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After A Year As Guatemala's President, Alvaro Colom's Stock Is Slipping

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom presented the first self-assessment of his presidency, his state of the state address. He was rather kinder to himself than were local and international observers, but not entirely out of line with their views. Amnesty International (AI), which has kept a sharp eye on Guatemala for many years, was not impressed with the comportment of a president who came in with a broad agenda for change, but neither was it particularly harsh. At the local level, a majority of citizens rated his performance unfavorably, in the polls and on the streets. Kerry Howard, AI's deputy director for the Americas, summed up, "Our assessment of President Colom's first 12 months in office is a mixed one. There have been positive moves, such as the commitment to opening the military files, but the Guatemalan justice system is still unable to deliver justice." There was nothing new in that, and the statement might have sounded even a little gratuitous to some, given that the justice system has never worked. Howard also said, "Millions of Guatemalans are now living under the threat of violence and poverty. For their situation to improve, real action needs to take place urgently." There were some good things to say, and AI said them. Their critique looked favorably on Colom's cooperation with the International Commission against Impunity (Comision Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG) and his presidential order to open military archives relating to human rights violations during the course of the 36-year civil war. But AI had to call the president on some issues that have risen to the status of benchmarks for this and other human rights agencies, and the presidency is where the buck stops. The worst of it Very high on the list of ongoing abuses is the discrimination and violence against women (see NotiCen, 2005-02-10, 2007-10-18). Despite repeated denunciations of the government from many local groups and the international community (see NotiCen, 2006-09-21), murders of women, frequently accompanied by torture and rape, have increased during Colom's tenure. Investigations have been no less inept, negligent, and fruitless under this administration than under any other. Closely related to this is the incidence of murders in general in the country. They have risen in the past year, and suspicion of security-forces involvement is as high as ever. The office of the attorney general is blasted as well for its continued subservience to the forces of impunity and specifically for its record, which indicates impunity in 98% of all crimes. Human rights activists seeking to document and change this say they have seen increased attacks against them as well. Colom has acknowledged these trends and has not been passive to them. In January, he reshuffled his Cabinet to address crime issues. He named Salvador Gandara as interior minister and moved the former minister, Francisco Jimenez, to the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad (CNS) as technical secretary. Gandara was formerly Colom's executive secretary of the presidency and is said to be very close to the president. But Gandara's qualifications have been questioned. He was vice minister of the interior in the government of former President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000), when the ministry was embroiled in human rights violations allegations, with no noticeable reduction in crime to show for it. In December, Colom overhauled the military leadership, also to create a more effective institutional response to crime. Equally devastating to the population are the ravages of poverty. In this, AI has criticized the president's forced evictions of poor people, mostly indigenous. In the midst of these assaults on

the poor, however, Colom stepped in to decree a raise in the minimum daily wage, starting this year, to 52 quetzals (about US\$6.61). This move equalizes the urban and rural minimum wage, representing a 10.63% increase for rural and 7.81% increase for urban workers, but with inflation at 9.82%, urban workers end up with a net loss in real terms. Also, maquila workers are expressly left out of this increase. On the demand of maquila operators struggling with the exigencies of global recession (see other article in this edition of NotiCen), workers still lucky enough to have a job in the apparel-export industry will remain with a minimum wage of 47.75 quetzals (about US\$6.07). The government has promised to revisit the maquila wage with a commission composed of business and labor representatives, but they will have to tread lightly; 60,000 jobs have already been lost. Speech disdained Local evaluations of Colom's first year were no better. Popular organizations and leaders did not spare the lash. "Falsity and demagoguery is what has characterized this government," said Mario Polanco, director of the historic human rights organization Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM). "It was a political speech, very aggressive, very defensive of what he and his wife have done, but with very little content about achievements and accomplishments." Much of Colom's invective was aimed at the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANAN) administration of former President Oscar Berger (2004-2008) that preceded him, leaving his administration to deal with hidden debt, unfinished projects, and a private sector fattened at the public trough while the looming global financial crisis went unheeded and unprepared for. Colom was reported to have railed and carried on during the speech for a long time, about an hour and a half, evoking Polanco's comment. Raquel Zelaya, political analyst at the Asociacion de Investigaciones y Estudios Sociales (ASIES), agreed. "The speech should have been brief, presidential, and conciliatory in tone," she said. "I don't think he displayed the dignity expected of a president of the republic." It could not have helped that, during the speech to the assembled legislature, the streets outside teemed with campesinos protesting mining on their lands and in their communities and the arrests of their leaders in land disputes, and demanding access to land. They demanded recognition of 30 local consultations wherein they rejected mining activities and the annulment of some 80 arrest orders for leaders. Independent analyst Adrian Zapata also found the speech factually deficient. "He is affirming substantial advances, which is difficult to believe in light of the brief time [in office] and also the limitation of government resources has to be taken into account," said Zapata. Comments from opposition politicians and media figures continued in a similar vein. People across the political and social spectrum just found Colom abrasive and unbelievable. For instance, he acknowledged that violence had killed more than 6,200 Guatemalans but claimed that, were it not for his adoption of "certain measures to purge the army and the police, the number would have risen to more than 8,000." The derivation of the latter figure was not explained. On the economic situation, he said that the "foreign crisis has not ended," and that "nobody knows what is going to happen," but called upon all and sundry to come together so that "we can turn this crisis into opportunity, generating more production in the rural area." In an attempt at unifying his skeptical listeners, he told them, "I appeal to the national leadership not to have an apocalyptic mentality. Crises pass, the worst that can happen to a leader is that he fear a crisis. The crisis has to be approached with aggressiveness, creativity, and decision." More substantively, Colom said that, in the past year, there had been a 22.2% reduction in maternal mortality and 20% in infant mortality. In education, 47% more children were enrolled in public schools. In the coming year, he said, 1.4 million more children would have access to education, of whom 1.1 million are indigenous.

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