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LADB Staff

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## **Guatemala: A Different Way Of Thinking At The Americas Social Forum**

*by LADB Staff*

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Guatemala hosted the third Americas Social Forum Oct. 7-12. This was a somewhat smaller gathering than the first one in Quito in 2004 and the second in Caracas in 2006. Still, it brought together some 350 organizations and 10,000 people at the Universidad de San Carlos, where it was held. This year's forum was an overwhelmingly indigenous event, owing partly to Guatemala being Latin America's most indigenous country.

In keeping with the indigenous focus, organizers had announced Bolivia's President Evo Morales would attend, but he did not. Women's issues and promotion of the concept of plurinationalism were taken up at the many panels. Among the problems arising out of indigenous and campesino friction with the dominant global culture, the effects of mining throughout the region was especially important (see NotiCen, 2007-04-12).

A mining forum drew activists and technical experts from Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Canada, and Guatemala. Guatemalan activist Rodolfo Pocop represented the sense of the forum in arguing that mining only benefits the oligarchies, violates the rights of indigenous populations, contaminates the earth, and pollutes the water sources. Indigenous groups have organized to oppose mining in several areas of Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2006-08-17 and 2006-10-05). Participants agreed that the struggle against the effects of mining, and whatever successes have been achieved, would continue to depend on coordinated efforts.

Alberto Acosta, former president of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente of Ecuador, made that point with the example of the new Constitution the Asamblea hammered out and which was passed two weeks ago (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10). Acosta said it could not have happened without the joint efforts of indigenous, Afro-descendent, worker, campesino, youth, and women's organizations. Resisting Europe Another of the issues that stoked the ire of Central American participants was the association accord under negotiation with the European Union (EU). Hundreds of protesters waved banners and chanted against "a treaty of impositions."

Again, it was a question of who benefits, and the answer was "not us." Said a spokesperson for the Union Nacional de Productores Agropecuarios de Costa Rica (UPA Nacional), "We, the campesinos, indigenous, and workers of Central America, oppose these negotiations because they only benefit the big European companies." He compared it with the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and predicted that if passed it "will bring nothing but unemployment, hunger, and poverty for Central Americans."

Oxfam International of Honduras representative Asier Malax agreed, stressing that negotiators needed to give first priority to protecting citizens of the isthmus before making any concessions to

European interests. Malax doubted that this could happen as long as the only people making the rules are from the business sector. "You can't leave trade absolutely in the hands of the corporations and leave the state aside, continuing to use the same paradigm that made the countries vulnerable," said Malax. "That's what is happening now, a financial crisis without precedent in the last 40 years."

Reiterating the indigenous historical perspective on the Europe deal, Lidiet Hernandez of UPA Nacional warned, "Central America will lose if the accord is approved because it is a new phase of colonialism like what happened 500 years ago when they came to plunder." She was not persuaded by claims that this agreement is somehow more humane than a simple trade agreement because it contains chapters on cooperation and policy (see NotiCen, 2008-08-07). She called this just a front. "What they are really looking for is a trade treaty where the beneficiaries will be the transnational corporations to the detriment of the precarious Central American economy, where more than 60% of the 35 million inhabitants are poor," she said. As evidence of her premise, she pointed to the lack of recognition in the text of the commercial asymmetries and social imbalances. Hernandez's words could turn out to have been prophetic.

As countries are buckling under the weight of the current financial crisis, socialism is once again bailing out capitalism. A newly chastened EU has called for a financial summit at which emerging economies should participate because, said French President Nicolas Sarkozy, "No one should feel excluded from what we are recasting." He spoke of creating a "new capitalism," with the creation of a new set of structures to replace the Bretton Woods system that, with its World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and related institutions, funded the neoliberal policies that have caused so much pain in developing countries. He called for the meeting to be held "preferably in New York, where everything started." If Sarkozy could be believed, Hernandez might have been heartened by what he said next. "We need to found a new capitalism based on values that put finance at the service of companies and citizens, and not the reverse," said the French president. "This fundamental reform can't stop at Europe. The economy is global; no country can protect itself alone."

Nonetheless, even if the new capitalism turns out in the end to be socialism, the people of the forum are for the moment having none of it. Jorge Coronado of the Hemispheric Commission of the Americas Social Forum characterized this event as "the resistance forum of the continental people's movement." There were, according to one observer, distinct lines of identification one racial, or indigenist, the other class based, campesino. Adherents to the two lines met separately on many issues, though individual participants moved freely between the two, and much of the discussion, while colored by international context, was American in tone.

Land and water issues, for instance, were discussed in terms reflecting a uniquely endogenous hemispheric epistemology. "Water is not a commodity, water is life," said Blanca Chancoso of Ecuador. "We are also saying that land is not a commodity, land is life. The land is our mother, and our mother is not a commodity." Recovering a system of knowing Observers noted that an effort to link the disparate struggles of the hemisphere overarched differences of identity.

A recurring theme was plurinationalism as contrasted with pluriculturalism. Humberto Cholango, president of the Ecuvarunari Kichwa movement in Ecuador, compared the two concepts.

Pluriculturalism, he said at one seminar, reinforces neoliberalism and the folklorization of peoples, whereas plurinationalism is a political, social, and economic idea that creates a foundation for a new political process, rather than just minority representation in government. This is the concept that Ecuador's new Constitution, approved Sept. 28, recognizes, that would, he said, provide social justice to all Ecuadorans (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10).

Another theme that parsed politics to yield essential conceptual differences was one that first came up a year ago at the indigenous summit in Guatemala. David Choquehuanca, Bolivia's foreign minister, introduced the Quechua term *sumak kawsay*, which roughly translated means "living well." He distinguished this from the concept of a "better life," which is fundamental to first world development schemes. Seeking a better life, said Choquehuanca, masked a process with inequality as its goal. At this year's forum, Roberto Espinoza of the Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indigenas (CAOI) used the Quechua term to stress reciprocity and collective rights above individual rights as essential to the American path to development. For Benita Simon of Huehuetenango, the term included "taking the position of moving from actions of resistance to actions that allow us to take back power."

It may be deduced from this that a breakdown of the fundamental framework of the culture of conquest, confluent with a recovery of the knowledge bases of the hemisphere's native peoples, could bode well for development in the style of *Abya Yala* (the Americas).

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