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## President De Lozada's Rough First Year

by LADB Staff

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As Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada nears the end of his first year in office, he is finding little to celebrate and less to look forward to in his next four years. The US-educated executive and key ally in the anti-drug war of US President George W. Bush's administration was elected with only 22% of the vote. He had pledged to carry on market reforms begun during his first term in 1993-1997, but his lack of support, a balky Congress, and growing public protests forced him to back down on International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed spending cuts.

Frustrations peaked in February when 29 people died as police, protesting austerity plans, battled the army near the government palace (see NotiSur, 2003-02-21). Since Sanchez de Lozada was sworn in as president on Aug. 6, 2002, 54 civilians have died in protests, says the Asamblea Permanente de los Derechos Humanos (APDHB).

"Bolivia faces the greatest uncertainty in two decades of democracy," said Hugo San Martin, a legislator from Sanchez de Lozada's governing party. "This could all spark a military coup."

Other Bolivians say a coup is unlikely but most agree that the president has huge challenges, including growing Indian opposition and frustration at a decade of market reforms that have not brought the benefits promised.

Critics say the president has done little to tackle the problems except put out fires. Polls show his approval ratings, over 40% a year ago, have fallen to under 20%. "We weren't expecting much. But he's even worse than we thought. He's not doing anything" said market vendor Gregorio Quispe.

### *Bolivia Calls Congress Session Amid Hunger Strike*

On May 31, the Bolivian government called an emergency session of Congress to defuse a hunger strike by nearly 50 opposition deputies and senators. Lawmakers began the hunger strike on May 29 to demand the government end congressional holidays a month early to deal with burning social issues. Most lawmakers stopped their fast after the government acquiesced. But others, mostly from indigenous opposition parties Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) and Movimiento Indigena Pachakuti (MIP), said they would continue to fast until El Alto, a large, poor community on the outskirts of the capital La Paz, was given autonomy to run a university there.

Opposition parties accused Sanchez de Lozada's party of stalling on passing laws covering land rights and agriculture subsidies, issues they considered critical in the nation of 8 million, the majority of whom are impoverished Indians. The remaining legislators suspended their hunger strike on June 3 after reaching an agreement with lawmakers from the governing coalition to debate several key bills early in the next legislative session, which begins in August, including one dealing

with the Universidad Publica El Alto and another to compensate victims of the political violence of the military dictatorships.

### *Miners want reactivation*

On June 25, the government reached an agreement with a group of miners who had been blocking Bolivia's main highway. "There is a principle of agreement that must be ratified by the bases," said Florencio Copa of the federacion Nacional de Cooperativas Mineras (FENCOMIN). FENCOMIN began the roadblocks demanding government support for reactivating the mining sector, but presidential spokesperson Mauricio Antezana first said the demand was "not acceptable."

As part of the agreement, the government said it would give the miners US\$3 million immediately and some machinery that belongs to the Corporacion Minera of Bolivia. FENCOMIN vice president Raul Torrez said the administration also agreed to look for foreign funding to support reactivation of the mining cooperatives throughout the country. He said the ministers would present to the president norms agreed upon to provide social security to the sector and guarantee the participation of mining cooperatives in the control of the municipalities where they are located. The government also agreed to provide compensation to the family of miner Severino Macias Villca, who was shot to death during the protest in Caracallo, 190 km south of La Paz.

#### Agreement with unemployed workers

On June 26, the government signed an agreement with the Asociacion de Desempleados de Bolivia to provide them free medical care and jobs. About 45 jobless workers had been fasting for ten days in several cities demanding that the government fulfill promises made a year ago to provide jobs, housing, health care, education, and food. The agreement assures the jobless that they will have preference in government public-works construction projects and that the government will provide training in electrical works, gas installation, irrigation, and road repairs.

Alfred Paredes, president of the organization, said the agreement was reached after a lengthy negotiation with representatives of the administration and through the mediation of the Defensor del Pueblo. "The government has promised that, starting now, it will give free medical attention to all unemployed workers and their families" in health centers through the country," said Paredes. Paredes said the authorities promised also to respond within 90 days to the requests for food, school tuition, and housing as well as funds to provide loans to create microbusinesses for jobless workers.

In addition, he said, "we are not giving up the right to have permanent employment, and the association will meet in August to outline its strategy to achieve that objective." The organization says it has 80,000 members and represents, counting the families, 400,000 people. Joblessness is a serious problem in Bolivia.

The acute economic and productive crisis and increasing liberalization of markets have led to a systematic loss of workers' rights, according to the nongovernmental Centro de Estudios para de Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario (CEDLA). This process, pushed by policies of flexible hiring, has

intensified the exploitation of workers, who otherwise face joining the ranks of the unemployed 13.5% of the economically active population (EAP) in urban areas.

The Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE) reports that, nationwide, 9.5% of the EAP is unemployed, but trade unions say that does not reflect reality. In addition to the unemployed, CEDLA says 60% of the working population is underemployed. In the past 10 years, the income of manual laborers in industry remained nearly constant: US\$34 to US\$47 dollars a month at current exchange rates. CEDLA figures also show that income distribution in Bolivia is a major problem.

In 1992, the top 20% of the labor force in income received 54.9% of total wages, and by 2000 that reached 59%, while the 20% with lowest wages saw their share drop from 4.3% to 3.0% in that period. Borrowing a page from Brazil in early July the government offered landless campesinos who have been occupying haciendas in several parts of the country land if they left the property. In late June, the Bolivian Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST) invaded various fincas in Santa Cruz, Los Yungas near La Paz, the Amazon, and the Altiplano demanding that 500,000 hectares be given them to cultivate.

On June 29, about 300 campesinos invaded the Collana hacienda, property of the sister-in-law of first lady Ximena Iturralde de Sanchez de Lozada. The campesinos demanded that authorities give them 1,833 ha of the property, 70 km west of La Paz, which they said had been abandoned. The occupation of the Iturralde hacienda is part of a national effort that the group calls "agrarian reform from below, with land for all," said Angel Duran, leader of the MST.

On July 2, Minister of Planning and Sustainable Development Moira Paz Estensoro convinced the campesinos to go to La Paz to discuss the government's proposal. But, on July 4, the government and the MST broke off negotiations after authorities demanded that the campesinos leave all land they were occupying. The MST called on campesinos to occupy more haciendas to pressure the government to give them land. Soldiers and police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to drive the campesinos off a plantation in Terebinto, near Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia, authorities said. There were no reports of injuries in the operation.

Government officials said the raid was just the start of a government campaign to suppress the growing wave of land protests across Bolivia. Interior Minister Yerko Kukoc confirmed that the police had forcibly evicted about 100 campesinos from a hacienda in Terebinto. He said the 300 campesinos occupying Collana would also be removed if they did not leave.

On July 6, the MST agreed to voluntarily leave the properties after reaching an agreement with the government. Vice Minister of Interior Jose Luis Harb said the agreement was signed the night of July 5 in Tolar, 75 km south of La Paz. He said that beginning July 7 government officials would draw up an timeline to review properties of questionable legality and give title and distribute such estates to campesinos who do not have land to cultivate. The government would distribute 3,000 ha by the end of the year and 621,000 ha in seven different departments by the end of 2004, compared with 12 million ha that the MST says is necessary. The investigation by the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA) of the use of the Collana hacienda will begin next week, said Harb.

On July 8, the president gave land titles to 55 Quechua indigenous communities and asked for patience from the MST. The titles cover 87,000 ha of community lands, which will benefit 33,000 residents of Potosi, 600 km south of La Paz. The president recognized that the process of registering land and giving titles was slow but said he was surprised by the pressures of the campesinos. "I'm surprised that you have lost patience after waiting so many years," the president said to the Indians meeting with him in the presidential palace.

On July 10, the detention for several hours of MST leader Gabriel Pinto Tola threw the talks between the government and the organization into Limbo again. Pinto was detained on the complaint of the owner of the land invaded by the MST. In the next several days, more invasions took place, one at the San Cayetano soy plantation, 30 km north of Santa Cruz. INRA officials arrived and tried to convince the campesinos to leave, but the calm seems to have disappeared.

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