americas. In 2006, 23 countries from the Americas declared youth employment as a priority in the Hemispheric Agenda on Decent Work. Leaders

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Note from the Editor

Judging by the worldwide media frenzy last month, paired with a relative indifference in Cuba, journalists seemed to be more worked up about Castro's retirement than Cubans themselves. In Miami, for example, a few hours after the announcement, eager reporters far outnumbered the mostly apathetic Cuban-Americans in local cafés. Similarly, the news was met with diffident shrugs by many Cuban affairs analysts. Despite the global attention on the issue, Castro's resignation was certainly not a surprise. But that does not mean Canada cannot play an effective role in the country's ongoing transformation.

Cuba, after all, has been going through a process of change since Fidel first began ceding power to his younger brother in 2006. While this eased the Cuban population into considering a life without Fidel, the powerful leader is not dead yet. Raúl Castro's trend of making small changes at the margins of policy indicates that, while testing the waters, he is unlikely to embark on any major reform plans.

For Canada, this means a policy of more of the same: continued application of quiet pressure. While our government should continue to support economic and political transitions in Cuba, we must also carefully weigh the costs. President Bush, for example, recently denigrated the fact that some people are pushing for stability, saying: "In the meantime, political prisoners will rot in prison and the human condition will remain pathetic in many cases." While Canada, Europe, and the U.S. are on the same page about the pressing need for change, we cannot afford to repeat the mistake of pushing democracy "at any price," as we have seen in Iraq. We do not want to watch Cuba fall into chaos simply


because we pursued transition regardless of the cost.

In Cuba, one rarely considered price of economic and political reform is the rise of social and racial tensions over increasing inequality. The government's attempts at economic openness — such as allowing freer use of remittances and more investment in tourism — have unintentionally led to a sudden and alarming rise in income inequality that is inextricably linked to race. Remittances to Cuba flow disproportionately to families of those that left earliest (who are predominantly white Cubans). Those most frequently hired for the tourism industry, where access to U.S. dollars is highest, are also lighter skinned Cubans.

As one Cuban-American noted, his mother lives in a freshly painted house with a new TV, microwave and other modern conveniences, while her next door neighbour, an Afro-Cuban war veteran with no relatives outside the country, lives in a dilapidated shack. This scene — repeated endlessly in a country where generations have grown up indoctrinated with ideas of economic equality and shared suffering among all citizens — is only one example of the care required when advocating reform in Cuba.

The risk of social tension, however, is not an excuse to avoid pushing for change. In fact, a lack of meaningful reforms that improve the lives of ordinary Cubans will most certainly exacerbate these tensions. The current system of political repression is an embarrassment to our hemisphere of democratically elected governments. Change will come to Cuba — the only question is when and how. Canada can play a strong role by urging caution and common sense while ensuring that ideology does not get in the way of doing the right thing.

Part of what Canada can provide is support for conflict prevention and management to ensure stability and avoid violence. We can also work on longer-term conflict transformation that includes democratizing Cuba's culture of conflict (for example, transforming revolutionaries into citizens). This would include respect for civil and political rights and the establishment of effective, accountable and transparent state institutions.

Such efforts would empower all Cubans on the island to meet the challenges of development and globalization. But we need to step lightly and learn from past mistakes. The international community cannot afford to destabilize a country in our enthusiastic efforts to achieve change. 

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Youth Employment *(continued from page 1)*

agreed to encourage better training and job access for young people with a specific target to halve in the next ten years the percentage of young people who neither study nor work.

The current challenge, then, is to turn these commitments into practical, efficient policy and actions that will improve the lives of millions of young Latin Americans. The case of Brazil – where a majority of the country's 31.3 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are affected by unemployment, precarious social inclusion and a lack of access to adequate education – merits consideration. With a youth unemployment rate of 17.7 per cent (3.8 million young people) and over 10 million young informal workers, the Brazilian experience will likely be highly relevant to other countries in the region.

Since 2004, there has been a concerted effort on the part of the Brazilian government to institutionalize the issue of youth employment, both at the international level as a lead country for the United Nations' Youth Employment Network (YEN) and at the national level through the creation of the National Youth Secretariat and the National Youth Council.

Additionally, there are several government programs in place to target Brazil's most disadvantaged youth, such as the National Programme for the Inclusion of Youth (Projovem). Throughout these processes, the government has engaged in social dialogue with civil society

and international agencies.

Despite the government's efforts, a paradox persists. Brazilians, like Latin Americans in general, make large investments in education so that youth can achieve a better quality of life; on average, those aged 20 to 24 have studied three years longer than those 25 and older. Nevertheless, statistics show that investment in education, even when coupled

Brazilians make large investments in education so that youth can achieve a better quality of life. But statistics show that investment in education, even when coupled with positive national social and economic indicators, has not been sufficient for youth to attain decent work.

with positive national social and economic indicators, has not been sufficient for youth to attain decent work. One possible explanation is related to the quality and suitability of the skills and knowledge acquired; if young people are poorly educated or lack the skills required for the jobs offered, more education does not necessarily translate into positive employment outcomes.

The missing piece of the puzzle may lie in the lack of a structural youth employment policy in Brazil


that is able to coordinate and integrate existing government programs and policies that specifically address both the demand and the supply side of the youth labour market. A recent government attempt to achieve this is the Projovem, which aims to integrate six previously separate youth programs in order to provide educational, social and professional qualification opportunities to 4.2 million young people in socially vulnerable situations over the next three years. It is too early to tell whether or not this program will be successful in matching professional skills with employers' demands; future results will need to be evaluated. Nevertheless, Brazil still lacks an overarching youth employment policy that guarantees access to decent work as a right for all young people.

In addition, a specific youth employment policy in Brazil would allow for the coordination of concerted actions by the private sector. For example, the ILO is currently implementing in Brazil its Project for the Promotion of Youth Employment in

Latin America. One of the innovative aspects of the project, funded by the Spanish government, involves practical training and job placement programs for youth by Spanish companies in sectors such as communications, information technology, energy, banking and human resources. While there are several such programs in existence, efforts to date have been mostly piecemeal. A youth employment policy could mobilize the private sector on a larger scale, allowing it to act not only

as an agent of economic growth, but also as a driving force in job creation and social development for youth.

There have never been as many young people between the ages of 15-24 in Latin America as there are today. Demographic forecasts show that this population growth will continue until 2015. If governments are able to “get it right” by moving the number one demand of youth (decent work) to the centre of the political agenda and by capitalizing on the large, dynamic, creative and talented young work force at their disposition, they may be able to significantly reduce poverty and strengthen social cohesion and democracy.

By looking for windows of opportunity — such as the development of a youth employment policy in Brazil — governments, the private sector, civil society and youth themselves can move young Latin Americans from a position of vulnerability and powerlessness in the job market, to one of full citizenship with the right to decent and productive work. 

Jenna-Dawn Shervill holds an MA degree from the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs in Ottawa and is currently working as a Youth Employment Network Associate at the International Labour Organization Office in Brazil.

The Ironies of Colombia Free Trade

Joachim Bamrud

In what has to be one of the major ironies of today, Colombia is still waiting for the U.S. congress to pass a free trade agreement reached two years ago. Despite an all-out campaign from the Bush Administration to get the accord passed, there is no indication that it will happen any time soon, thanks to solid opposition from key Democrats like Senator Hillary Clinton, one of the two candidates for her party's presidential nomination.

Meanwhile, Canada and the European Union are moving full speed ahead on negotiations for free trade agreements with Colombia. Canada's agreement with Colombia is “imminent,” as Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier said on February 19. The EU is scheduled to hold three negotiating rounds with the Andean Community (which includes Colombia) between April and October this year.

Key U.S. Democrats — who control the majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate — have stated they won't pass the accord until Colombia makes more

progress fighting union violence. “I am very concerned about the history of violence against trade unionists in Colombia,” Clinton said in a statement in November announcing her opposition to the free trade agreement.

The irony is that the current government of President Alvaro Uribe has made more progress fighting union violence — and insecurity in general — than any of his predecessors. In 2001, the last year before Uribe became president, there were 168 union murders in Colombia. In 2003, the first full year after he became president, there were 52, according to government figures. In 2005 that figure fell to 14. However, in 2006 they reached 25, marking an increase compared to the previous year, yet still considerably better than before Uribe became president. Last year the trend towards falling rates continued again. During the first seven months, the number of union deaths fell to six — a considerable achievement.

The intransigence of Democrat lawmakers opposed to the Colom-

Landslide Cuts Off Ecuador Pipeline

On February 28, a severe landslide cut off one of Ecuador's main export oil pipelines. Ecuador's state oil firm, Petroecuador, has said they will bypass or use private pipelines to transport the crude oil, reversing an earlier decision to halt exports. The pipeline in question, the SOTE pipeline, normally carries about 360,000 barrels per day of crude from the Amazon jungle to the Pacific Ocean. SOTE is of particular importance as it transports about 0.4 per cent of the global crude oil supply and is one of only two pipelines that carry oil from the Amazon to ports on the Pacific Ocean. News of the disruption to the SOTE pipeline sent oil prices to a record high, above \$103 a barrel. Yet prices dropped after Petroecuador reversed its decision to suspend operations. Ecuador is South America's fifth largest oil producer and is a recent OPEC member, producing around 500,000 barrels per day of crude oil.

bia FTA has been criticized by key members of the last Democrat administration of President Bill Clinton, such as his former chiefs of staff Leon Penetta and Mac McLarty. “The level of violence in Colombia — though still too high — has steadily and significantly declined under President Uribe,” a group of prominent Democrats said in an open letter in September. “Rather than hiding the scandals or minimizing them, Colombia is taking steps to root them out and cleanse the political system, even while recognizing that more must be done, including bringing to justice those who have committed crimes against unionists.”

Another irony is that the same lawmakers who oppose the Colombia FTA have generally supported repeated extensions of the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). The act provides duty-free access to the U.S. market for more than 5,000 products. Unlike the FTA, however, it does

not provide any benefits for U.S. exporters to Colombia. One could therefore argue that supporting the ATPDEA rather than the FTA is in reality hurting U.S. export-related jobs. Despite Colombia’s apparent benefits, it’s not that popular there, either. Unlike the FTA, the ATPDEA is temporary in nature and has been suffering from short-term extensions in recent years. Hardly the

environment Colombian exporters plan around.

Another irony is that the U.S. Congress did pass the U.S.-Peru free trade agreement in December, and Peru’s market is only half the size of Colombia’s for U.S. exports. While Colombia imported U.S. goods for \$8.6 billion last year, Peru’s imports from the United States only reached

heavy “competition” from China and Hugo Chávez. The United States has traditionally used a carrot-and-stick policy in Latin America to pursue its goals, but with the delay in passing the Colombia FTA (and the inroads by Chávez’s subsidized oil agreements), it appears it can’t muster up either.

Perhaps the largest irony in all of this, though, is that Colombia’s economy continues to boom despite the delay in getting the U.S. FTA passed. The economy grew above six per cent in 2006 and 2007, with local and foreign direct investment increasing significantly. “Colombia is enjoying its strongest growth in three decades as security improves and foreign investment increases under President Alvaro Uribe’s U.S.-backed campaign to reduce violence from a guerrilla conflict,” Reuters reported February 7.

Trade is also growing. Last year, Colombia replaced Chile as the fourth-largest U.S. trading partner in Latin America. Free trade

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\$4.1 billion, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. So clearly, if the goal is to boost U.S. exports, the Colombia FTA should have been passed first. That argument has only been strengthened by the current slowdown in the U.S. economy.


Yet another irony is that Colombia is seen as a close U.S. ally at a time when U.S. influence in Latin America is at an all-time low, with

agreements typically generate increased interest among companies even before they are formally ratified or implemented.

The growing confidence is due to a combination of factors, including the improved security and economic reforms undertaken by Uribe. Colombia is Latin America’s top reformer when it comes to implementing reforms aimed at facilitat-

ing business, according to the World Bank's Doing Business Report in 2007. Colombia ranked sixth worldwide in reforms, ahead of countries like China.

The improved security has boosted not only foreign companies' confidence in Colombia, but also among small companies – the backbone of any successful economy. A study by Cornell University's Johnson School of Management, based on a decade of research of almost 1,000 entrepreneurs, showed how they were expanding thanks to the safer environment and growing economy. "The survival rates of ventures [in Colombia] double after 2001," Wesley Sine, an assistant professor of management and organizations at the Johnson School of Management, said in November. "Entrepreneurs are more likely to take risks in stable environments."

Meanwhile, Colombia is still waiting for the U.S. free trade agreement. 

Joachim Bamrud is the editor-in-chief of Latin Business Chronicle.

Costa Rica: Development at a Crossroads

Peter Krupa

To spot the signs of globalization in Costa Rica, just take a long drive. The Inter-American Highway, which winds south from Nicaragua through the country's arid Guanacaste province, passes hundreds of thousands of hectares of citrus orchards, pineapple fields, and sugar cane plantations, all producing for the export market.

To the west, on the northern Pacific coast, hotels crowd the ocean-view ridges, crown jewels of the country's \$2 billion tourism industry. Further south in the Central Valley (home to the country's four principal urban centers) office parks for export manufactures and high-tech services sprawl out along the highways. The streets of the capital city, San José, are jammed with commuters on buses, in cars, and on foot, many of them headed to jobs at multi-national companies.

Mountainsides east of San José are covered with coffee plantations that grow a premium product for Starbucks and other luxury coffee companies. Banana trees lurch up from the mud on the Caribbean slope to produce export-quality Cavendish bananas. And in the Central Pacific and the southern Osa Peninsula, another tourism boom is just getting under way, with hotels and condominiums sprouting like weeds.

Not bad for a country the size of West Virginia and with a population not even half that of New York City. Only a few decades ago, this country located between conflict-ridden Panama and Nicaragua made ends meet with aid from the United States and international development banks.

Today it writes its own meal ticket. Costa Rica exported more than US\$9 billion worth of goods last year. Its economy is split practi-

Bolivian Police Officers Lynched by Mob

By late February, Bolivia had already seen its tenth lynching death of the year. Three police officers were stoned, beaten and hanged by an angry mob after the officers allegedly tried to extort money from a resident driving without license plates. Deputy Interior Minister Ruben Gamarra said that the officers were not on duty at the time and that an investigation was taking place. Most of the previous lynching victims have been apparent acts of vigilante justice against thieves caught in the act.

One of President Evo Morales' big campaign promises was to reform the justice system, including community-based courts where local elders hear the crimes and decide on punishments. Critics argue that the community courts are just another form of vigilantism, as they have little accountability to larger justice systems. On the other hand, proponents of the reforms say that backlogs in the current justice system have caused the acute frustration that leads to vigilante justice. They argue that community courts could amend such problems and that vigilantism is a major distortion of true community justice.

cally evenly between export manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism, with service exports becoming ever more important. Unemployment is a rock-bottom 4.6 per cent, poverty is at its lowest level in history, and per capita GDP is nearly three times that of its neighbours.

One could say Costa Rica is a model of globalization for Latin America – a success story. But this story is just getting started, and this year finds Costa Rica at something of a crossroads. The events of the next 18 months will test the durability of the country's new development model.

Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)

Socially, Costa Rica has begun to flounder. Cracks have appeared in the country's predominantly middle-class identity, as inflation shoots up along with consumer and housing debt. Wealth disparities are giving rise to more crime. Rapid development – especially tourism related – has led to several high-profile smudges on the country's environmental record, including water shortages and sewage dumping on beaches. More such scandals are in the offing.

Social upheaval brought on by rapid development was partly responsible for the fierce resistance to the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement. While the other Central American countries implemented the treaty more or less painlessly, Costa Rica balked, debating the treaty internally for years. The apparent climax

of the debate was a national referendum on the treaty in October, but while Costa Ricans approved it by less than two per cent, it has yet to be implemented as legislators wrangle over laws needed to put the country in compliance.

This year will mark the final chapter of the CAFTA drama, and it will be a nail-biter. President Oscar

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Arias has asked for an extension to the March 1, 2008 deadline for joining the treaty, a possibly unprecedented situation. It's still not clear if Costa Rica will be able to line up the support of all the treaty's members for the deadline extension. Meanwhile, its path toward trade liberalization hangs in the balance, even as the country joins the rest of Central America in negotiating a trade agreement with the European Union.

The United States Sneezes

On another front, an economic slowdown in Costa Rica's largest trading partner will test the strength of its export-dependent economy.

Last year, close to 50 per cent of Costa Rican exports ended up in the United States, and the last three years have marked a bonanza of export growth, to the point that the Costa Rican government ended 2007 with a budget surplus for the first time in half a century. A team from the IMF recently said that Costa Rica was growing as fast as anyone could expect.

The IMF team also said Costa Rica will likely lose one per cent of growth for every one per cent lost in the U.S., and with an economic recession brewing there, Costa Rica may be in for a rough ride. Of course, all economies experience downturns at some point. The question is if Costa Rica has grown nimble enough to withstand such a downturn and recover quickly. Experts say Costa Rica is better prepared for an economic challenge than at any time in its recent history. Will it be enough?

Certainly Costa Rica has plenty of other growing pains to confront in the near future. But if this tiny little success story can manage to resolve CAFTA once and for all and weather the economic duress of the United States, 2008 will mark a milestone in its development and once again prove Costa Rica to be a safe choice for foreign investors. 🌐

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Good “Politics,” Bad Policy: Washington’s Approach to Latin America

Adam Isacson

Latin America doesn’t get a lot of attention in Washington. There are only a handful of “think tanks” and experts focused on the region. Only a tiny group of Congress-people pays attention to what is happening in the rest of the hemisphere. The U.S. Southern Command and the regional bureaus at the State Department and intelligence agencies are smaller than those for nearly every other region (Africa excepted).

This may make some sense. U.S. soldiers aren’t being killed every day in Latin America. No Latin American or Caribbean country is developing nuclear weapons. There are no likely scenarios for interstate wars, no violent separatist movements, and only one civil war, in Colombia. Only one country currently lacks a president chosen through free and fair elections. Macroeconomic growth rates are at their highest points since the 1970s.

What happens, then, when the region is placed on Washington’s “back burner”? Benign neglect has certainly created political space for elected leaders who have prioritized reducing poverty, giving voice to indigenous populations, and doing away with stark, persistent economic inequalities. Outside of Colombia, it has generally meant less – or at

least stagnant levels – of equipment and training for historically abusive, largely unreformed militaries and police forces.

A low priority also means, however, that domestic politics come to the fore. Internal political concerns guide much U.S. decision-making in Latin America and the Caribbean today. The trouble is that what makes

A low priority also means that domestic politics come to the fore. Internal political concerns guide much U.S. decision-making in Latin America and the Caribbean today. The trouble is that what makes good “politics” at home often translates into terrible policies abroad.

good “politics” at home often translates into terrible policies abroad. A policy can be popular with key domestic constituencies even when it fails abysmally to meet its stated objectives.

For examples, look no further than the embargo on Cuba, which the Bush administration has strengthened. Even though it has gone an incredible 47 years without dislodging or destabilizing the Castro’s regime in Havana, the embargo

appeals to an important electoral group, Cuban-Americans in Florida, a state that has been an indispensable “must-win” in the last two presidential contests.

Another case is the “War on Drugs,” a collection of punitive and militarized strategies that, after twenty years, has had zero impact on the U.S. street price or availability of illegal drugs produced in Latin America. Despite this stunning failure, the U.S. voting public does not yet appear ready for a shift to the demand-focused, harm-reduction (or, in U.S. political parlance, “softer”) approaches that, nearly all studies indicate, would offer better chances of success.

Likewise, the U.S. debate on immigration policy is rarely informed by questions like the impact that mass deportations have on fragile societies and economies, or the hugely negative message that building a wall along the Mexican border sends to the entire hemisphere. And while labour and environmental concerns have justifiably slowed consideration of a free-trade agreement with Colombia, the greatest brake on congressional action has probably been an unwillingness to take on a politically unpopular trade issue during an election year in the midst of a likely recession.

In a climate of neglect, if a regional issue lacks a major domestic political constituency, it gets very little “play” unless it can be portrayed as a national security threat. Hence U.S. conservatives are increasingly sounding the alarm about the “expansionist” program of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and like-minded elected leaders elsewhere in the region. And even though there is no evidence of terrorist groups with “global reach” capable of hitting the United States, the “War on Terror” continues to be a principal rationale for U.S. military and police assistance to the rest of the hemisphere. (This assistance will exceed \$1 billion for the first time in 2008, if a proposed package of mostly military anti-drug aid to Mexico and Central America wins congressional approval.)

The United States’ current priorities in Latin America, unsurprisingly, do not overlap with those of the region’s citizens. Polling and press coverage show a hemisphere concerned with economic well-being and poverty alleviation; with halting and punishing corruption; with curbing rampant organized crime; with making citizen security institutions able to make people safer; and with consolidating fragile democratic institutions. Washington, currently consumed with domestic political priorities and potential threats, is on a very different page.

A modest exception is the Democratic-majority Congress, which signalled a willingness to alter course in late 2007 by changing the makeup of aid to Colombia, which has totalled \$6.1 billion since 2000. The new legislature cut military assistance under the “Plan Colombia” framework by one quarter, replacing most of it

with new development and judicial reform aid.

While this is a positive step, it would be too optimistic to expect a dramatic change after the 2008 elections. After dozens of candidates’ debates and “town-hall meetings,” the only regional issues to get attention have been immigration (its domestic aspect), Cuba policy, and a rather facile Democratic argument about whether or not a president should meet with, or even engage, the leaders of Cuba and Venezuela. (Curiously, the drug war – a hot-button issue in the 1980s and 1990s – has received almost no mention at all.)

Of the likely presidential nominees, only Barack Obama has proposed a departure from the current U.S. approach to Latin America and the Caribbean. While it is not a major theme for his campaign, Obama proposed engaging Cuba in an August 2007 Miami Herald column, and working with Mexico on a host of issues in a February 2008 Dallas Morning News piece.

Whoever wins, however, it is likely that more pressing concerns elsewhere in the world – especially the Middle East – will keep the next president from expending much political capital on a creative new approach to Latin America. Nonetheless, a new administration will offer the best hope in a generation for a new, non-ideological relationship with Latin America – one that actively seeks engagement and seizes opportunities, instead of pandering to domestic constituencies and inflating perceptions of threats. 

Adam Isacson is Director of Programs at the Center for International Policy in Washington, DC.

Nuclear Energy-Sharing Deal Between Argentina and Brazil

In the midst of energy shortages in South America, Brazil and Argentina have agreed to begin the process of uranium enrichment with the aim of establishing a joint nuclear power plant. The announcement was made on February 23, following a meeting between Argentinean president Cristina Kirchner and her Brazilian counterpart, Luis Lula da Silva. As the two most powerful economies in South America, each country already has two nuclear power plants in operation, and both are aiming for nuclear expansion in the coming years. Brazil, with the sixth-largest uranium reserves in the world, is well positioned for expansion in the nuclear energy sector. This bilateral cooperation occurs in the midst of energy shortages that have been causing blackouts in Argentina. While an agreement on nuclear energy has been reached, its effects will not be immediate. In the short-term, Brazil has agreed to share its surplus electricity with Argentina over the winter. However, Brazil was unwilling to reduce the amount of natural gas it imports from Bolivia in order for Argentina to import a larger share of the valuable energy commodity. Regional negotiations on generating and sharing energy are ongoing, with the goal of sustaining current economic growth.

Advancing the Rights of Migrant Women

Barb MacLaren interviews Tanya Basok

Tanya Basok, author of *Tomatoes and Tortillas, recently gained the interest of 15 researchers from six different countries in examining migration in Latin America and the Caribbean – this time from a woman's perspective. The project explores ways of advancing the rights of female migrants and will include case studies from Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. FOCAL's Barb MacLaren conducted an interview with Dr. Basok and her colleagues, Dr. Nicola Piper and Dr. Claudia Mora to learn more about the project.*

Q. What type of grant have you received from IDRC?

A. This is a three-year research grant under the International Development Research Centre's Women and Citizenship Program.

Q. What led to your interest in this research field, who are your co-researchers and what are the main objectives of this new project?

A. We (Nicola Piper and I) met at a conference on labour migration in Ottawa in 2005. We discovered that both of us were interested in regional migration, migrants' rights, and advocacy for migrants. At that time Nicola was a senior researcher at the National University of Singa-

pore and her research focused on migration in Asia, whereas I had done research on migration within Latin America. We decided to work together and started looking for funding. Coincidentally, Nicola was invited by IDRC to produce a concept paper for a workshop on gender and migration, held in Singapore in 2006, and that is how she learned about the IDRC Women

the project with enthusiasm and brought some of their colleagues on board.

Q. Around 50 per cent of the global population of 190 million migrants are women, and this percentage is slightly higher in the Latin American region. Why do you think the number of women migrants in the region is rising?

A. The rise in women migrants has to do with two broad structural trends: 1) the demand structures (in sectors or job categories dominated by women, such as domestic work or certain types of factory work); and 2) the inability of men to find sufficient work in their home countries as well as abroad (due to rising unemployment or underemployment in male-dominated sectors).

For households who view migration as a household survival strategy but do not have sufficient financial means to cover high costs of transportation, intra-regional migration is a preferred option. However, households will often pool resources and save money to send males to far-off destinations, while women migrate for work within the region. For women, migration to a neighbouring country offers an additional advantage: they can easily return home to attend to household needs.

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and Citizenship program. Nicola shared our research ideas with Rob Robertson, an IDRC program officer. He seemed interested. With his encouragement, we started building a research team and prepared an application.

We already knew some Latin American researchers specializing in regional migration and partners were found with the help of other contacts. All the people we contacted accepted our invitations to join

Q. Do women migrate using mostly legal or irregular means and why?

A. Most of the women migrants cross the borders through irregular means, although domestic workers can obtain visas in such countries as Chile and Costa Rica. Some women and children are trafficked. In Chile and Argentina, undocumented migrants from Latin America are now allowed to legalize their status although in practice, many among them have encountered bureaucratic or financial obstacles.

Q. What are the main migrant-receiving destinations and where are migrant women finding work?

A. All countries in our study are receiving destinations. We will focus on Peruvian migrants in Chile, Bolivians in Argentina, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and Guatemalans in Mexico. Women are employed in domestic work, agriculture, textile factories, street commerce, and other occupations.

Q. Why is it important to examine the human rights of migrant women?

A. In light of numerous abuses, xenophobic treatment, and racism experienced by migrants (particularly undocumented migrants) throughout the world, many organizations and researchers have called for a human rights approach to migration. The experiences of women migrants differ from the experiences of men

in many ways.

Often they tend to work in sectors that have historically not been well protected, such as domestic work. Women who work as live-in domestic servants experience the most abuse: they are denied days off, expected to provide services at any time of the day or night, dismissed without pay, and are victims of sexual abuse by the employers.

Emotionally, if migrants leave their

In light of numerous abuses, xenophobic treatment, and racism experienced by migrants throughout the world, many organizations and researchers have called for a human rights approach to migration.

families behind, separation from the household is harder on women migrants because they are usually the main care providers. On a general basis, women are subject to gender inequality which is exacerbated when they find themselves in foreign lands.

Q. Can you talk about some of the real or potential methods for the protection of human rights of migrant women that your study will examine?

A. In those situations where migrant women do have legal rights to health services, education for their children, and labour protections (particularly in the countries which have ratified the 1990 International

Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families, such as Chile, Argentina and Mexico), it is extremely important to inform female migrants of their rights and ensure that the violations of these rights are reported and redressed.

Nongovernmental organizations can play an important role in disseminating the necessary information and assisting female migrants in claiming their rights. In those countries where migrants do not have basic rights, it is important for civil society organizations to advocate that these rights be extended to them. Transnational networks of pro-migrant civil society organizations can be vital in this process; they provide fora to discuss and improve strategies for success. International organizations have an important role to play: not only do they provide funding

for local civil society organizations assisting migrant women, but they can also pressure governments to adopt policies that respect the rights of female migrants.

Q. Where can readers find out more about your research project?

A. Readers can learn more about our project, research teams, relevant publications, and other important information from our website: www.advancingmigrantrights.org. Eventually, we will also be posting our findings on this web site. 

Barb MacLaren is the project manager for FOCAL's Labour Mobility, Trade and Development project. She can be reached at bmaclaren@focal.ca.

Shifting Political Identities: Gender Roles in Venezuela's 'New' Citizenship

Jennifer Peirce

Amid heavy media coverage of the violent street protests and accusations that surrounded the December 2, 2007 referendum on reforms to Venezuela's Constitution, its impact on women's rights and activism went largely unnoticed. Mobilization efforts on both sides of the campaign created some strains among women's groups, who for many years have maintained a flexible, issue-based coalition that crosses party and ideological divides.

These debates point to some of the complexities of feminist activism within the "Bolivarian Revolution," which Chávez has called "the first revolutionary process in the world in which the rights of women are neither postponed nor relegated." Indeed, "21st Century socialism" has shifted the ground for feminist advocates, but changing entrenched hierarchies remains an uphill struggle.

Legislative Reforms:

Towards Equality on Paper

The most specific advances in women's rights in Venezuela can be seen in a series of legislative changes since the 1980s to marital, labour, and domestic violence laws; most recently, a 2006 law defined nineteen types of gender-based violence. Rather than reflecting significant shifts in gender ideology, these re-

forms were due largely to a core group of activists – grassroots and professional women – who, acting out of frustration with traditional party and government structures, secured the support of trans-national feminist organizations and like-minded politicians and judges. Since the 1998 election, the "Bolivarian Revolution" has aimed to break with traditional party and

The gap between community-level organizing and trans-national feminism is now being filled by structures and rhetoric that tend to emphasize class and economic marginalization more than gender issues.

representative democracy models and redefine the terms for political participation. What this means for the gendered roles of the 'new' citizenship, though, is less clear.

In the participatory consultations that built the new Constitution (1999), the pre-existing women's coalition used similar strategies to push for women's rights and perspectives to be included. As a result, the Constitution codifies recognition of domestic labour, social security rights, the right to family planning, and gender-inclusive language; numer-

ous commissions targeting women were created. In general, the gap between community-level organizing and trans-national feminism is now being filled by structures and rhetoric that tend to emphasize class and economic marginalization more than gender issues. This affects how recent changes to laws and institutions, as well as ongoing advocacy efforts, are perceived and implemented.

To start with, campaigns for further legislative changes now focus less on addressing all aspects of an issue – such as laws, institutions and public education about domestic violence – and more on strategically linking specific proposals based on political calculations. This was most evident in the negotiations over the proposed constitutional reforms in 2007,

in which the proposed amendments were voted on as two blocks. As a result, even though the broad women's coalition had articulated its "minimum agenda for legislative change," influential women politicians accepted the proposal for 50-50 parity in government representation, trading off rotation of top positions by gender. Amending the ban on abortion was not considered politically likely; on the other hand, the inclusion of a potentially controversial amendment – recognizing diverse sexual orientations – attracted little

attention in the midst of the furor over removing limits on presidential terms and state of emergency powers. Although the reform proposals were defeated by the referendum vote, the block-voting format and both campaigns' framing of the vote as an endorsement or rejection of Chávez's leadership have altered the terrain in which women's coalitions advocate for further change.

Implementing Equality: Mothers and Domestic Labour

One of the most-heralded milestones of the 1999 Constitution is Article 88, which affirms the social and economic value of domestic labour. One implementation mechanism for this principle is the Misión Madres del Barrio (Mothers of the Neighbourhood), one of the many social missions that are the hallmark of Chávez's redistribution project. The purpose of the mission is to combat poverty and improve 'socio-productive' inclusion of women. Because it provides 80 per cent of the minimum wage to women identified as the poorest in a neighbourhood, this mission is often criticized as a "handout" model. While the burden of poverty on women is undeniable, in terms of genuinely altering the 'value' of women's work, the approach contains some problematic assumptions.


First, by selecting only single mothers as the poorest citizens, it portrays households without men as inherently the most vulnerable – despite high rates of male unemployment and domestic violence. Second, the goal of moving women 'beyond' the household to income-generating jobs underestimates the political potential of "domestic" roles for women – what feminist scholars have termed the 'strategic needs' potential within 'practical needs' projects. Bringing household tasks into public, collective settings can develop political skills and identities differently. According to sociologist Sujatha Fernandes' study of barrio women in chavista areas of Caracas, women who work in long-term, neighbourhood-level projects – many of which are based in 'feminine' tasks – have more autonomous and critical political views, both at the barrio level and nationally.

Shifting Political Identities

The resurgence of state-sponsored women's projects has brought new opportunities and resources for bridging the long-standing gap between 'local' women's needs and national-level institutional and legislative issues. For example, the Gender-Sensitive Participatory Budget, an international initiative which was endorsed by Chávez through

an appeal to his desire to "forge new paradigms," brings grassroots consciousness-raising practices and the voices of barrio women into official finance-planning structures.

Yet political polarization and the rhetoric of militants and battalions complicate the question of feminist autonomy among 'core' activists and community-based groups, both long-standing 'popular women's circles' and newer, state-funded communal councils. The President of the National Institute for Women refers to Chávez as the "father and leader of us all," invoking a masculine image of the 'protector' of the nation – paternalistic towards his people and belligerent toward hostile outsiders.

Achieving equal and meaningful citizenship for women will require moving beyond such frames – toward, in the words of socialist feminist Jessie Blanco, "reinventing the forms of political action, through discovering new paths, pregnant with political lessons and with creative militancy." 

Jennifer Peirce is currently an MA candidate at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. In 2007, she spent several months in Venezuela researching gender and social movements.

Cuba Signs Human Rights Agreements

Just days after Raúl Castro officially took over as president of Cuba, the country signed two legally binding human rights agreements at the UN. The pledges concern civil and political rights as well as social, economic and cultural rights, including freedom of expression and association and the right to travel. They follow Cuba's announcement last December that it would allow monitoring by the UN Human Rights Council as of 2009. As the two covenants had been long rejected by Fidel Castro, some experts see in this speedy deal yet another sign of a possible turn-around in the island country's human rights policy. However, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque insists that the agreements only formalize rights Cuban citizens have enjoyed since the 1959 revolution. Cuba is urged to substantiate the agreements by freeing dissidents. There are an estimated 200 political prisoners, including 22 journalists, currently held in Cuba.

High Noon at the Orinoco River: Venezuela and Exxon-Mobil

Luis A. Pacheco

Push finally came to shove in the conflict between the Venezuelan national oil company, PDVSA, and the giant multinational Exxon-Mobil, when the latter appealed to courts in New York and London to freeze PDVSA's assets in February. This is just the latest chapter of a saga that started as a love affair and now appears to be heading for an acrimonious divorce.

During the 1990s, Venezuela faced a strategic conundrum: how to economically activate the enormous quantity of heavy hydrocarbon resources that were known to exist in the Orinoco Belt since the 1960s and that were fully charted by the newly formed PDVSA during the 1980s.

These resources were known to be enormous: close to 1,200 billion barrels of oil originally in situ (between 80 and 210 billion barrels of recoverable resources, depending on the recovery factor one chooses to believe). However, they were of very poor quality, at 10° API (indicating low gravity/high viscosity) and a high content of sulfur and heavy metals. For all intents and purposes, these reserves were commercially worthless, at least with the technology that was available to PDVSA at the time, the oil price forecast, and the fiscal regime then in existence in Venezuela.

However, given the very mature nature of the Venezuelan basins on the one hand, and the need for Venezuela to use its resources to foster economic growth on the other, the Orinoco Belt presented itself as a clear strategic opportunity for the future.

So PDVSA, with the full support of the government and parliament,

Originally, the Orinoco Belt was no more than an unfulfilled promise: 400 km from the nearest export port and with no real future with the policies as they then stood — it was the proverbial “middle of nowhere,” both geographically and economically.

set out to design an industrial and fiscal strategy that would attract the best actors within the international oil industry – actors who were capable of contributing not only the large amounts of capital and innovative strategy required, but also the access to markets that the venture called for. This strategy was familiarly known as “Apertura Petrolera.”

The chosen strategy was the production of the oil, its transportation to port and its upgrade (using dif-

ferent degrees of decabornization) in order to produce oil streams of commercial grade. This required the modification of the then very stringent Venezuelan fiscal regime, resulting in the reduction of royalties and tax rates. This facilitated the more than \$20 billion that were eventually invested, between PDVSA and its chosen partners, for the development of a capacity of 600,000 barrels per day of synthetic crude in four different projects. These projects became unqualified successes, technologically and commercially.

Although the strategy was agreed upon and implemented in less than five years, it would take more than a decade to see the projects built and in operation. It is important to remember that prior to this effort, the Orinoco Belt was no more than an unfulfilled promise: 400 km from the nearest

export port and with no real future with the policies as they then stood — it was the proverbial “middle of nowhere,” both geographically and economically.

Of course, such initiatives were not without detractors, particularly from the political opposition of the time, who could never put forward legal arguments or assemble enough political support to derail what they regarded as the denationalization of the Venezuelan oil industry.

But destiny plays tricks on even the best of intentions. With the new decade came a number of unexpected events. Hugo Chávez became president of Venezuela, and with him came political groups that had stubbornly opposed the “Apertura Petrolera.” With them came the political intention to rewind all the projects that had been previously implemented.

At the same time, oil prices started moving upward to unexpected levels, making the concessions of the previous decade appear unsustainable at best and politically dangerous at worst. The Venezuelan government then started a focused effort to modify the legal and fiscal concessions that had been necessary to realize the “Apertura Petrolera.”

The four projects in the Orinoco Belt were the last to be tackled by the government. Between 2005-2007 royalties were first increased, then the tax structure was modified, and finally, the new legislation put in place by the government called for

a reduction on the share that private companies could hold in the projects. The government’s negotiating stance was simple: take it or leave it.

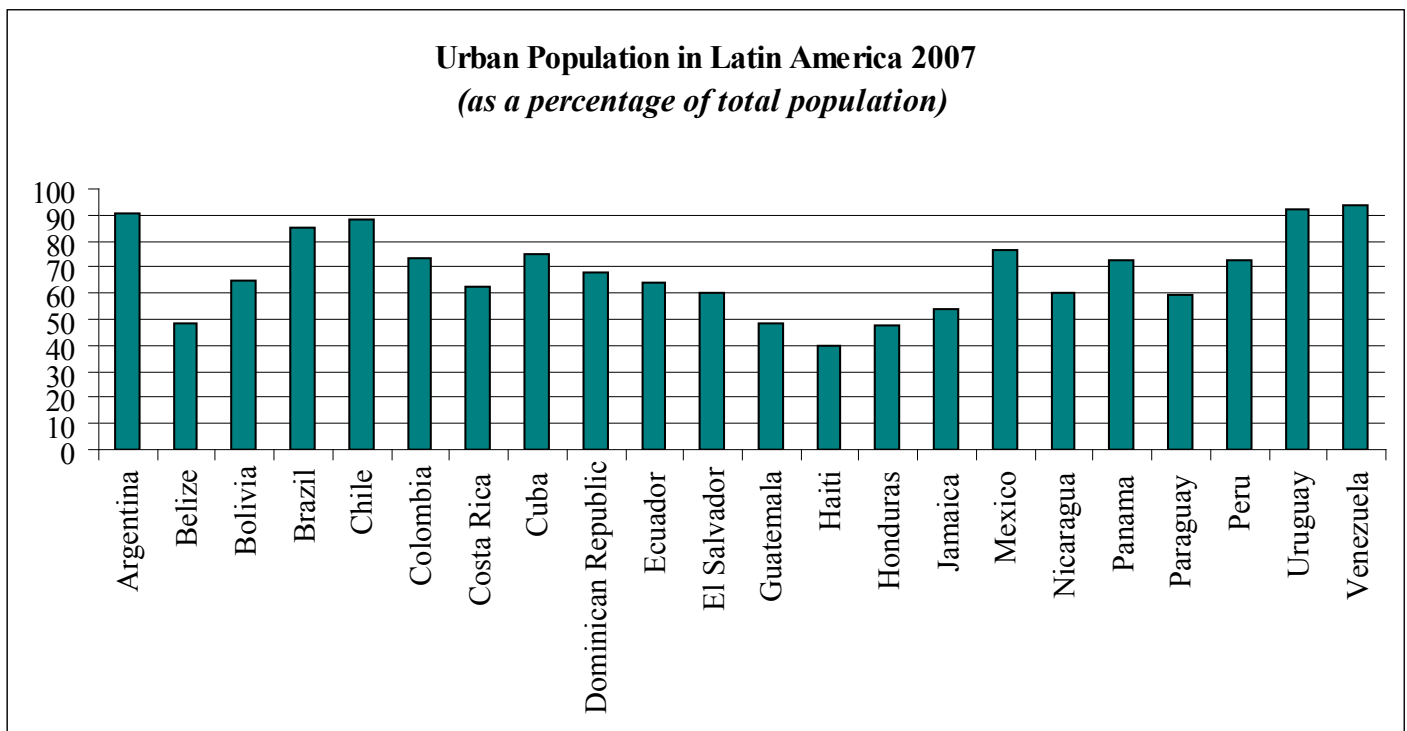
Most of the foreign companies reluctantly agreed to these changes, even though in the process they were the object of political abuse and public invective. One has to remember that although the vindication of the rights of the resource owner (in this case, the nation) appear logical under the light of market conditions, the government needed to appear to be getting a rematch, this time on the winning side, of a political argument they had lost in the 1990s.

Exxon, which incidentally was never a part of the “Apertura Petrolera” but inherited its presence from its takeover of MOBIL, took exception to what they saw as inadequate compensation and resorted to arbitration in accordance with the original contract. For the Venezuelan government this was like adding insult to injury, since international arbitration was one of the conditions

to which they most objected in the original contracts.

EXXON and PDVSA are both engaged in an unnecessary farce that will benefit no one. In the end, Exxon’s stance will only lead to fair economic compensation, but the affair will hurt the long-term credibility of Venezuela. It will also lend support to those in Venezuela who preach that foreign companies are unrepentant vultures and that political dogmatism takes precedence over the nation’s welfare — even if takes a rewriting of history to make that political point. 🌐

Luis A. Pacheco was formerly the Executive Director of Planning for PDVSA and is currently an independent consultant, with more than twenty five years in the oil and gas industry. He is also a visiting Lecturer at Instituto de Estudios Superiores en Administración (IESA), Caracas, where he lectures on the future of the oil and gas sectors. He can be reached at: pachecola@cantv.net.



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