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CORREO | DEL | ORINOCO

FRIDAY | March 25, 2011 | No. 57 | Bs 1 | CARACAS | ENGLISH EDITION | *The artillery of ideas* **INTERNATIONAL**



Focus on food sovereignty

Venezuela is increasing national agricultural production and state-run food distribution networks by more than 50% with the hopes of guaranteeing supply for the increasing demands in the nation. President Chavez also announced the launching of a new social program to ensure affordable housing is available to all residents throughout the country. Mission Housing will be inaugurated this coming week.

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Venezuela: Education and jobs for all

President Chavez announced an increase in scholarships for university students nationwide and guaranteed jobs in public industry for recent graduates

Under the Chavez administration, access to free, quality higher education has become a reality for millions of Venezuelans who previously were excluded from the university system. The number of public universities has grown exponentially, along with the diversity of subjects and resources for students. But not only is the Venezuelan government guaranteeing education for its citizens, it's also ensuring jobs are available for those recent graduates ready to enter the labor market.



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Attack on Libya seeks to kill Gaddafi

According to Venezuelan Vice-Foreign Minister for Africa, Reinaldo Bolivar, the military invasion in Libya, led by the US government and its allies, has two main goals: assassinate Muammar Al Gaddafi and separate Benghazi from the rest of Libya's territory. Bolivar also said the United Nations Security Council supported the decision of a few to intervene using military force, under the pretext of "protecting" the population. In a televised interview on Wednesday, Bolivar stated the UN

decision marked a negative precedent for the rest of the world, because if another separatist movement exists in a nation of strategic importance, "the Security Council could then make a decision to intervene militarily based on economic interests". The region around Benghazi is home to most of Libya's vast oil reserves. The diplomat underscored that UN General Assembly decisions should be above those of the Security Council, as several countries of the world have demanded, including Venezuela.

"Since the creation of the United Nations, at least 70 armed conflicts have arisen and, so far, the Security Council has not solved a single one", he stressed. Bolivar urged people to raise their voices in protest against the attack on Libya that is killing innocent people. "Venezuela stands up to ask the world to take action against the military invasion in Libya. Libya has to decide its own future, based on principles of self-determination and sovereignty".

T/ AVN

Venezuelan racer takes on Formula One



The braces on Pastor Maldonado's teeth betray the maturity of the words that float out of his mouth in little Latin-tinged sentences.

The Venezuelan driver, having secured a seat with the Williams team for the impending Formula One season, will make his debut this weekend at the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne. The race is expected to be watched by millions worldwide, yet he shows no hint of trepidation about making his bow.

"For sure, it is going to be an exciting moment for me, especially being my first F1 race, but it is just one more race", said Maldonado, who celebrated his 26th birthday earlier this month. "I have been racing for many years and it is the same".

All of Venezuela will be watching proudly as Maldonado takes on some of the best racers in the world.

Venezuelan priority: food sovereignty & agricultural production

In the face of skyrocketing food prices on the international market, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez reaffirmed his government's commitment to food sovereignty last Sunday during his weekly television program broadcasting from the presidential palace of Miraflores

During the 372nd edition of his show "Alo Presidente" Chavez announced 3 billion bolivars (\$697 million) in new funding for agricultural initiatives to boost national production and distribution.

"What we're seeing today is part of a process of activation and amplification of our productive, processing, and distribution systems", the President of the South American country declared.

The announcement comes on the heels of a new agrarian program created by the government earlier this year called Mission Agro Venezuela designed to reduce the country's reliance on food imports and provide employment opportunities to the rural poor.

The measure, which already boasts over 500 thousand enrollees, will benefit producers with low-interest financing and training to increase production on 423 thousand hectares (approximately 1 million acres) of land recently catalogued by the government.

Since the launch of the mission in January, more than 3,700 officials from the Land and Agricultural Ministry have been busy completing an ambitious registry program which to date has resulted in 220 thousand plot inspections.

The overall goal is to ensure that Venezuela, a country blessed with highly fertile farmlands, is not subject to the price swings of international food commodities by converting the immense amount of fallow estates in the country into productive farms.

Such an idea was the impetus behind the government's 2001 Land Law, which has sought to redistrib-



ute underutilized estates to landless farmers and funnel state resources to agricultural initiatives.

These initiatives, although not freeing the nation completely from imports, have led to marked increases in the production of staple crops such as corn, rice and black beans.

Meat and dairy production has also seen an important increase as a result of the government's efforts in recent years.

"We have tremendous potential to keep growing and just as today we are self-sufficient in terms of pork production, within a few years we'll be self-sufficient with respect to beef and in conditions to export", Chavez stated on Sunday.

AGRARIAN ASSEMBLIES

To further these kinds of productive gains, Chavez announced the creation of a presidential decree that would give legal standing to the grassroots agrarian assemblies being formed around the country.

With legal standing, these farmers' organization will have the authority to determine their own agricultural policies and streamline funding from the national government to productive projects.

"We're going to organize ourselves and unify through the agrarian assemblies", Chavez said.

INCREASE IN FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Apart from increasing production, the Venezuelan government has also been improving access to staples for the economically disadvantaged through the creation of state run processing plants and distribution chains.

By creating alternatives to the private middlemen known for their speculative practices such as hoarding and price rigging, the Chavez administration has focused on getting affordable agricultural products to the consumer.

Currently, Venezuela's state run distribution network, comprised of a range of outlets including subsi-

dized neighborhood bodegas and large scale supermarkets, delivers some 170 thousand tons of low cost food to residents a month.

That number, Chavez declared last Sunday, will be increased to 300 thousand tons by the end of 2011.

"From the 33 percent [of market share] that we had at the end of 2010, we're going to jump to 50 percent", Chavez said of the government's distribution network.

Savings at the state run Mercal, Pdval, and Bicentennial Markets when compared with private outlets can reach more than 100 percent on some products.

"Before Mercal, we had to buy things in the private shops because there was no alternative. We could always eat vegetables but some products such as milk were very difficult to get for the price. It was very rare before that the poor could eat chicken and meat. Now we can", Gerardo Lopez, a community activist from the city of Merida told the *Correo del Orinoco* in an interview last year.

ADVANCING HOUSING

During his broadcast, President Chavez also placed emphasis on making affordable housing available to residents through another new social program dubbed Mission Housing.

First mentioned by the head of state in February, Mission Housing seeks to build two million new homes in the country by 2017 by strengthening alliances with private construction companies and international partners.

The first phase of the new mission will entail the carrying out of a national census which will identify the exact needs of residents currently living in precariously built shantytowns on the outskirts of urban centers.

"Just as we made a call a month ago to create a registry for Mission Agro Venezuela, in the same way, I'm announcing a registry for housing", Chavez reported.

In addition to the census, the government has identified four other strategic points necessary to carry out its plan including the identification of land available upon which to build, the number of companies that wish to collaborate on the project, the types of financing that will be provided, and the materials and building methods that will be employed.

According to Carolina Duran, a resident of the city of Barquisimeto who currently lives with her two children in her parents' residence, Mission Housing represents her longstanding dream to own a dignified home.

The program, Duran told the Venezuelan News Agency (AVM), will benefit her and "all those families who cannot obtain housing with the basic salaries we earn".

Given the importance of the government's plans to low income residents, Duran explained that she and her neighbors are getting organized through their community council to participate in the program.

"[We're] making a lot of moves and we've been able to identify land that is not being used and could be utilized for the development of housing projects", she said.

Venezuela condemns attacks on Libya, warns against further aggression

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, along with Bolivian President Evo Morales and ex-Cuban head of state Fidel Castro, expressed condemnation of air strikes launched against the country of Libya last week, calling for a diplomatic solution to the conflict that grips the North African nation.

Chavez referred to the decision of the UN Security Council to permit the use of force in its purported enforcement of a No-Fly Zone in Libya as "horrifying" and "irresponsible".

"We demand the cessation of the aggression against Libya and any aggression against any country in the world. If you want to help a country with an internal conflict, you don't drop bombs on them. That's crazy", the Venezuelan President said during his weekly television broadcast last Sunday.

Two weeks ago, Chavez proposed heading up an international commission to mediate the conflict currently raging in the fellow OPEC member state.

Although the initiative was accepted by the Libyan government, it never got off the ground as the



United States, France, and Great Britain prepared resolution 1973 in the UN's Security Council authorizing military action against the country.

According to Chavez, such aggression will not solve the crisis in the nation ruled by Muammar Gaddafi.

"You have to go and speak with the parties involved in the conflict, not drop bombs" which just results in "more death", he exclaimed.

Libyan officials have reported over 100 civilian deaths as a consequence of the attacks.

Chavez has called the bombing "indiscriminate" and has pointed to oil as the true motivation behind the campaign currently being carried out against the nation.

"Nothing justifies this invasion. Absolutely nothing. The US Empire made the decision to overthrow Gaddafi, take advantage of the popular insurgency to over-

throw him, even kill him, and after a sea of blood take control of [Libya's] oil", he imputed.

The Venezuelan President also warned Washington to "not even think about" engaging in further aggressions directed towards the South American country.

"[The United States] has maintained their plan to return here as owners of Venezuelan oil. Well, it shouldn't even occur to them because millions of Guaicapuros

would rise up and fight", he warned with reference to the indigenous warrior who fought against Spanish rule in the 16th century.

In 2002, the United States aided right-wing Venezuelan opposition leaders in their brief ouster of the Chavez administration.

Despite the coup's eventual failure, dozens of innocent lives were lost while hundreds more were wounded.

Washington has continued to finance opposition groups in Venezuela through a network of government agencies and NGOs in what Chavez has referred to as an intent to "create [destabilizing] conditions for 2012", year of the country's presidential elections.

"They're already saying that Chavez has lost and that if he wins it must be due to [electoral] fraud. They're trying to create a violent situation before, during and after the electoral process. That's why I'm calling on Venezuelans to think rationally. Let's neutralize these violent factors that they want to generate here like they did in 2002", he declared.

T/COI
P/Agencies

Venezuela sends aid to victims of disasters in Japan

In a gesture of solidarity with those recently affected by the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the Venezuelan government sent 25 tons of humanitarian aid to the island nation last week and announced plans for further assistance in the coming days.

The aid left from Simon Bolivar International airport in Maiquetia on Saturday and included non-perishable food items, potable water, blankets, medical supplies and other necessities.

During the loading of the plane, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro explained that the Venezuelan government is also evaluating the shipment of gasoline to assist in relief efforts.

"President [Hugo] Chavez has observed the lack of fuel and how it is impeding recuperation and threatening lives in the middle of the tragedy. He's ordered the shipment of a dona-

tion of fuel to the most devastated zones", Maduro reported.

Although the amount of gasoline to be sent has not been specified, the foreign minister explained that the Venezuelan and Japanese governments are working on the specifics to ensure that the fuel arrives "as soon as possible".

Maduro linked Venezuela's response to that of the international community after torrential rains pounded the South American country at the end of last year, killing dozens and leaving more than 100 thousand displaced.

"That's the way the world of today should be built, founded on a base of respect and solidarity", he stated.

Shotoku Habukawa, First Secretary of the Japanese Embassy in Venezuela, expressed his nation's gratitude for the shipment.

"In the name of the government and the people of Japan, we



deeply appreciate the generous manifestations of support and solidarity demonstrated by president Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan nation", he declared.

Specifically, the shipment was comprised of 167 crates of blan-

kets, 612 crates of sardines, 578 of tuna, 708 of water and an additional 180 crates of disposable surgical materials.

In addition to the humanitarian efforts, the plane with which the assistance was sent returned to

Venezuela with citizens of various Latin American countries who chose to leave Japan in the wake of the disaster, which has led to at least ten thousand deaths.

According to Bertha Capella, First Secretary of the Venezuelan Embassy in Tokyo, 71 of the 380 Venezuelans living in Japan decided to evacuate the country.

"The Venezuelan community is one of the smallest in Japan... Many have been living for a long time. They have family, work, and their belongings. [Deciding to leave] is something that people really have to think over", she said.

Residents from Colombia, Chile and Cuba have also been evacuated by the crew of the Venezuelan state airline Conviasa, which delivered the humanitarian shipment.

T/COI
P/Agencies

Emphasis on education

President Chavez announced increased scholarships for students and guaranteed jobs for recent graduates in public industry

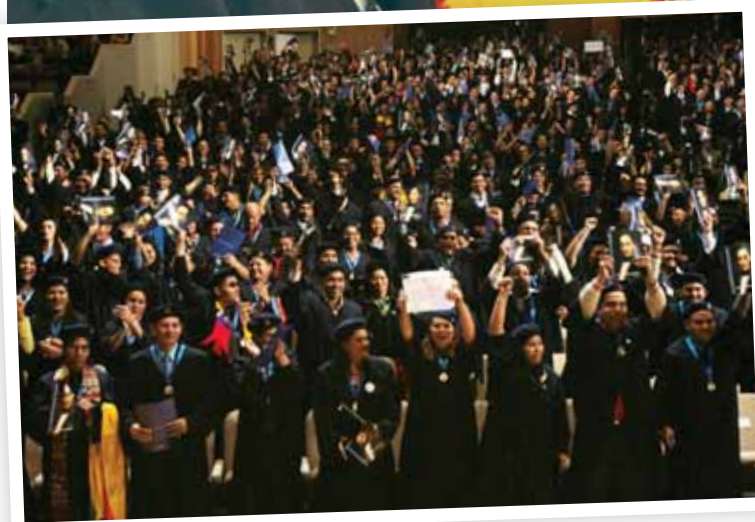
The National Executive will double the amount of state scholarships granted to students at Venezuelan public universities in order to continue "building the nation", announced President Hugo Chavez during a graduation ceremony of 1,154 technical specialists in hydrocarbons from the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV).

The President recalled that when he took office, monthly stipends for students in public universities were the equivalent of \$3 to \$9 dollars. His government increased these stipends to \$45 dollars in 2008. Now, they have been almost doubled to reach \$89 dollars.

"Scholarships at the UBV add up to \$89 dollars and students of other universities complain because they only receive the equivalent of \$45 dollars. Well, they should question the authorities of their universities who control the budgets", said the Venezuelan President during the event in Caracas, showing the millionaire budget allocated by the national government to the Venezuelan Central University (UCV), where protests are currently taking place.

A small group of anti-Chavez students from the UCV have been engaging in a hunger strike alleging the national government is not properly funding their university. The students, supported by the university's dean, have disrupted transit and even gone so far as to partially sow their mouths closed this week in order to draw international attention. Nonetheless, the Chavez administration has sent national authorities to dialogue with the students and has proposed roundtable discussions with the protestors and national educational authorities from the Ministry of Higher Education. The anti-Chavez students have rejected these offers and continue to claim the government has not met their "demands".

Meanwhile, the Chavez government is making major strides in advancing more inclusive university education and attempting



to balance the benefits accorded to needy students in all public universities nationwide.

Despite budgetary differences, the Executive has been reviewing the number of scholarship holders, in order to standardize the amount granted to each of them.

But autonomous universities "must provide us with information on how many stipends and scholarships they are giving out. That is the minimum thing we must demand. Now, if they do not hand in the lists and authorities do not act with transparency and provide us with their budgets, then we cannot proceed. However, I have ordered standardization in all public universities", Chavez said.

Besides scholarship standardization, Chavez announced student cafeterias would be expanded so long as those responsible pledge to manage the resources. "Someone must account for the operations because these are resources for the cafeteria and in the past, funds have been misused and squandered by university authorities".

HYDROCARBON PROJECTS

During Tuesday's event, graduate Elio Uzcatogui, on behalf of his classmates, presented twelve projects to President Chavez related to the hydrocarbons field as part of Plan Sowing Oil, a program fostered by the government through state oil company Pdvsa.

"We pledge to protect our energy sovereignty and together with our President Chavez we will build our Bolivarian homeland. We are technicians and soldiers of our nation and we will continue learning in order to advance our knowledge", Uzcatogui proclaimed.

INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT

"If during the 20 century, oil was used to enrich the unpatriotic local bourgeoisie, to give strength to the US Empire in the world, it must now be one of the main engines for the integral development of our Bolivarian nation, in order to put an end to misery, exclusion and extreme poverty", Chavez declared during the graduation ceremony.

He added that those governments in the 20th century who

tried to control Venezuelan natural resources for domestic development were overthrown, as well as his government, which was subjected to a coup d'etat backed by Washington in April 2002.

"When they tried to overthrow our government, the US was surprised because the children of Simon Bolivar rose up. Together, the Venezuelan people and their patriotic armed forces fought back and won. If the Empire tries again to overthrow this government and take over the country, they will fail again and be demolished by the force of Bolivar's people. Of this, I am sure".

NEW COLONIALISM SEEKING OIL

The US government has undertaken a new form of colonialism to seek and control oil in the world, President Chavez claimed. The core of the epicenter of the military invasion in Libya is not to defend or protect its population, but rather the US desire for that nation's natural resources, warned the Venezuelan head of state.

"Libya's oil is what moves US power. Also the huge water reserves and all its strategic resources. We condemn this new form of colonialism that seeks to continue spreading US imperialism", exclaimed Chavez.

He urged European countries to condemn the military invasion against Libya. "Let's pray for moral strength to fight these ter-

rorist trends of war. Meanwhile, let's continue fighting to defend our beloved Venezuela".

"Just see what is going on in Libya. The United States and its imperialist allies decided, on behalf of the world, and a so-called international community, to bomb savagely and mercilessly the people, villages and hospitals in that sister nation", President Chavez remarked.

He added, "Which is their excuse? That the government of Moammar al-Gaddafi is massacring its people? It is the same thing they said here on April 11 2002 to justify the coup against me. During the coup, US warships were right off the Venezuelan coasts; Blackhawk helicopters were at Maiquetia Airport (near Caracas). But then they were met with the response of our heroic people and they had to back down. Just as they came, they left".

NEW PROFESSIONALS

With the aim to ensure the 1,154 technicians graduated as specialists in hydrocarbons can join the labor market, President Chavez informed that 687 of this group will begin to work as soon as next week in PDVSA. The remaining group will work in different public agencies, the Food Ministry, and in public universities.

Urging them to continue studying, Chavez said he has been reviewing projects and approving resources to improve facilities of some of the different UBV sites around the country, including the construction of new buildings and laboratories.

SOCIAL PROPERTY

During the graduation ceremony, President Chavez approved resources to create social property companies proposed by the students.

Among the projects, were the creation of a company to manufacture construction materials, another to build houses and a paint factory.

Each of these projects was reviewed by experts from the Ministry of Science and Technology. "We are very interested in this new network of companies with a new property system based on a socially-oriented approach", said the Venezuelan chief.

Colombia planned leaks to link Chavez, Correa to FARC: WikiLeaks

The Uribe administration in 2008 carefully planned the leaking of information from computers of killed FARC commander Raul Reyes to link Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa to the rebel group, diplomatic cables released Wednesday by WikiLeaks.

In a cable from March 27, 2008 -- little over three weeks after the computers were found -- then-US ambassador to Bogota William Brownfield informed Washington that the Colombian government would "selectively leak information from FARC computers connecting Presidents Chavez and Correa and their Governments to the FARC over the next 4-6 weeks".

According to Brownfield, Bogota put Deputy Defense Minister Sergio Jaramillo in charge of the publicizing of information.

"In the 4-6 week interim, the GOC (Government of Colombia) plans to selectively provide intelligence from the computers to carefully chosen North American, Colombian, Spanish, and Latin media tied to specific themes. Jaramillo thought the most logical themes were: the FARC and President



Chavez, the FARC and President Correa, the FARC and drug trafficking, and the FARC and hostages. The GOC would carefully review all material before release to filter material that could be damaging to the GOC. Then-Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos promised to give the U.S. the full set of information coming from the computers "on the condition that the USG not release any information publicly or

for attribution without prior consultation with the GOC".

Santos told the ambassador that Bogota planned to release all contents of the computers to an international organization after Interpol verified the content of the computers was not tampered with.

Interpol eventually reported that the computers had not been tampered after March 4 when the evidence entered a chain of cus-

tody. The International police organization did not guarantee the content could not have been tampered in the period between the March 1 bombing and the time the computers entered the chain of custody. Interpol admitted, however, that the authenticity of the source of the information could not be verified.

Colombia used the information on the computers to accuse

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez of financially supporting the FARC and Ecuadorean President of having received FARC funds for his presidential campaign in 2006 as leverage to the aggressive attitude towards the two neighboring countries following the cross-border attack that killed Reyes.

The erroneous handling of the computers made Colombian courts reject the laptops as evidence in cases against politicians and human rights workers who were accused of having ties to the FARC.

The Colombian government never released the full content of the laptops to the public.

Such accusations during the Uribe administration later led to a break in relations with Venezuela, when Colombia formally alleged the Chavez government was "harboring terrorist groups" in its territory. After Juan Manuel Santos took office as president in August 2010, relations were quickly mended between the neighboring countries.

**T/ Adriaan Alsema-
Colombia Reports
P/ Agencies**

Corruption crackdown in Venezuela

Four pro-government public servants, including two ex mayors, have been disqualified from political activity for one year due to acts of corruption during the exercise of their previous positions. A fifth, an opposition legislator, has also been disqualified.

In the first case, the General Comptroller's Office disqualified an ex mayor from the state of Aragua named Carlos Miranda, as well as his wife, Liz Jaramillo, acting president of the Foundation for Integral Attention for Children and Women in her municipality.

Miranda ran on a coalition pro-Chavez ticket in 2004 regional elections.

According to the government's official gazette published last Friday, Miranda and his wife could not explain the source of Bs 242,645 (\$US 56,429) in relation to legitimate income received dur-

ing the period of July 1, 2006 to October 31, 2008.

The second case involved ex mayor Numa Rojas, from Monagas state, and his partner Odilia Fernandez, president of the Bolivarian House for Women. The two are both pro-Chavez figures.

Their case involved a similar period, and Bs 1,838,058 (\$US 427,455) of unexplained income.

According to El Universal, this is Rojas' second sanction of such a nature.

The final case involved Hernan Aleman, ex-mayor from Zulia state who is currently a legislator in the National Assembly. In his assets declaration, he did not explain Bs 1,358,848 (\$US 316,011). Aleman, a member of the opposition party A New Time (Un Nuevo Tiempo), will only be disqualified from political office once he finishes his term as legislator.



The Comptroller determined that in all three cases the public officials distorted or omitted property in their sworn declarations of personal assets, a declaration that all public officials, including some communal council spokespeople, have to make.

According to the Law against Corruption, people must provide

the Comptroller's office with the necessary information so that it can check their assets declarations and make sure they have not made any illegal earnings while exercising their position.

The Attorney General, Luisa Ortega, informed press this week that the Public Prosecutor's office concluded 3,210 cases of corrup-

tion under the Law against Corruption in 2010. Eighteen of these were against bankers.

She also said that in 2010 the government carried out 2,500 workshops with communal councils to educate them about how to register complaints regarding corruption as well as in the areas of gender violence and human rights.

Corruption is a historic problem in Venezuela, mostly because of its dependency on its oil income.

Local and national private media outlets, as well as international media, have often accused the Venezuelan government of political persecution when certain opposition figures have been arrested for corruption, but Ortega has responded that the arrests are criminal, not political, and part of the campaign against corruption.

T/ Tamara Pearson
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Celebrating water security in Venezuela

The Venezuelan Government has invested an average of 600 million dollars per year, since 1999, to improve accessible, drinkable water and water treatment systems, underscored Rodolfo Roa, Director of the Environmental Ministry during the celebrations of World Water Day on Tuesday.

He explained that some of those resources have been destined to over 1,500 community projects, developed by Water Technical Tables nationwide, in which over 18,000 Venezuelans are participating.

In reference to infrastructure, Roa commented that significant work has been done, such as the aqueduct Winka in the state of Zulia state (northwest); the Bolivarian Aqueduct in Falcon (northwest); Aqueduct Luisa Cáceres between Sucre and Nueva Esparta (northeast); and another in the Peninsula de Macanao in Nueva Esparta.

"The list of public works completed that have allowed improvement of drinkable water and water treatment systems is amazing compared to the number built before this last decade", said Roa during the installation of roundtables to discuss the importance of water on the occasion of World Water Day.

The Director of Hydrographic Basins of the Environmental Ministry explained that among



the public works that have made the increase in drinkable water possible in Venezuela from 81% (1998) to 96% (2010), are the construction of aqueducts, construction of water treatments, maintenance and upgrade of existing water systems, and restoring of dams.

Likewise, in the past ten years rural and urban water treatment coverage has also increased - from 62% (1998) to 84% (2008). This has been possible thanks to the cleaning of the main lakes and rivers in the country and the

construction, maintenance and upgrading of treatment plants.

Moreover, Roa pointed out that the Venezuelan Constitution is at the vanguard in reference to the environment. "Indeed, the Constitution guarantees environmental protection at all levels and ensures the topic be incorporated into the education system so the public be aware and conscious of environmental issues".

"It is important to reflect and reach a natural balance in the planet, which is not possible just with the necessary political will, but also by implementing plans and programs



aimed at spreading environmental consciousness within the society, resulting in the protection of the environment", he asserted.

In Venezuela, 96% of the population now has access to drinkable water and 3 million people have benefited from the creation of the Water Technical Tables. These achievements have helped the country reach the UN Development Goals long before expected.

T/ AVN
P/ Presidential Press

Venezuela keeps the heat on in The Bronx

Leonora Laboy has received a credit on her rent in the Mount Hope section of the Bronx for the last two years through help from an unlikely source — the Venezuelan government

Mount Hope Housing Company, Inc., the community development organization that manages the housing complex where Laboy lives, has participated in Citgo Oil's heating oil subsidy program for the past six years, including 2010. This year, 290 of Mount Hope's almost 400 residents benefited from the program,

which grants recipients an annual rent credit.

"It definitely makes a difference", said Laboy, a widow with five children.

Every year Citizens Energy, a Boston based company that uses revenues from commercial enterprises to channel millions of dollars into charitable programs in the US and abroad, asks for aid from major oil producers —including Chevron, Exxon-Mobil and BP— to alleviate the burden of high heating costs for low income, elderly and Native American populations in the US. Citgo, which is a subsidiary of the state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela, is the only company that agrees to help.

According to a Citgo official, the Heating Oil Program assist-

ed 40,089 households in New York City in 2010, including 9,735 single-family homes and 30,354 apartments.

The subsidy works as a lump-sum annual credit based on a donation from Citgo that is applied as a rent credit. The amount is divided equally among the tenants and can be applied to a resident's rent bill throughout the year. The credit varies depending on the year and oil donation from Citgo, says Mount Hope property manager Roslyn Gaspard.

Ivelisse Arroyo, who received a rent credit of \$176 this year, has lived at Mount Hope for the past 10 years and has seen what a difference the subsidy can make. She says the heat and hot water are much more reliable than be-

fore and jokes that her son can no longer avoid taking baths, as he did as a small child, by claiming that there is no hot water.

Brian O'Connor, a vice president at Citizens Energy, says the company has reached over 500,000 people in 23 states with more than \$350 million in aid over six years. According to Citgo, the program also benefits, "more than 250 tribal communities and 234 homeless shelters across 25 states and the District of Columbia".

Recent proposals by President Obama to cut federal funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program in half will likely affect millions of low-income residents in cold climates. O'Connor says these cuts will not directly affect resources for Citizens Energy but have created

a large increase in demand for the program. These cuts could make the Citgo/Citizens Energy program all the more important and could possibly put indirect pressure on its efforts by increasing the pool of those without access to heating subsidies, leaving some out in the cold.

For now, Bronx residents hope to continue to benefit from the subsidy. Arroyo, who works as a receptionist at Mount Hope housing, says the program eases different aspects of daily life at the complex. Better heating and hot water result in fewer colds and the rebate that she describes as "surprising and awesome" makes paying bills and putting food on the table easier.

T/ John McDonald

Obama in Latin America: brazilian ethanol, Washington bombs and venezuelan nukes

Obama isn't the first US president to seek a solution to domestic crisis by pushing for open markets, but his administration might be the first to so candidly admit that is what it is doing

According to Michael Froman, Obama's national security adviser for international economic affairs, "This trip fundamentally is about the US recovery, US exports and the critical relationship that Latin America plays in our economic future and jobs here in the United States". It's a startlingly honest admission that, unable to overcome domestic obstacles (that is, the cult of austerity that enthalls Republicans and Democrats alike) to investment and stimulus, the United States is looking abroad for relief. Obama is making the case that more globalized trade—including the pending Colombian Free Trade Agreement—will pull the United States out of its slump.

In the past, trade with Latin America did inordinately benefit the United States in all sorts of ways, underwriting its cold war Keynesian and post-cold war neoliberal economies. Today, though, things are different and it's unlikely that more "free trade" with Latin America would heal what ails the United States.

Setting that point aside, the very same set of obstacles that blocks Obama at home makes it impossible—as I've noted here earlier—for him to offer serious concessions in exchange for Brazil's help, particularly when it comes to the sticky issue of ethanol tariffs, subsidies and intellectual property rights. There was goodwill and great photo ops of the first family's trip to Brazil, especially to Rio's City of God favela. It was, as many noted, highly symbolic for the first African-American US president to visit the country with the largest African population outside of Africa (especially since Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, did once ask Brazil's president, "Do you have blacks, too?"—which



prompted Conde Rice to give her boss a quick tutorial in the history of New World slavery).

But it was short on substance. Brazil's new president Dilma Rousseff was friendly and "warm" as expected, but she did criticize the United States shameless ability to preach "free trade" while practicing protectionism. And Brazil was extremely disappointed that Obama, despite indicating that Washington was ready to deal with Brazil as an equal, did not endorse its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Washington and Brasilia signed a few inconsequential trade agreements, but Obama offered nothing that could jumpstart the stalled Doha negotiations—where any real movement in trade relations would take place. Over the years, Brazil has taken the lead in opposing a world trade agreement that didn't address the issues of first-world agricultural subsidies and tariffs and intellectual property rights. Nothing in Obama's trip suggests Brazil's demands

have been met, despite Dilma's much admired cordiality (Lula was always extremely cordial; he also was steadfast in his vision of a more equitable global playing field and confident that Brazil, with its enormous economy, was in a position to demand it).

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the *Washington Post's* op-ed page, feeling emboldened by the hawks' success in ginning up yet a third, poorly conceived, open-ended war, took the opportunity of Obama's Latin American trip to run a piece by Roger Noriega, perpetual plumper for all things bellicose, asking if here is a Hugo Chavez "terror network on America's doorstep". Noriega is part of the same Iran/Contra crowd, led by Otto Reich, that continues to have an inordinate influence on US policy in Latin America, even when Democrats are supposedly in charge (it was Reich who inaugurated the destabilization campaign against Honduran president Manuel Zelaya). They have long tried to link Venezuela to some interna-

tional conspiracy, either involving nuclear weapons or Islamic terrorism. Both claims have been debunked by the State Department (via released Wikileaks cables) and the Pentagon. But as with Iraq, they never let the facts get in the way of an insinuation.

In fact, Chavez, in the wake of the disaster in Japan, has called a halt to Venezuela's fledgling nuclear program. When Venezuela signed a deal last year with a private company in Russia to develop nuclear power, the Noriegas and Reichs perked up, charging that Venezuela was opening a back channel to get nukes to Iran. That deal now is on hold, and Chavez probably used events in Japan to cut loose an expensive program with very little expected return. Still, it's a welcome policy reversal. As he put it, speaking of nuclear power generally, "it is something extremely risky and dangerous for the whole world". Only Mexico, Brazil and Argentina have working nuclear power plants in the region.

In Chile, however, where Obama went after Brazil, President Sebastian Piñera has taken the opposite lesson. Though his country sits on the same so-called Pacific "Ring of Fire" of seismic activity that does Japan, and suffered a devastating earthquake and tsunami nearly exactly a year ago, Piñera said he was keeping the nuclear option open. In anticipation of Obama's visit, Chile and the United States signed a nuclear co-operation deal, which is to include US training for Chilean nuclear engineers.

Obama's visit to Latin America has entailed a series of ill-timed events: arriving in Brazil just after Aristide returned to Haiti; announcing the bombing of Libya from Brazil, a country that abstained from and criticized the UN Security Council resolution; and signing a nuclear accord with Chile, which recently suffered an earthquake and tsunami, just after Japan's earthquake-induced meltdown.

T/ Greg Grandin-The Nation
P/ Agencies

OPINION

Egypt, the american way

In Egypt, a people's uprising succeeded in removing Hosni Mubarak from power. The main battle, however, lies ahead. Will there be a substantive transformation of Egyptian society, or will the economic and political system remain essentially unchanged, with only a new face occupying the presidential office? There are powerful forces that are keen to steer events in the latter direction.

While many in the Egyptian middle class, fed up with the corrupt rule of Mubarak, may be content to see the establishment of formal electoral democracy, the poor of Egypt hope for genuine economic and political change. Their grievances are many.

Mubarak's adoption of the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program in 1991, at the urging of the IMF and World Bank, had predictable consequences. Social benefits were cut in accordance with neoliberal principles. Passage of the Unified Labor Law in 2003 targeted unions and the rights of workers. Privatization of state-owned enterprises resulted in mass layoffs, and Special Economic Zones were established, offering tax and legal concessions to investors.

The net effect of the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program and the Unified Labor Law has been to concentrate ever more wealth in the hands of the few, while driving great numbers of people into poverty. According to World Bank figures, 44 percent of Egypt's population survive on less than \$320 a year.

US corporations have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo in Egypt. The United States is the primary foreign direct investor in that nation. Egypt is an attractive destination for foreign investment, as its textile workers earn less than half the pay of their counterparts in Tunisia, and about a third of the pay of those in Morocco and Turkey.

For the last several years, workers have responded with strikes and protests, helping to build the

momentum that eventually toppled Mubarak from power. They aim to achieve some measure of economic justice. Can they succeed in that goal? Not if US imperial interests have their way. In a revealing comment, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said, "We have an enormous stake in ensuring that Egypt and Tunisia provide models for the kind of democracy that we want to see". Note the language she used: the kind of democracy that US elites want to see, rather than what the Egyptian people want.

For the Obama Administration, the model it hopes to see Egypt adopt is that of the Philippines, where a people's movement drove Ferdinand Marcos from power in 1986, or Indonesia, where a similar mass movement removed Suharto from office in 1998. Men like Marcos, Suharto and Mubarak were warmly embraced as close US allies, but Western support for them vanished once it became clear that their continued rule was no longer a viable option. US allegiance shifted abruptly, with an eye on the continuation of fundamental economic interests, based on the con-

cept that rulers are expendable. Profits are forever.

Although people's movements in the Philippines and Indonesia successfully ousted brutally repressive rulers, daily lives for most people remained otherwise unchanged. Wealth remained in the hands of the few, corruption persisted, and the majority of people continued to struggle in desperate poverty under neoliberal policies. That is the model the US wants Egypt to follow. And US leaders are not shy about pushing that goal.

Mubarak enthusiastically embraced the neoliberal economic model, but US and Western

European elites sense an opportunity to accelerate that process and remake Egypt in their own image. Already Senators John Kerry, Joe Lieberman and John McCain are preparing legislation to establish what are termed the Egyptian-American Enterprise Fund and the Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund.

Senator Kerry said the legislation is based on "the belief that the US has an historic opportunity to help these two countries, to transform the Arab awakening". In Kerry's eyes, it is the mission of the US to steer events in the Arab world.

To remove all doubt about whose interests will be served, a statement by the bill's sponsors says, "The funds will be designed to improve the overall business environment in the two countries and strengthen local capital markets. By relying on US financial managers and other private-sector experts, the funds will concentrate on making profitable investments".

Not to be outdone, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Egypt, bringing along Elizabeth Littlefield, CEO of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), to discuss with the interim Egyptian government support for business. "We want to see a very specific commitment by OPIC and by the US Export-Import Bank to provide letters of credit, to encourage private sector investments, because the long-term econo-

mic growth of Egypt depends not on government jobs but on private sector jobs", Clinton announced.

Clinton took the occasion to announce a \$2 billion aid package for North Africa, to be provided through OPIC, in order to "encourage foreign direct investment." According to an OPIC press release, the organization "will identify and encourage private businesses, especially US businesses, to invest in the region by providing direct loans, guarantees and political risk insurance". In other words, this so-called "aid" to Egypt is in reality aid to US corporations.

In a populous capitalist nation such as Egypt, it takes money - and lots of it - to run a political campaign. New political parties will have had little time to form, let alone campaign, by the time a new election takes place in Egypt. And working-class parties will simply be incapable of mustering sufficient funds to run a national political campaign. It remains to be seen whether entrenched interests in Egypt, backed by the West, prevail, or if the Egyptian people can grab the reins and choose their own destiny. US government and non-governmental organizations are going to provide funding and training to political candidates supporting the neoliberal agenda, giving them a clear advantage.

US leaders are once again on a civilizing mission, in which the "natives" are to have their fate chosen for them. If the US has its way, Egypt has only more of the same to look forward to: more privatization, more poverty and economic dislocation, and more subservience to the West. The Egyptian people have not asked for this Western "help" and fighting off Western meddling and diktat is likely to prove a far more difficult battle for the Egyptian people than the removal of Hosni Mubarak from power.

T/ Gregory Elich

