



# The Bodies of the Innocent

By Daniel Kovalik (Kovalik is a labor & human rights lawyer working in Pittsburgh, PA.)  
 This article was previously published in various online locations.

The biggest human rights scandal in years is developing in Colombia, though you wouldn't notice it from the total lack of media coverage here. A mass grave – one of a number suspected by human rights groups in Colombia – was discovered by accident last year just outside a Colombian Army base in La Macarena, a rural municipality located in the Department of Meta just south of Bogota. The grave was discovered when children drank from a nearby stream and started to become seriously ill. These illnesses were traced to runoff from what was discovered to be a mass grave – a grave marked only with small flags showing the dates (between



A man digs to reveal a body in one of the Colombia's recently discovered mass graves. (Photo: Courtesy of the El Nuevo Herald)

2002 and 2009) on which the bodies were buried.

According to a February 10, 2010 letter issued by Alexandra Valencia Molina, Director of the regional office of Colombia's own Procuraduria General de la Nacion – a government agency tasked to investigate government corruption – approximately 2,000 bodies are buried in this grave. The Colombian Army has admitted

responsibility for the grave, claiming to have killed and buried alleged guerillas there. However, the bodies in the grave have yet to be identified. Instead, against all protocol for handling the remains of anyone killed by the military, especially the bodies of guerillas, the bodies contained in the mass grave were buried there secretly without the requisite process of having the Colombian government certify that the deceased were indeed the armed combatants the Army claims.

Story Continued on Page 7 "Bodies"

inside the  
 may/june 2010  
 edition

The Bodies of the  
 Innocent  
 1

Left Social Forum  
 2

Maternal Waiting  
 Homes in Nicaragua  
 3 & 4

Mesoamerica Housing  
 5

AFGJ to Support Anti-  
 Militarization Meetings  
 10

News from Nicaragua  
 11

# Report from the Left Social Forum

By Midge Quandt (Quandt is a solidarity activist, historian & member of AFGJ's board.)

The Left Social Forum took place in New York City, March 19-21. I attended two panels that dealt with Venezuela. In “Lessons from Venezuela: Achievements and Failures,” the assessment was generally positive. Participants included Eva Golinger, Gregory Wilpert, Steve Ellner and Carlos Martinez. They agreed that the U.S. media persistently paints a misleading picture of political dynamics there, especially exaggerating the cult of personality that surrounds Hugo Chavez and supposedly reinforces a top-down governing apparatus. According to Ellner, who has taught and written about Venezuela for years, and whose most recent book is the well-regarded *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, the political structure is far from monolithic. For one thing, disagreements exist within the Chavista party. The predominant debate which he alluded to (and which he fleshes out in his book) is between soft and hard-line currents, including Trotskyites. The soft-liners are moderates; the hard-liners favor continuous radical transformation, such as the recent wave of expropriations.

Carlos Martinez, author of *Venezuela Speaks* and an activist with the grassroots, said that both detractors and supporters of the Bolivarian revolution in the U.S. wrongly equate it with the central government and with Chavez personally. This misplaced perception results in an unfortunate erasure of the social movements — women, the indigenous, labor, environmentalists — as important political players.

The panelists raised, and sometimes circled around, the question of what role Hugo Chavez plays in holding everything together. He is clearly “the glue” in the Bolivarian process, but what does this mean? To be sure, he articulates and crystallizes popular demands. As a leader, Chavez also encourages self-organization at the grassroots. He is in a perpetual dialogue, a give-and-take, with the popular base. This picture surely

does not conform to the caudillo or populist stereotype where the leader is a demagogue pure and simple and his followers have a “Messiah” fixation.

At a panel on “Latin America after Neo-Liberalism,” the Venezuelan leftist, Margarita Lopez Maya, gave a paper that was much more critical of Venezuelan politics than the preceding speakers had been. A prominent writer and intellectual, she has supported the Bolivarian revolution while remaining a long-standing critic of its authoritarian tendencies. Lopez Maya has consistently underlined Chavez’s penchant for personal rule and for undermining the institutions of formal democracy.

Focusing her remarks on recent instances of popular unrest — student hunger strikes and peaceful demonstrations among them — she noted that protest was weak and fragmented in this period running up to parliamentary elections. Lopez Maya contended that government control of the media and clamp-downs on street mobilizations had both increased in the last year and a half. She has always been hostile to the overarching power of the state that accompanied socialist revolutions in the Soviet Union and Cuba. At the World Social Forum in 2005, Chavez had declared his allegiance to “a socialism for the 21st century” that was less state-centered and more pluralist than these. She nonetheless argued that in practice Chavez has increased the macro-decision-making power of the central government while leaving micro-decisions (and by implication, unimportant) to participatory bodies like the communal councils.

On a different note, Eva Golinger has started an English-language newspaper devoted to Venezuela. She said that one purpose of the paper is to counteract the misinformation perpetrated by the U.S. media. The online edition of the paper is published each Friday and can be found at [www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/english-edition](http://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/english-edition).

“They agreed that the U.S. media persistently paints a misleading picture of political dynamics (in Venezuela), especially exaggerating the cult of personality that surrounds Hugo Chavez and supposedly reinforces the top-down governing apparatus.”

# La Casa Materna

*By Kitty Madden (Madden is a Casa Materna volunteer /cofounder and a liason with Friends of Casa Materna.)*

Every minute of every day, somewhere in the world, there is a maternal death. Each day, 1,440 women die from factors related to their pregnancy, birthing or postnatal complications in the 40 days following birth. It is called the “silent epidemic” as the story of the 525,600 women who die annually never makes the nightly news.

In 1989, in response to this silent epidemic manifest among rural pregnant mothers in the northern highland region of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, a small group of women from Nicaragua, Spain, Italy, Holland and the United States proposed the development of a “Casa Materna,” or maternal waiting home. The initial proposal presented to the Women’s Institute of Madrid, Spain, was drafted by a Nicaraguan nurse, an Italian midwife and a Spanish pediatrician.

Following the model developed by Cuba’s Ministry of Health in the 1970s, a Casa Materna is a home for rural mothers with high-risk pregnancies located close to a regional hospital. It welcomes mothers 7-10 days before their due date and provides food, shelter, medical supervision, education on maternal and infant healthcare and transportation to and from the hospital at the time of and after their birthing. Nicaraguan’s first Casa Materna was founded in 1988 in the northern city of Ocotal and was/is coordinated by the women’s group AMLAE.

Visitors to Matagalpa’s Casa Materna Mary Ann Jackman on any given day will find from 20-35 mothers from 15 to 45 years of age. Central to the service provided by the Casa Materna is the mutual care and concern that the mothers provide for each other in a community that changes each day as new



mothers arrive and others return home with their newborns. Appropriately, the Spanish word “tierna(o)” used for newborns is also the adjective tender.

In addition to basic around-the-clock services provided in the Casa, the staff provides outreach education for 265 rural midwives and follow-up with over 400 Casa mothers organized in mutual support groups in 12 rural communities. Many mothers are referred by local midwives and other women - sisters, mothers, cousins or friends – who have themselves been served by the Casa Materna. As one in four births in Nicaragua is to an adolescent mother, specialized outreach to these younger women is also being developed.

Since the doors of the Casa Materna first opened in late October of 1991, over 14,300 mothers have been received. Of these, there have been 2 maternal deaths: Nicolasa Zeledon, 43 years old, died in April of 1996 four days after returning home following the birth of her 16th child and Susana Zeledon Rayo, who was just 30 years old when she gave birth to her 3rd child in November of 2009 following life-threatening miscarriages in 2007 and 2008. Efforts to stem her post-partum hemorrhaging were unsuccessful. Susana was the first of over 14,300 Casa mothers sent to the Matagalpa Regional Hospital who did not survive her birthing.

Casa Materna Mary Ann Jackman was named for a young Nicaraguan sociologist (a paternal grandfather had come from England) who had worked closely with the Nicaragua Network in the 1980s when helping to provide services for rural families who had been displaced from their homes because of the Contra War. It was Mary Ann who, in 1986, gathered together the group of women who later initiated the proposal for the Casa Materna. Tragically, pregnant with her third child, Mary Ann and her baby died following an automobile accident in January of 1987.

**Story Continued on Page 8 “Materna”**



Mothers-to-be rest at El Sauce's Maternal Waiting Home in Nicaragua. (Photo: Courtesy of Allison Kornblatt. This photo was taken and reproduced with the express consent of the mothers.)

# El Sauce's New Maternal Waiting Home

*By Dr. Arnold Matlin (Matlin is a pediatrician & serves on the Executive Committee of the Nicaragua Network. He is the only North American to be awarded the Medal of the 25th Anniversary of the Revolution.)*

**E**l Sauce, Nicaragua is a city in the León Department of northwestern Nicaragua. The population of the city is 12,000, and another 15,000 people live in the surrounding countryside. Although El Sauce is not really remote, it has an isolated, rural feel to it.

Rochester, New York, has had a *ciudad hermana* (sister city) relationship with El Sauce since 1987. This relationship has endured through the Contra War, and the political and economic upheavals of the past 20 years. The El Sauce-Rochester Ciudad Hermana Task Force has carried out many excellent projects—scholarship programs, clean water projects, rotating loan projects, etc. As a spinoff from the efforts of the Ciudad Hermana Task Force, the Business School of the State University of New York at Geneseo has begun an independent project in El Sauce. In addition, medical students and residents from the University of Rochester take clinical rotations at the El Sauce Health Center.

My family has been working in parallel with the Ciudad Hermana Task Force since the first Rochester delegation visited El Sauce in January 1988. All four of us have visited the city many times, and we all have extensive political, social, and economic ties to the people of El Sauce. Starting in 1990, we financed a model preschool and kindergarten in El Sauce—Servicio Infantil Rural (SIR) Nimian Ortiz. (The late Nimian Ortiz was the SIR's first director and our close friend.) For complex reasons, this

project ended in November 2009.

At that point we were faced with an immediate problem. We needed to provide employment for the four loyal SIR employees—school director, assistant teacher, cook, and gardener/watchman—all of whom had worked at the school for many years. A more overarching problem was how to direct our energies and our funds to a new project that would be of benefit to the people of El Sauce.

The answer to both these problems came via a request by the Ministry of Health's (MINSa) director in El Sauce, Dra. Teresa Velásquez. Dra. Velásquez told us that a new Casa Materna (maternal waiting home) was beginning in El Sauce, and asked for our help.

Casas maternas are facilities at which pregnant women can live and rest before and after they deliver their babies. This model has proven to be an efficient and effective way to reduce maternal and infant mortality in countries like Nicaragua...

**Story Continued on Page 8 "El Sauce"**

# Housing and the Mesoamerica Project

By Jamie Way (Way is the Communications & Media Coordinator for AFGJ.)

(The following is the second installment in our series exploring the various sections of the Mesoamerica Project, once known as Plan Puebla-Panama.)

In 2003, civil society achieved a great feat. Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), which had received heavy criticism from a variety of community, indigenous, activist and environmental groups, would be substantially cut due to its lack of funding and unpopularity. The massive package of infrastructure projects to be created throughout Central America just three years prior by Mexican President Vicente Fox, had been largely defeated...or so it seemed.

Just four years later, in 2007, Fox's successor President Felipe Calderon gathered a group in Campeche, Mexico to discuss the restructuring of the PPP. In the following year in Villahermosa, Mexico, the plan was finalized. This time it would include Colombia, be much reduced and concentrated in size and perhaps most importantly shed its old, unpopular name. Reinventing its image, the new plan was called the Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project (known more commonly as the Mesoamerica Project).

Under the Mesoamerica Project, the PPP was substantially reduced, and concentrated into the most important projects. In fact, it was reduced by some 95%. That being said, the Mesoamerica Project (MP) is still a massive undertaking. It involves nine countries and the investment of \$8 billion for nearly 100 projects. Its stated goals are to improve the flow of goods and lower the cost of transportation within the region. It is argued that doing so will increase market access and foreign investment, while allowing the region to make use of its comparative advantage and trade liberalization. Trade can be used as a tool for poverty alleviation, or so the theory goes. However, history has shown us that major infrastructure projects and faster border crossings have no direct correspondence to poverty reduction.

Perhaps this theory was most clearly articulated in the 2009 World Bank's Development Report, "Reshaping Economic Geography." The report pointed toward the importance seeing development in "3D," the

three D's standing for distance, division and density. It argued that poverty was in large part due to dispersion, citing that most wealth was located in the most densely populated areas. It seemed largely uninterested in the fact that much poverty is also located in these densely populated areas and caused by programs and policies that push rural dwellers to head for the cities. Furthermore, it ignored the fact that the wealth of these urban centers often results from the exploitation of the rural periphery. Under the "3D" logic, programs that increase population density, while decreasing distance and divisions are seen as productive.

Unsurprisingly, the idea of massive infrastructure projects and the concentration of populations appealed to many of the usual suspects. In the Mesoamerica Project, a variety of states and neoliberal players were already advocating this position before it was articulated in the World Bank report. The Mesoamerica Project would receive support and backing from the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, the Central American Bank of Economic Integration, the World Trade Organization, Andean Development Corporation, etc.

## The Housing Program

Upon condensing Plan Puebla-Panama into the Mesoamerica Project, the member countries decided to divide the plan into eight subcategories. These categories defined where the group would focus its energy. Amongst these was that of housing, seen to be in shortage from Mexico to Colombia. Perhaps as a nod to the groups that had helped defeat the PPP, the MP included a number of areas that seemed to focus on the social welfare of the region.

As part of the MP's housing effort, they created the Program for the Development of Social Housing in Central America. They would use Mexico's programs as a model for how to improve low income housing

“...Plan Puebla-Panama was substantially reduced and concentrated... but the Mesoamerica Project is still a massive undertaking. It involves nine countries and the investment of \$8 billion for nearly 100 projects.”

throughout the zone, as it is argued that the regional situation at present is very similar to Mexico's when its programs were initiated: young and with a shortage of homes. As part of this effort, in February of 2009, Mexico announced that there would be a \$33 million seed fund allotted for the housing project. The funds would come from the San Jose Accords, in which many regional countries had agreed that a percentage of petroleum sales would go to social projects. They hoped that this money would go to the "construction or repair" of approximately 50,000 homes. These funds would be channeled through the Central American Bank of Economic Integration (known by its Spanish acronym as BCIE).

### **How It Works**

Since this program is relatively young, there has not been an extensive amount published on how it operates in practice, but the basics of the system are fairly clear. Similar to the U.S. Stimulus Package, the idea of the housing project seems to be to focus primarily on loosening up credit. This is done through a system of money transfers. First, money from the San Jose Accords is transferred to the BCIE. The BCIE has formed partnerships with two major Mexican institutions, the Federal Mortgage Society and the National Commission on Housing (known by their Spanish acronyms SHF and CONAVI respectively). BCIE and CONAVI have signed an agreement of collaboration and technical assistance. BCIE and SHF work together and share best practices. From the BCIE, the money travels to in-country financial institutions in the form of financing, guarantees and warranties. Financial institutions are tasked with distributing the funds as mortgages and microcredit loans to debtors, and in the form of a "bridge loan" to developers. The hope is that developers and debtors will then unite thus improving the housing market.

Thus far, the Program for the Development of Social Housing in Central America has made a number of steps toward implementing their program. In June of 2009 the final draft of the Central American Housing Strategy (ECVAH by its Spanish acronym) was approved. The ECVAH says the programs will be created to promote home improvement, increase services to existing neighborhoods, assess disaster risks and work on construction quality, develop alternative healthy housing programs, provide government subsidies and increase government transparency in housing policy. A memorandum of agreement on technical cooperation

was signed with El Salvador, and other agreements are soon expected to be signed with Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

### **Things to Keep an Eye On**

While on its face the program appears positive, a number of critiques have been made. Because the program is relatively young and in its initial phases, it is difficult to tell exactly how it will play out. It may have very different outcomes in different countries, depending on how governments choose to distribute funds to national financial institutions and what autonomy they are given in implementing the programs. What is clear is that there are a number of points on which activists must remain vigilant. Below are a number of critiques:

***1) The program privatizes a potentially government function of supplying loans and building projects and instead profits private companies.***

It can be argued that one potential problem with loosening up the credit system in this way is that it allows government to shirk its responsibility of providing housing, and places it on the private sector. Moreover, while the program is government sponsored, it ultimately directs funds to financial institutions rather than directly to people.

***2) The program is based on the standard neoliberal trickle down assumptions.***

While the world economic and housing crisis has brought most people to understand that a government role is necessary to address social needs, the housing program still maintains the standard neoliberal assumptions about trickle down economics. That is, rather than the government directly distributing loans or housing credits, it instead funds large financial institutions. The program is highly based in market logic, and therefore assumes that credit will flow to those in need of low income housing. We know from experience that this only happens when government mandates it.

***3) The program may lead to housing projects, similar to the Ciudades Rurales program in Chiapas, Mexico.***

Perhaps the most significant critique of the program comes from its potential to result in housing projects similar to those in Chiapas, Mexico. While the actual texts published by the MP do not explicitly indicate that the program will include housing projects, many fear that this may be the result of the program. This fear

is not completely unfounded. Some of the language in the housing declarations is vague. Moreover, Mexico's National Commission on Housing (CONAVI), which works with the BCIE on this project, helped fund the Ciudades Rurales project in Mexico.

In Chiapas, Mexico, the government implemented a housing relocation program. The housing projects were supposed to move low income, rural populations that were highly dispersed into housing projects referred to as "Rural Cities." These cities, were then supposed to create population centers where people could receive easier access to services. Additionally, it was argued that these would help address issues of disaster risk and increase jobs and investment in the region. The program largely follows the same logic as the World Bank Development Report on "Reshaping Economic Geography."

Almost needless to say, the program came under heavy criticism. The relocation of indigenous and rural people appears to be intended to devastate the communal land system. It creates an abundant source of cheap labor, while simultaneously opening the land the rural people have left for resource extraction and development by multinational corporations. Additionally, many worry that by concentrating the population, the government is seeking to better control and subvert the activities of groups (especially indigenous rights groups) opposing government policies.

##### ***5) This may be a way to increase the availability of cheap labor.***

Even if actual housing projects are developed, it is necessary that organizers pay close attention to the distribution of loans. It is very possible that the loans will be regionally directed to increase foreign investment and labor availability in specific areas benefiting multinational corporations rather than the inhabitants.

### **Conclusion**

While the jury is still largely out on the results of this program, it is important to keep in mind that the reasoning behind the creation of the project is largely to increase regional integration to "take advantage of liberalization." This likely indicates that there are deeper motivating factors behind the program besides increasing the availability of low income housing. It is yet to be seen how these factors will play out in action. We will follow the lead of our Southern partners as they evaluate whether the housing component of the

Mesoamerica Project is to their benefit or to that of the multinationals.

### **"Bodies" Continued from Page 1**

And, given the current "false positive" scandal which has enveloped the government of President Alvaro Uribe and his Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, who is now running to succeed Uribe as President, the Colombian Army's claim about the mass grave is especially suspect. This scandal revolves around the Colombian military, recently under the direction of Juan Manuel Santos, knowingly murdering civilians in cold blood and then dressing them up to look like armed guerrillas in order to justify more aid from the United States. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, this practice has been so "systematic and widespread" as to amount to a "crime against humanity."

To date, not factoring in the mass grave, it has been confirmed by Colombian government sources that 2,000 civilians have fallen victim to the "false positive" scheme since President Uribe took office in 2002. If, as suspected by Colombian human rights groups, such as the "Comision de Derechos Humanos del Bajo Ariari" and the "Colectivo Orlando Fals Borda," the mass grave in La Macarena contains 2,000 more civilian victims of this scheme, then this would bring the total of those victimized by the "false positive" scandal to at least 4,000 --much worse than originally believed.

That this grave was discovered just outside a Colombian military base overseen by U.S. military advisers -- the U.S. having around 600 military advisers in that country -- is especially troubling, and raises serious questions about the U.S.'s own conduct in that country. In addition, this calls into even greater question the propriety of President Obama's agreement with President Alvaro Uribe last summer pursuant to which the U.S. will have access to 7 military bases in that country.

The Colombian government and military are scrambling to contain this most recent scandal, and possibly through violence. Thus, on March 15, 2010, Jhonny Hurtado, a former union leader and President of the Human Rights Committee of La Cantina, and an individual who was key in revealing the truth about this mass grave, was assassinated as soldiers from Colombia's 7th Mobile Brigade patrolled the area. Just prior to his murder, Jhonny Hurtado told a delegation of British MPs visiting Colombia that he believed the mass grave at La Macarena contained the bodies of innocent people who had been "disappeared."

### **“Materna” Continued from Page 3**

From its very inception with the generous grant from the Women’s Institute of Madrid, Spain, the Casa Materna MAJ has been a ray of hope in the Nicaraguan solidarity movement and has received support from groups and individuals from Holland, Switzerland, Ireland, England, Germany, Scotland, Japan and the United States. In 1990, the Cuban consulate in Matagalpa was sold to the Casa staff for half the valued price “in order that this house continue to serve the people of Nicaragua.”

In the late 1990s, the World Bank staff decided that the Casa Materna model would greatly help in the prevention of maternal death and they provided a program of loans to help fortify the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health in this area. The network of 11 Casa Maternas initiated by the staff of the Matagalpa Casa Materna MAJ in 1996, with help from a nurse-midwife from Switzerland, became the basis for developing a larger network, which today includes over 60 Casa Maternas. Many of these, however, are located in rural communities and do not directly care for women with high-risk pregnancies at the time of their birthing.

While working closely with the Ministry of Health and with other rural Casa Maternas who send their mothers with high-risk pregnancies to Matagalpa, the Casa Materna MAJ receives no government assistance and made a conscious decision to not receive World Bank funding because of past harmful effects of WB policies on the poor of Nicaragua and of the world.

Throughout the history of the Casa Materna MAJ, it has been the close collaboration of the staff and the mothers themselves that has ensured the success of their work. At crucial moments, while appreciating the work of the staff, the mothers have also reminded them “after all, it is not your Casa, it is our Casa, here for us and for our sisters, our daughters and our newborns.” This is a trust that the workers take very seriously.

In 2000, Friends of the Casa Materna was developed in Michigan to help channel resources from English speaking friends in the U.S., Canada, Ireland, England and Scotland. Those seeking more information should visit the website: [www.casamaterna.org](http://www.casamaterna.org) For visitors to Matagalpa, the Casa staff is happy to share an orientation to the daily work and welcomes those who might stay in the “casita,” the bed and breakfast that helps provide Casa support.

### **“El Sauce” Continued from Page 4**

where transportation to and from hospitals and health centers is often difficult and costly. Casas maternas allow pregnant women to travel slowly and safely to the facility, where they receive food, housing, and perinatal teaching. The casas maternas in Nicaragua exist to help pregnant women deliver their babies safely and without fear. The basic concept is to establish a calm and caring place for women to stay before and after deliveries.

Once we learned that a casa materna was going to open in El Sauce, we responded by transferring the 500-gallon water tank from the SIR to the El Sauce women’s center, Casa de la Mujer Arlen Siu, the home of the new Casa Materna. (The Casa de la Mujer is operated by the NGO AMNLAE, named after the revolutionary martyr Luisa Amanda Espinoza. Arlen Siu was a revolutionary hero who was killed near El Sauce. The Sandinista revolution is never very far from the surface in Nicaragua.)

When the Casa Materna opened in December 2009, we offered the services of the assistant teacher, cook, and gardener/watchman from the SIR. These three people are still employed by our family, but they work at the Casa Materna under the direction of Dra. Velásquez and Nidia Arostegui, the AMNLAE director.

No one in El Sauce has extensive experience in operating a casa materna. To offset this lack of expertise, in January 2010, we took the opportunity to visit the Casa Materna Mary Ann Jackman in Matagalpa. This is the best-known casa materna in Nicaragua, and we hope it will serve as a model for the casa materna in El Sauce. I had prepared the Nicaraguans traveling with me for the fact that the Matagalpa casa had operated successfully for many years, and, as a regional referral center, it was naturally much larger and more developed than its El Sauce equivalent. Everyone was impressed by the skill and competence of the staff at the casa in Matagalpa, and by the fact that 30 women were staying there. The El Sauce Casa Materna will never be that large, but we can aspire to the same level of excellence.

The Sandinista government is highly supportive of the casa materna concept, and the local government is actively supporting the El Sauce casa. In fact, the Sandinista mayor of El Sauce, Alcaldesa Rosa Amelia Valle Vargas, has helped to coordinate activities of the various entities in the project.

This coordination is not a simple matter, because responsibility for the El Sauce Casa Materna is shared by an NGO (AMNLAE), the government health



ministry (MINSA), and an international solidarity group (our family). This shared responsibility is both the strength and weakness of the organization. Because the lines of authority are somewhat fluid, it is possible for AMNLAE to provide the building rent-free, MINSA to send food from the health center and to provide the services of nurses or physicians as required, and our family to provide the three staff members and the basic electricity and water utilities. We also provide the coordinating services of the former SIR director, Francisca Rodríguez, who among her duties for our family visits the Casa almost every day.) However, some responsibilities fall between the cracks. Who is responsible for training Inés Martínez, the young woman who was the SIR assistant teacher, and is now the registrar at the Casa Materna? She is capable of becoming a health educator, but someone must provide this instruction. Who should do it, and who should pay for it? Decisions like this cannot, and will not, come solely from any one of the three organizations. We will work them out amongst ourselves in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation.

Acceptance of the Casa Materna by the pregnant women has not happened overnight. It's a new concept for the Sauceño women, and they are only slowly accepting the value of the services. In the first few months of operation, the Casa has served an average of about eight women a month, but it has the capacity for

three or four times that many. The good news is that we've received strong support within the community, especially from the highly-respected nuns of the Franciscan order Order of the Immaculate Conception. Not only do the nuns themselves spread the word, but also they have asked the lay catechists, who visit the remote villages, to talk to women about the value of the casa materna. Nurses, brigadistas, and doctors from the health center are also recommending the casa materna to their patients. The Ciudad Hermana staff person in El Sauce sent a request for support for the casa materna to Rochester, and the sister city responded with a \$500.00 grant. University of Rochester medical students have visited the casa, and it is possible that service learning students from SUNY Geneseo will volunteer at the casa for their service activity.

The El Sauce Casa Materna is a work in progress. Our family feels very comfortable supporting this project, because it was developed and operates under the solidarity model of providing what the community wants, not what we think they ought to have. We believe that the project will succeed, because many people and organizations are willing to invest time, money, and energy in it. We hope that the casa materna will flourish and fulfill its potential to bring about lower infant and maternal mortality for the people of the El Sauce municipality.

## Graphic History of the Honduran Coup



For more information or to make a purchase, please visit  
[www.archcomix.com](http://www.archcomix.com)

# AFGJ Helps with Anti-Militarization Meetings

*By Chuck Kaufman (Kaufman is a National Co-Coordinator with AFGJ.)*

The staff of the Alliance for Global Justice will be participating in two important meetings in the coming months. We encourage activists and supporters to attend.

The first is the U.S. Social Forum, June 22-26, 2010, in Cobo Hall. This gathering of 15,000 to 20,000 progressive U.S. activists will provide a great opportunity to make connections across movements and to build our Latin America solidarity work. We hope to sign up thousands of new people to our alerts lists and project work. If you are coming to the social forum and have some time to volunteer with us, please email [chuck@afgj.org](mailto:chuck@afgj.org).

We will also be helping to lead a four hour People's Assembly sponsored by the Latin America Solidarity Coalition (LASC) focused on building a movement to combat U.S. militarism at home and abroad and the increasing militarization of our relationships with Latin America. In the past decade the Pentagon budget has doubled even without counting the cost of the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. More and more, traditional diplomatic functions have been subsumed by the military. President Obama's relations with Latin America, at first filled them and us with hope, but are now seen as potentially more dangerous for the region than were those of his predecessor.

We must build a strong and wide-spread movement in the U.S. to change the culture of militarism while there is still time. The People's Assembly in Detroit will be the beginning of that process.

After the initial meeting at the U.S. Social Forum the next step will be a one-day organizer's strategy conference called by the LASC on Nov. 18, 2010, in Columbus, GA to address U.S. militarism, the day before the annual School of the Americas Watch vigil at the gates of Ft. Benning. This is a call for all Latin America solidarity groups, whether or not currently members of the LASC, as well as all US community-based grassroots movements fighting the militarization of our culture. For registration and information about how you and/or your organization can participate, send an email to [info@lasolidarity.org](mailto:info@lasolidarity.org).



# News from Nicaragua

March 30 - May 4, 2010

## Politics

The Special Commission on Nominations of the National Assembly released its reports on Apr. 28 with recommendations for the controversial posts of justices of the Supreme Court and magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) whose terms of office have run out or are about to run out. But the National Assembly was no closer to an agreement that would result in any candidates receiving the required 56 votes out of 92 members of the Assembly. In the case of the Supreme Court Justices, instead of a majority report, there were three minority reports. For the magistrates of the CSE, there were two reports. As expected Sandinista Party (FSLN) deputies supported reelecting the officials whose terms were ending, while opposition members recommended that they not be reelected. The previous week the Commission had issued its reports on candidates for Superintendent of Banks, Comptrollers General, and Human Rights Ombudsman.

The deadlock in the National Assembly on appointments to 25 high level positions in the judiciary, electoral authority, and executive branch has created a constitutional crisis as the terms for many of those currently in those positions have expired or will expire soon. President Daniel Ortega issued a decree in January that those in office would continue to serve until the Assembly elects their replacements. The opposition claims this is a usurpation of power but has been unable to bring the issue to a vote in the Assembly. The Supreme Court has ruled the decree constitutional and that the National Assembly does not have the authority to override it.

The crisis worsened when groups of Sandinistas, including members of the union representing workers at the Supreme Court and evidently led by Supreme Court Justice Rafael Solís, prevented National Assembly deputies from entering the Assembly building on Tues., Apr. 20; then, the Sandinistas marched to the Holiday Inn Hotel to protest when opposition deputies held what they called a legislative session there. They caused considerable property damage and a Sandinista journalist was injured in a scuffle with the opposition.

On Wednesday, Apr. 21, the Sandinistas demonstrated outside the party headquarters of the "Let's Go with Eduardo" Movement (MVE) and prevented 18 members of the Nicaraguan Democratic

Bench of the National Assembly from leaving for about seven hours. While riot police kept members of the opposing political groups separate, they did not prevent the property damage. In response to criticism of the lack of action by the Police, Commissioner Vilma Reyes, said, "The Police will not cause deaths."

Foreign media from both the left and the right speculated about whether Nicaragua would become a victim of a U.S. campaign similar to the one that resulted in a coup 10 months ago in Honduras (Prensa Latina on the left) or why the Obama Administration was "ignoring" a developing "leftist thugocracy in Nicaragua" (Jackson Diehl of the Washington Post on the right). The views of the Nicaragua Network can be read at: <http://www.nicanet.org/?p=932#>.

Two of the most respected members of President Ortega's government were replaced in April. Consumer advocate Ruth Herrera on Apr. 8 resigned her post as president of the Nicaraguan Water and Sewer Company (ENACAL), a state company. At a press conference she said, "My decision is political. President [Daniel] Ortega understands that since last year I have been asking for a change. ...He has a high opinion of our work and he understands my reasons." She went on to explain some of those reasons, saying, "I take the decision at this moment to leave because I reject, I oppose the interventionism of Dr. Gustavo Porras with the corrupt unions which have been sacking and robbing. There are unions that have a responsible attitude, but there are some unions that feel supported by the position that Dr. Porras has had in the FNT (National Workers Front)...This type of interference in the administration of ENACAL Ruth Selma Herrera Montoya will not be accepted."

A week later, respected educator Miguel De Castilla was replaced as Minister of Education by Miriam Ráudez, head of the Ministry in the Department of Esteli. Milena Nuñez resigned as Vice-Minister of Education and Director of Statistics Yolanda Zamora and Special Education Director Elizabeth Baltodano were fired. A Ministry source told La Prensa that De Castilla's Ten Year Plan, which was a plan to guarantee investment in Nicaragua's principal education problems would be suspended. Ernesto Robleto, president of the group Eduquemos, said, "We are very concerned that the authorities of the Ministry are making the decision

of postponing the Ten Year Plan because that is where short term investment (plans) would be laid out.” The reasons for De Castilla’s ouster were not clear.

Twenty deputies from the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), the “Let’s Go with Eduardo” Movement and the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) have introduced a bill to legalize therapeutic abortion in the National Assembly. However, since both groups have

nomination. While PLC leaders promised that the party would join with other Liberal parties to elect one Liberal candidate for president to run in November 2011 against the Sandinista Party candidate who is expected to be President Daniel Ortega, the decision to hold its own primary would appear to be a blow to the forever inaccessible goal of the right wing for Liberal Party unity.

## Remembering Ben Linder (1959-1987)

**B**enjamin Linder, a 27-year old engineer from Portland, OR, was surveying water flows in preparation for building a mini hydroelectric project to bring electricity to the small, isolated community of El Cua, on April 28, 1987, when a U.S.-funded contra force murdered him and his two Nicaraguan co-workers. Ben’s dream has been carried forward over the years by friend and fellow engineer, Rebecca Leaf, founder of the Benjamin Linder Association of Rural Development Workers (ATDER-BL), and members of the community. The association continues to work in the region constructing small hydroelectric projects. In 2007 the government of President Daniel Ortega inaugurated a hydroelectric project in neighboring El Bote that is producing 900 kilowatts of electricity. ATDER-BL provides technical support and has helped organize residents to construct 58.3 kilometers of electric lines including digging post holes, making the poles and stringing the wire.



Today the area is transformed. According to Mayor Raul Acevedo Lara, 20% of the 52,000 residents of El Cua, in the municipality of Bocay, now have light and electricity for other uses. Members of the communities, interviewed by El Nuevo Diario, repeatedly confirmed that their lives have been improved in a multitude of ways by the coming of electricity. Numerous small businesses have formed, family income is up, access to food is improved thanks to refrigeration, value is added to products produced in the area, schooling is not limited to daylight hours, communication with the capital is improved and information about government services such vaccination campaigns by the Health Ministry, and programs such as Zero Hunger is more widely accessible. Many homes now have televisions and even satellite dishes. Internet cafes have brought access to the world of information. Religious leaders, while happy about the improvements brought about by electricity also point out that it has brought taverns and slot machines as well.

Engineer Juan Enrique Morales remembered that, at the time of Linder’s arrival, El Cua was a community of barely 30 homes. “Benjamin was an electrical engineer who appeared in the area with the desire to help the people,” he remembered. “He saw that there was no permanent light in El Cua and the communities, and he felt, understood, that that was everyone’s dream.” The headstone of Linder’s grave in the public cemetery of Matagalpa includes the inscription, “The light he lit will burn forever.”

been boycotting sessions of the National Assembly, it is unknown when the bill, which faces substantial opposition from religious groups, will be considered.

The Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) announced on April 3 that it will elect its candidate for president in a party primary on July 4, 2010, and will confirm that selection at the national party convention on July 11. Former president and convicted criminal, Arnaldo Aleman, is expected to win the PLC

### **Economy**

At a rally for International Workers’ Day held the night of Apr. 30, President Daniel Ortega announced that government workers with monthly salaries under US\$275 would begin in May to receive a \$25 monthly payment in addition to their salaries. Ortega said that the payment would go to 61,000 teachers and other education workers, 23,600 health workers, 12,000 police officers, 10,000 soldiers, and 9,600 government

administrative workers. He said that funds for the payments were not part of the regular budget, but would come from Venezuela under the Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas (ALBA). Ortega also announced a subsidy for public busses, taxis, and boats throughout Nicaragua. He said that it was thanks to ALBA that Nicaragua was able to channel these resources to benefit workers and public transportation users.

In the three years of Sandinista government, coverage of workers by the Nicaraguan Institute for Social Security (INSS) has increased from 19% to 26% despite the global financial crisis caused by the irresponsibility of U.S. banks, according to INSS Executive President Roberto Lopez. "There is a seven percent growth in the coverage of social security for two reasons: first a greater confidence by workers and employers that the right of social security coverage is a human right and a right designated in the Constitution of the Republic," he said. The other factor, according to Lopez, is improvements in the administration of the INSS which made the growth possible.

Personnel from the World Bank and Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MTI) inspected farm-to-market road paving projects in the Department of Esteli financed by the World Bank. Laura Tuck, director of the World Bank's Sustainable Development Department for Latin America and the Caribbean expressed satisfaction with the impact the paved roads have had for the population. "It's impressive," she said, "now we are able to see more access to these municipalities, the improvement of services, transportation, and the economy." She announced that the World Bank will continue to support Nicaragua's farm-to-market road paving projects with US\$60 million and an additional US\$40 million in financing.

U.S. Ambassador Robert Callahan announced that Nicaragua's exports to the U.S. have increased by 37% in the four years since the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) entered into force. Nicaragua is the only country in Central America whose exports to the U.S. have increased in this manner according to Callahan. However, at a meeting commemorating CAFTA's fourth anniversary, U.S. Commerce Department representative Walter Bastian called for Nicaragua to implement "clear rules of the game" to attract investment and improve trade even more.

The value of Nicaraguan coffee exports rose by 43.1% in the first six months of the 2009-2010 harvest season in comparison to the same period the

previous year according to the government's Center for Export Statistics (CETREX). In the period of October to March export coffee sales totaled US\$129.3 million. CETREX attributed the increase to higher productivity and a rise in international coffee prices. Coffee sold for almost \$20 more per hundredweight (at US\$142) than in the previous year and the quantity of coffee exported by Nicaragua increased 26.2%. The primary importers of Nicaraguan coffee were the United States, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Spain and Canada.

The long-awaited state-run "Let's Produce" Development Bank (known as Produzcamos) opened on Apr. 19 with initial capital of US\$117 million and with windows at the main Produzcamos office in Managua and at branches of the privately-owned Bank of Production (BANPRO) in Leon, Chinandega, Granada, Matagalpa and Jinotega. Manuel Alvarez, president of the Union of Agricultural Producers (UPANIC) and a member of the board, said the bank would not base its decisions about loans on the political affiliation of the borrower, noting that "in the countryside everybody needs credit." The new bank will be able to offer credit to some 20,000 farmers at an annual interest rate of 12%.

Rene Blandon, president of the National Commission of Cattle Ranchers (CONAGAN), said that this year cattle sector exports could produce 8% more of the nation's foreign exchange than they did in 2009 if the National Development Bank fully supports the cattle sector. He explained that in 2009 US\$234 million was earned by Nicaraguan cattle exports (beef, cattle on the hoof, and dairy products). He expects that figure to rise to US\$253 million in 2010. Blandon added that CONAGAN had signed an agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to support the Nicaraguan dairy industry. However, the US\$4 million USAID Farmer-to-Farmer Program which will be split among Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Nicaragua for three years amounting to very little in reality.

A year ago Nicaragua inaugurated its first wind farm, Amayo, in Rivas, with a capacity to generate 40 megawatts of electricity. It currently supplies about 5% of Nicaragua's electricity needs. When fully on-line it will supply 7-9%. The second phase of the Amayo wind park should be completed by mid-2010 with the addition of 11 wind turbines generating 2.1 megawatts each for an additional total of 23. Three other wind energy projects are in various states of study and development. ALBANISA, the joint Nicaragua-Venezuela company,

has received a license to determine the wind energy potential of an additional wind farm in Rivas with 40 windmills each producing 2 megawatts of electricity.

Some 150 retailers, the majority of whom are women, will benefit from the improvements being made by the new Corporation of Municipal Markets (COMMEMA) at the Israel Lewites market. COMMEMA is constructing a large building 246 ft. long by 48 ft. wide, with a 20 ft. high ceiling so that vendors selling dairy, meat and other products will work under better conditions and sell a safer product. The women will no longer have to work in the hot sun or rain, nor will those who have small eateries have to endure the smoke from their cooking fires. They will also have easy access to water and new restrooms.

The Nicaraguan Central Bank announced the opening of a US\$24 million account in the new currency “sucres” (named after South American independence fighter Antonio Jose de Sucre) that will be available for exporters and importers to facilitate trade with Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Cuba and the Caribbean countries that form the Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas (ALBA) without using U.S. dollars. Nicaragua is the fourth country to adopt the ALBA currency. In 2009 Venezuela became Nicaragua’s third largest trading partner buying US\$160 million in Nicaraguan products. That amount is expected to grow to US\$200 million in 2010. Antenor Rosales, president of the Central Bank said transactions in sucres will simplify trade between member countries and that Nicaraguan exporters will be paid with Nicaraguan cordobas.

### **Social Services**

The Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSa) received a donation from Venezuela of antiretroviral medicine for those infected with HIV worth more than US\$400,000. The donation consisted of ten types of medicine for the 1,063 patients with HIV for whom MINSa provides care. Dr. Enrique Beteta, the secretary general of MINSa said, “This Sandinista government is guaranteeing that our brothers and sisters with HIV receive free treatment, and we are going to continue improving their care. There are teams that are now mobilizing to go to hospitals within the next few days to see up close how people are being treated,” Beteta said. Programs are also being launched in the departments.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), with President Daniel Ortega presiding, launched its Americas Vaccination Week in Masaya on April 26.

“We chose Nicaragua to launch the campaign this year,” said Mirta Roses, PAHO director, “because Nicaragua has almost 100% (of the population) covered by the vaccines.” The launch of the week-long campaign coincides with the conclusion of Nicaragua’s own national vaccination campaign against 13 illnesses. Ortega stated that Nicaragua has eradicated several diseases through vaccination including polio, rubella and tetanus, but acknowledged that they remain dormant and susceptible to future outbreaks due to polluted water. Ortega stated that Nicaragua’s vaccination campaign administered 1,586,506 doses and also distributed vitamins and medicines against parasites.

Over the last three years, the maternal death rate has continuously decreased, from 107 maternal deaths in 2007 to 94 in 2008 and 90 in 2009, according to Nicaragua’s Ministry of Health. MINSa released data indicating that for the first quarter of 2010 compared with the same quarter last year, deaths decreased 25%. The Ministry noted, however, that there remained much work to be done in improving maternal health throughout the nation.

Nicaraguans approve of the Ortega government’s health care and education programs according to a March poll by independent pollster M&R Consultants. Access to free basic health care and education were promises that President Daniel Ortega made when he assumed office. M&R reported that the survey indicated the public notes a significant improvement from previous administrations.

### **Foreign Relations**

President Daniel Ortega and Costa Rican President-elect Laura Chinchilla met for more than two hours in Managua on April 20. They agreed to reactivate the bi-national commission, which has not functioned for the past two years. For her part, Chinchilla acknowledged the contribution of 600,000 Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica to its economy and culture. Ortega confirmed for the first time that he will attend Chinchilla’s May 8 inauguration. The two leaders also discussed the need to normalize relations in the region so that the Central America Integration System (SICA) can function. SICA has been effectively paralyzed since the June 28, 2009 coup in Honduras. They discussed their respective meetings with Honduran President Porfiro Lobo, who took power after elections many nations (including Nicaragua) have not recognized. “We are convinced of the need to normalize those relations,” Ortega said. Ortega met with Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom

on Apr. 8 and Honduran President Porfirio Lobo on Apr. 9.

Six Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) on Monday, Apr. 26, began the last round of negotiations on an association accord (free trade agreement) with the European Union in Brussels, Belgium. Europe and Central America are still far apart on a number of issues with Europe insisting on greater access to Central American agricultural markets and the Central American governments, labor, business groups opposed without an agreement by the EU to set up a substantial development fund to protect Central American agricultural production. Nicaraguan Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Manuel Coronel said, "If there is no fund, there is no signature."

U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Robert Callahan announced on Apr. 13 that Nicaragua has "complied" with the requirements for a waiver needed to continue to receive U.S. aid. "This year the government of Nicaragua has resolved more than 50 property claims by U.S. citizens," the Ambassador said. US law requires aid to be cut off if another country confiscates the property of U.S. citizens, including naturalized citizens, unless the Secretary of State issues an annual waiver. Callahan said that there remain some 500 claims by 250 people to be resolved. Attorney General Hernan Estrada said that the U.S. government has accepted the removal of 12 people from the list. Estrada said, "We have achieved the elimination from the list (of these people), something that hadn't happened before; it was

a case of people who shouldn't have been on the lists, among them people who put in their names just because they had been naturalized U.S. citizens and they wanted to be compensated."

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez visited Nicaragua on Apr. 14 and 15 and signed agreements for the construction of a petroleum gas plant, a fertilizer plant and a milk processing plant financed by Venezuela and for the exportation to Venezuela of more Nicaraguan beef, milk and beans. The health ministers of the two countries signed an agreement under which Venezuela will provide cancer medications and antiretrovirals, and the countries will exchange technical knowledge.

On Apr. 10 the Encounter of Parties of the Left and Social Movements of Central America and the Caribbean met in Managua hosted by the Sandanist Party. The final declaration of the meeting stated, "We recognize the National Popular Resistance Front as our principal reference point for democracy and social justice in the sister Republic of Honduras and commit ourselves ... to the international campaign in support of the convoking of a Constituent Assembly to return constitutional order to that country."

The government of Nicaragua has formally invited the European Union to send observers to the November 2011 general elections for president and members of the National Assembly. Mendel Goldstein, EU representative for Central America, said that the EU would send at least 100 observers who would arrive in Nicaragua two weeks before the elections.

The Global Justice Monitor is published by the Alliance for Global Justice to educate U.S. citizens about the effects of U.S. policy on the people of Latin America and to build ties of peace and friendship between our two peoples. This publication was formerly the Nicaragua Monitor. If you are interested in contributing articles to this publication or have comments, please contact the editor at the email address listed below.

The Global Justice Monitor is free and available in electronic form, and may be reproduced in whole or in part to educate U.S. citizens about Latin American and U.S. policy. Please credit the Alliance for Global Justice.

Alliance for Global Justice  
1247 "E" St., SE • Washington, DC 20003  
Phone: (202) 544-9355 • [info@afgj.org](mailto:info@afgj.org)  
Website: [www.afgj.org](http://www.afgj.org)

Editor: Jamie Way  
Staff: Katherine Hoyt, Chuck Kaufman, James Jordan and Duke Feldmeier