

Central America Weekly News

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CUBA

Charley Leaves Massive Destruction in Havana

On August 15, it was reported that Hurricane Charley, considered the most damaging to the province of Havana since 1915, left four dead, five injured, more than 200,000 Cubans homeless and more than 16,000 homes destroyed in the western part of Cuba, with heavy rains and winds up to 105 miles per hour. According to a tally taken after the hurricane, 95 per cent of banana, other fruit and vegetable and sugar plantations were damaged by the hurricane.

In Havana province, some 500 electric cable poles were downed, dangerously damaging transformers and electricity converters. While not directly hit by Charley, Pinar del Río province was cut off from the national electricity system, along with other western provinces, due to the fact that 13 high tension towers were felled by the hurricane. In the capital city of Havana, more than 50 transformers and 200 electric light poles were damaged, leaving some neighborhoods in darkness.

Víctor Puentes, head of National Electricity Regulation, told the Cuban official daily Juventud Rebelde that more than sixty brigades had been organized to carry out recovery efforts in the area, with the aim of re-establishing at least 80 per cent of power in Havana by August 16. (El Nuevo Herald from EFE, Miami, 8/16/04)

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Leonel Fernández Sworn In as President, Announces Austerity Plan

Leonel Fernández, of the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD), was sworn in on August 16 as president of the Dominican Republic. He defeated former president Hipólito Mejía in the May 16 elections.

Fernández and his vice president Rafael Albuquerque will serve a four-year term. They are taking over a country with a foreign debt of some \$6 billion, electricity outages that are increasing in frequency and length, up to as long as 20 hours per day, 16 per cent unemployment and desperate poverty. To deal with the crises, the new president announced his austerity plan, which includes a cut of at

least 20 per cent in government spending. He described the situation saying, "It will be like walking in a mine field or sitting on a burning bonfire."

He said it is essential for his country to pay off the foreign debt in order to alleviate the country's economic crisis, but that it would be nearly impossible to do so, because, he said, the national treasury is empty. He said he will work to re-negotiate the debt. He announced that he will ask the congress, dominated by deputies from the social democratic Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), the party of former president Mejía, to approve measures for fiscal reform, including increasing taxes. His proposed measures will mean fewer social services, a cut and in government jobs and in subsidies for electricity and gas

At the same time, Fernández said he will promote a social plan that he entitled "To Eat is First," through which he plans to provide food for 25,000 poor families.

According to Miguel Ceara-Hatton, an economist with the U.N. Development Program in Santo Domingo, "This crisis will last at least two years and will be painful."

Fiscal reform was to be carried out under Mejía's administration in accordance with an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). That agreement is currently suspended. It had been reached with the previous administration after the collapse of three commercial banks in 2003, which resulted in a loss to the government of more than \$3 billion.

This is Fernández's second administration. He served previously from 1996 to 2000. He did not run for re-election in 2000 due to the Dominican Republic's election law that at that time established a single-term limit for the president. The law, however, was later repealed, allowing Hipólito to oppose Fernández in the most recent elections. Fernández left office at the end of his term in 2000 amid a scandal involving \$100 million allegedly embezzled from a government fund. He denied any wrongdoing.

During Fernández's first administration, the Dominican economy grew by more than eight per cent per year. Under the administration of President Mejía, the economy grew by barely .4 per cent per year, the Dominican peso was devalued by 200 per cent in relation to the U.S. dollar, and inflation rose to 42.6 per cent in 2003 and is currently at 31.8 percent.

Guests at Fernández's inauguration included Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, Brazilian president Inacio Lula da Silva, Colombian president Alvaro Uribe, Panamanian president Mireya Moscoso, Haitian interim president Boniface Alexandre, Guatemalan president Oscar Berger, Costa Rican president Abel Pacheco and Uruguayan president Jorge Batlle. In addition, the prime ministers of Taiwan and the Antilles, Yu Shyi-Kun and Etienne Nestor, respectively, were in attendance. The king and queen of Spain were represented

by the prince and princess of Asturias, Felipe Borbón and Letizia Ortiz. (El Nuevo Herald from AFP, Miami, 8/16, 17/04; El Nacional, Santo Domingo, 8/16/04; Boston Globe from AP, 8/16/04; BBC, London, 8/16/04)

EL SALVADOR

Riot in Salvadoran Prison Takes 31 Lives, Leaves More Than Two Dozen Injured

In the early hours of August 18, members of the gang Mara 18 who are being held in the Salvadoran prison La Esperanza on the outskirts of San Salvador clashed with other prisoners, in a battle involving knives and sticks, leaving at least 31 people dead and more than two dozen people wounded. Bonifacio de León, an official from the State prosecutor's office, said grenades, guns and machetes were also used by the prisoners. Authorities said none of the prisoners escaped.

Prison officials said the confrontation began after dozens of prisoners beat another prisoner to death. They said prison guards fired their gun to try to take control, but failed. Special Forces troops were brought in to take control over the prison, while ambulances took away the injured.

Prison Director José Antonio Guzmán, along with the General Director of Prisons Rodolfo Garay Pineda and officials from the Attorney General's Office and the government human rights office negotiated with the prisoners to reach a peaceful end to the conflict. A state of emergency was declared in the prison, which was surrounded by special forces troops and police.

Following the riots, the members of the Mara 18 gang were removed from the prison and relocated to another prison, Cojutepeque. Another group of 80 prisoners were distributed between two other prisons in Santa Ana and in San Vicente.

Beatrice de Carrillo, of the government human rights office, said the riot was "a massacre foreseen," given the conditions the prisoners live in. La Esperanza was built to hold 800 prisoners, but currently houses some 3,000. (Miami Herald from AFP, 8/19/04; BBC, London, 8/19/04; Washington Post from Reuters, 8/19/04; La Prensa Gráfica, San Salvador, 8/19, 20/04; Univisión from AFP, Miami, 8/19/04; La Nación from ACAN-EFE, Costa Rica, 8/19/04)

Students March to Demand Lower Bus Fares

Dozens of Salvadoran students who attend the Francisco Menéndez National Institute (INFRAMEN) and the University of El Salvador (UES) on August 17

participated in a peaceful march in San Salvador to demand that their bus fares be cut in half. The marchers wore red hoods, and burned tires. This is the third march since July to protest what they say is an illegal fare increase.

Salvadoran education minister Darlyn Meza said she believed that march was politically motivated. She told a local journalist, "[I]f we can prove that the director and deputy director of INFRAMEN are directly manipulating this, we will take administrative measures." For his part, Carlos Fulgar, deputy director of INFRAMEN, said that "for us as authorities it is very difficult for us to restrict the young peoples' rights," because the education law "establishes that it is prohibited to limit the free association among other educators and the students." One student spokesperson said that all the students wanted to support the march but that they were afraid to do so because of intimidation by Minister Meza.

INFRAMEN director José Portillo said the students had received visits from legislative deputies of the opposition left wing party, the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). He said he did not know how FMLN leaders Schafik Handal and Salvador Arias had come to speak with the students. (La Nación from ACAN-EFE, San Salvador, 8/17/04)

Salvadoran Troops Go to Iraq Despite Protests and Lawsuits

The government of El Salvador sent new troops to Iraq on August 18, in spite of protests and a lawsuit brought by an attorney, acting as a private citizen. They will be replacing the 374 troops that are currently in Iraq. The first contingent of 150 soldiers left on August 18, and the remaining 230 are expected to leave between August 20 and 22. They will serve for six months.

Salvadoran attorney José Francisco García, in his role as a private citizen, had brought a lawsuit against Salvadoran president Tony Saca, for violating the Salvadoran constitution by sending Salvadoran troops to support the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq. The suit has been brought in the Salvadoran Supreme Court, said Supreme Court spokesman Walter Raudales. The basis of the suit is that, in accordance with the Salvadoran constitution, "The Armed Forces are an institution at the service of the nation and has as its mission the defense of the sovereignty of the State and the integrity of the [national] territory."

In addition to the lawsuit, García has also asked for an injunction to stop Saca, as Commander and Chief of the Armed Forces, and Defense Minister Gen. Otto Romero, from sending the latest battalion of 380 troops to Iraq. The troops were scheduled to leave El Salvador on August 17. However, the departure was delayed because of the lack of availability of air transport, said Col. Eduardo Figueroa, head of the Defense Ministry's Center for Communications and Protocol.

Earlier, more than one hundred Salvadoran protesters marched in San Salvador on August 16 to express their opposition to the Salvadoran government sending more troops to Iraq. This was the second demonstration within one week against the sending of the troops to support the U.S.-led occupation of that Middle Eastern country.

The government has insisted it will send troops, in spite of threats against El Salvador, as yet unauthenticated, allegedly issued by the Mohammed Atta Brigades -- al Qaeda of Jihad on August 5 and 8. The threat gave El Salvador 20 days to withdraw its current troops. The alleged threat, posted on a web site that has carried this kind of message in the past, said, "The aim of this deadline is to give you a chance to review yourselves and after that we wash our hands of the blood of every Salvadoran, whether in Iraq or in El Salvador."

A different threat was issued on August 12, allegedly by another extremist group known as Jammāt al-Tawhīd al-Islamiya.

Schafik Handal, leader of the opposition left wing Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), said on March 16 that in Iraq, "what there is, is a war and an occupation in which we have no reason to participate." He said the Salvadoran legislature "must rescind" the decree issued in July authorizing the sending of the new troops to Iraq.

FMLN deputy Salvador Sánchez Cerén reiterated that what is going on in Iraq is an occupation, and added, "... there is no reconstruction process, so there is no reason to be there. It is a war in which the Salvadoran people have nothing to gain. It is for oil... For sending troops, we have become a target of terrorist threats, and this affects everyone."

Salvadoran president Tony Saca said he was sending Salvadoran troops in return for the help the international community gave El Salvador in the peace process that in 1992 ended a 12-year civil war in that country. The small Central American country has maintained troops in Iraq since August 2003, in spite of the fact that the governments of other Central American countries, Honduras and Nicaragua, and the Caribbean country, the Dominican Republic, have removed their troops and not sent replacements. El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and the Dominican Republic made up the Plus Ultra Brigade, which was led by Spain, until that country's president withdrew the Spanish troops, following the May bombing of a commuter train in Madrid.

Thus far, one member of the Salvadoran troops has died and 12 have been injured. The injured have returned to El Salvador. (El Nuevo Herald from AP, Miami, 8/16/04; Washington Post from Reuters, 8/16, 19/04; La Nación from ACAN-EFE, Costa Rica, 8/16, 19/04; Univisión from AFP, Miami, 8/18/04; La Prensa Gráfica, San Salvador, 8/19/04)

GUATEMALA

Guatemalan Congress Approves Payment for Former PACs

The Guatemalan Congress has approved payment of some \$420,000,000 to former members of the Self-Defense Patrollers (PACs), who acted in collaboration with the Guatemalan military during that country's 36-year-long internal armed conflict. The PAC members were not included in the terms of the peace accords, signed in December 1996, which officially ended the civil war.

The members of the PACs, who as a group have been accused of war crimes and human rights violations, have been lobbying since the end of the war for compensation for what they see was their service to the Guatemalan State, and threatened recently to paralyze the country if the payments were not approved. Each of about 700,000 former PAC members will receive about \$600, in three payments, to culminate in 2006. The PACs say that 1.3 million people are entitled to payment.

Legislative representatives for the left New Nation Alliance (ANN), the left Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), the National Wellbeing party (Bien) and union members opposed the payments. Representatives of the ruling party, GANA (Grand National Alliance), opposed how the payment will be made, saying, "... it is an attack against the national economy." They proposed minimum payments to be made between this year and 2008. "This would allow the government to manage the figures within the budget, and would not affect the macroeconomic situation with the outlay of such a large amount of money," said Víctor Ramírez, a GANA deputy.

The Congress' decision to go forward with the payment goes against a previous Constitutional Court ruling that the payments to the former paramilitary members is a violation of the country's constitution. The PACs were set up in 1982, under the rule of former military dictator Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, and are accused of some of the worst atrocities committed during the civil war. They were allegedly made up of volunteers, but many say they were coerced into joining. "We had no choice, either we patrolled for up to 24 hours at a time or the army killed us," said one former PAC member, Erasmo Ramírez.. (BBC from Reuters, London, 8/20/04; Prensa Libre, Guatemala City, 8/20/04)

Marches Throughout Guatemala to Demand an End to Violence

On August 13, thousands of Guatemalans marched in at least 15 of the country's main cities, including the capital, Guatemala City, to demand peace and to protest a growing wave of violence and murders. The protests were called by the Front Against Violence, made up of some 560 religious, union, popular,

indigenous, campesino, humanitarian and academic organizations, as well as public employees and volunteer firepeople.

In Guatemala City, the march lasted about two hours, leaving from Spain Plaza and ending in Constitution Plaza, in front of the former headquarters of the Guatemalan government, now a cultural center. "We want peace, we want to work with dignity, we want security because it is unbearable to continue to live like this," said on participant, Sergio Orozco. The march ended with a moment of silence for the more than 2,700 people who have been murdered in Guatemala so far in 2004.

The Guatemala City march was headed by Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada and the government human rights procurator, Sergio Morales. Others who participated included Monsignor Mario Ríos Montt, Nery Rodenas of the Archbishop's Human Rights Office (ODHA), Vitalino Similox, of the Protestant Church, Robert Ardón, of the High Commissioner for Private Enterprise (Cacif), Nineth Montenegro, a deputy for the left leaning New Nation Alliance (ANN), Mario Polanco, director of the Mutual Support Group (GAM), whose members are relatives of the detained and disappeared in Guatemala, Adela Torrebiarte, of Anguished Mothers, Frank LaRue, founder of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) and currently the head of the Presidential Human Rights Commission.

"This march is the call of society, which is demanding security, to the government. I think there should have been more people in the walk, but many preferred to show solidarity in their homes. The government must be aware that violence also affects the economic and social problems," said Miguel Ángel Albizures, of the Alliance Against Impunity. Human rights defender Sergio Morales said, "We hope to continue with the work of the Front Against Violence, because this is just the beginning. At this moment we are working on proposals to give to the government. Our aim is that the Guatemalan people may live in a culture of peace."

Cardinal Quezada Toruño said, "This march is a demonstration of the need we all have to live in peace, above all respecting life, which is the greatest of all human rights." (Prensa Libre, Guatemala City, 8/14/04; Univisión from Reuters, Miami, 8/14/04)

HONDURAS

After Three Successful Prisoner Escapes in 2004, Honduran National Penitentiary Blocks Fourth

Officials at the Honduran National Penitentiary stopped an apparent planned escape by 256 members of the Central America-wide gang Mara 18, when they discovered a tunnel that had been dug in the cell of some of the prisoners.

The tunnel was discovered in the morning of August 19 by members of a special team created specifically to investigate the cells where conflictive prisoners were housed, according to prison authorities. The tunnel was discovered because of some "irregularities" that were peculiar to the cells the gangs were being kept in, the authorities said. The tunnel lacked only a little more than 15 yards to reach the outside of the prison.

According to Mauro Bustillo, Deputy Directory of the National Penitentiary, the prisoners dug the tunnel at night, using spoons and other tools, and covered up the noise of the digging with loud music. The dirt from the tunnel was put in sacks kept in their cells or in garbage sacks, said Bustillo.

The National Penitentiary has suffered three escapes so far in 2004, one on April 28, when one prisoner escaped, dressed as a guard; one on June 8, when three prisoners jumped the walls in the early morning hours; and the third, on August 11, for which the method of escape was not revealed. (Tiempo, San Pedro Sula, 8/20/04)

JAMAICA

Record High in Murders Reported in Jamaica

A record high of 47 people were murdered in Jamaica during the week of August 9 to 15, bringing the total of murders so far this year in the Caribbean nation to 835. The total for 2004 is expected to surpass the 2001 record of more than 1,100.

The weapons most frequently used are knives and guns. The motives for most of the murders have not been determined, but Raymoth Notice, the mayor of Spanish Town, a suburb of the capital city of Kingston, said street gangs have been very active in that area. Notice has called for military intervention to control the violence. "The police have tried. We need the army," said Notice.

At least 13 murders were carried out in Spanish Town between August 12 and 17 alone. Jamaican Assistant Police Commissioner George Williams told the local RJR radio that a feud between rival gangs over the murder of one of their leaders was to blame for the latest wave of violence. (BBC, London, 8/17/04)

NICARAGUA

U.S. Cancels Nicaraguan Debt of \$100 Million

On August 17, the U.S. government cancelled \$100 million of the Nicaraguan government's debt, in accordance with an agreement made in March of this year by the U.S. and other members of the Club of Paris.

In March, the participating countries determined what specific amounts of the debt owed to each country would be cancelled. The \$100 million constitutes one hundred per cent of the debt owed by Nicaragua to the U.S.

U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Barbara Moore said the U.S. government's decision was the result of "responsible" political policies carried out by the Nicaraguan government as part of the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as part of the agreement for Nicaragua to be included in the Initiative for Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). Nicaragua was included in the initiative in January.

Moore said the new economic policies make Nicaragua a country that is attractive to national and international investors. She said the cancellation of the debt is a sign of support by the U.S. government of the administration of Nicaraguan president Enrique Bolaños.

Germany and the U.S. have been the first to officially cancel Nicaragua's debt with their governments. Italy, Australia and Israel are expected to announce cancellation of debt in the coming weeks. Nicaragua owes a total of \$107 million to those three countries. (La Prensa, Managua, 8/18/04)

PANAMA

Panama Denies Plans to Pardon Posada Carriles and Accomplices

The Panamanian government has denied assertions by the Cuban Foreign Ministry on August 14 that before she leaves office, Panamanian president Mireya Moscoso is planning to provide amnesty for anti-Castro activists Luis Posada Carriles, Gaspar Jiménez, Pedro Remón and Guillermo Novo. They were sentenced in March of this year for actions against the Panamanian State and illicit association, for actions they carried out in November 2000, which were tied to an alleged attempt on the life of Cuban president Fidel Castro, who was in Panama for an Ibero-American Summit. Charges of attempting to assassinate Castro were dropped due, the authorities said, to lack of evidence.

Since the four were imprisoned, Cuban authorities have alleged a number of times that there are plans to pardon them or help them to escape.

Panamanian foreign Minister Harmodio Arias said on August 17 that the convicts will complete their sentences, which range from seven to eight years. "The government has not thought about giving them a pardon. I read the communiqué

(from the Cuban Foreign Ministry) and it does not say anything about an escape. Yesterday [August 16] I was with the ambassador (Cuban Ambassador to Panama Carlos Zamora) and I informed him that the people were sentenced in Panama and must complete their sentences here." Cuban authorities have accused Posada Carriles of planning or taking part in numerous assassination attempts against Castro and of being responsible for the blowing up of a Cubana de Aviación airplane in 1976, in which 73 passengers died en route between Barbados and Cuba.

Posada Carriles said he had no plan to assassinate Castro in November 2000, and that he was the victim of a trap by the Cuban secret service. He and the other convicts are being held in a maximum-security prison at El Renacer, in the town of Gamboa, southeast of Panama City. (El Nuevo Herald from AFP, Miami, 8/17/04)

PUERTO RICO

Puerto Rico Basketball Victory over U.S. at Olympic Games Highlights Ambiguous Status

The basketball team sent by Puerto Rico to the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, on August 15 beat the U.S. team, with a score 92 to 73. The Olympic competitions are traditionally between nations. This battle between Puerto Rico and the U.S. basketball teams has highlighted the peculiar status of Puerto Rico in relation to the U.S.

Puerto Rico currently is considered a commonwealth, or a Free Associated State, of the U.S. However, Puerto Rico is neither free nor a state. It is a former unincorporated territory of the U.S. that now has its own government, a right given in 1947, when the residents of Puerto Rico for the first time were allowed to elect their own leaders. Prior to that, the government was led by a governor appointed by the U.S.

Puerto Rico's residents are now U.S. citizens, whose 18-year-old sons are obligated to register for the military draft, and whose government cannot negotiate its own trade agreements, and which has no representation in the U.S. Congress except for a commissioner who has no voice nor vote in the Congress, and who serves more as an observer and lobbyist than a true representative. The Puerto Rican people do not pay federal taxes.

There is a continuous struggle within Puerto Rico among those who want to maintain the status quo, those who want Puerto Rico to become an independent country with complete sovereignty, and those who want Puerto Rico to become the U.S.'s 51st state. A number of referendums of have been held over the past

years, 1967, 1993, and 1998, for Puerto Ricans to vote on what status they want in relation to the U.S. In 1967 and 1993, the majority voted for the status quo. In 1998, statehood was again defeated. However, there is still a strong independence movement. Any decision made in a referendum to change the status of Puerto Rico would have to be ratified by the U.S. Congress.
(El Nuevo Día, Puerto Rico, 8/16/04; WNYC from NPR, 8/16/04; WBAI, New York City, 8/16/04)