Forum Proposals for Latin American

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The first-ever Social Forum of the Americas (SFA), held in Quito, Ecuador, July 25-30, brought together as many as 8,000 activists to present their ideas on how to defy neoliberal, free-market practices in the Americas. Participants presented an alternative country-risk index, held a mock trial against the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and proposed the region's first summit for immigrants. Building alliances between indigenous peoples of the Americas was also a prominent goal at the meeting.

Meeting of "other America"

Thousands marched on the capital's central plaza to mark the opening of the forum. While the event organizers had hoped to welcome 10,000 activists to the event, they said 8,000 registered. Other estimates put the total at 5,000. The SFA is an outgrowth of the World Social Forum (WSF), which has been held every year since 2001, first in Brazil and this year in Mumbai, India (see NotiSur, 2003-02-07). It is set to reconvene again in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in January 2005.

Both forums use the slogan "Another world is possible," as they seek to postulate alternatives to the neoliberal model promulgated by the World Economic Forum (WEF), a conclave of political and economic elites that meets regularly in Davos, Switzerland.

SFA panel meetings included Free Trade: The Trojan Horse Model, Sexual Diversity and Alternatives to Globalization, Populations in Movement and Immigrants' Rights, Reconstruction of Political Space, Poverty, Migration, Remittances and Development, and a film festival documenting Memory and Rebellion.

The Indice de Riesgo Pais Alternativo (IRPA), or Alternative Country-Risk Index, was one of the presentations attendees made at the forum. The index sought "to reflect the likelihood of social, economic, and environmental deterioration faced by Latin American countries," Uruguayan economist Eduardo Gudynas, one of the creators of the new index, said.

Two Uruguay-based nongovernmental organizations, Desarrollo, Economia, Ecologia, Equidad-America Latina (D3E) and the Centro Latino Americano de Ecologia Social (CLAES), developed the method as a response to the traditional investment-risk analysis by international credit-rating agencies to describe the credit-worthiness ratings on which investors rely.

Gudynas pointed out that country-risk ratings are used by governments in developing nations to guide economic policy in sensitive areas like the foreign debt. "Another world is possible, and we need an index to measure it," joked Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta with the Instituto
Latinoamericano de Investigacion Social (ILDIS). "While the traditional country-risk rating emphasizes economic and financial aspects, our index incorporates other dimensions, like social, political, and ecological indicators," Gudynas said.

Costa Rica is the only country in Latin America with a reasonable IRPA rating, while at the other end of the spectrum, two of the biggest economies in the region, Argentina and Brazil, are in a situation of outright social and environmental default.

**Indigenous groups present collective-rule ideas**

Most of the 700 indigenous people from around the region taking part in the Second Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala (America in the language of the Kuna Indians of Panama), which began July 21, joined the Social Forum when their meeting ended on the July 25. Representatives from 64 indigenous nationalities and peoples said they would seek to build alliances with other social sectors in the effort to overcome neoliberal expansion.

Luis Macas, one of Ecuador's most highly respected indigenous leaders, said the summit was a means of "joining efforts to fight neoliberalism, which runs directly counter to our communities, because it seeks to impose market values on the collective way of life that native peoples have developed over centuries." Macas, a founder and former president of the influential Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE) and a former parliamentary deputy, served as agriculture minister in the first six months of the administration of President Lucio Gutierrez.

Gutierrez lost support from CONAIE and other indigenous groups after those groups called his policies a betrayal of their support (see NotiSur, 2004-01-30). "The sectors in power in the Americas and the US government see the indigenous movement as a threat to the democracy that they defend, which excludes segments of society," said Macas at the opening of the summit. Indigenous people, on the other hand, want a democracy "based on coexistence revolving around the community. In the community, we help each other, with solidarity, to build our houses, plant our crops, or build a road, and the decisions are taken collectively, in search of consensus," which forces everyone to participate with their opinions and suggestions, said Macas.

Out of a total population of more than 500 million people in Latin America, there are around 50 million indigenous people, 80% of whom live in poverty.

In Ecuador, ethnic Indians account for 30% of a population of 13 million people. Indigenous democracy is "inclusive, more participatory than the democracy in which one merely casts a vote that does not signify an influence in the later decisions of those who are elected," Macas said.

**Participants propose first-ever summit for migrants**

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Oscar Chacon, a leader of the Salvadoran immigrant community in the US, said that a continentwide dialogue is needed to tackle the phenomenon of migration flows, which move not only toward the North, but between countries of Latin America as well. Organizing communities of migrants, the impact of migration, and demands that governments and the international community take action to deal with the phenomenon were discussed in the panel on Poverty, Migration, Remittances, and Development held at the Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar in Quito.

The panel was organized by the US-based Enlaces America, an organization that "facilitates the empowerment of transnational communities in their commitment to building an equitable, sustainable, and dignified way of life" and "supports the development of Latino immigrant-led organizations as national and regional leaders in the Americas."

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) said that around 20 million Latin Americans are living outside their countries of origin as a result of migration flows, which were particularly high in the 1990s. Nearly two-thirds of those migrants live in the US, but there are also large communities of Latin Americans seeking better opportunities in Europe, especially Spain.

ECLAC reports that people from Latin America and the Caribbean who emigrate to industrialized countries send their families back home an average of US$200 a month, while remittances to the region totaled US$25 billion in 2002. The money wired to families back home "helps build houses, but breaks up families," said an Italian nun who has been working in Machala, a city on Ecuador's southern coast, for over a decade.

Speaking at a SFA panel, Adriana Palli said the negative impact of emigration overshadows the positive effects, despite the large flows of remittances that it generates. "Machala is a city rich in natural resources, but which lives in utmost poverty," she said. "Those who go abroad are young people of working age, who leave their children in the hands of grandparents who are unable to care for them properly, and many of those children later swell the ranks of juvenile delinquents."

**IDB and World Bank accused in absentia**

At a mock trial against the IDB and World Bank, forum attendees accused the international lending organizations of social and environmental crimes. No representatives from the institutions were present, but the two sent a letter that said they were open to dialogue on the issues at hand and maintained that their policies are based on sustainable development.

Rural and environmental activists from several countries of Latin America presented charges that the lending groups fuel the concentration of land ownership and promote the cultivation of transgenic crops in the region. The "trial" was conducted by a symbolic "tribunal on food
sovereignty" in Quito. The two multilateral lending institutions were in the dock because of their "ecological debt to the countries and peoples of Latin America."

Aurora Donoso, with the Ecuadorian environmental group Accion Ecologica, read the audience of more than 200 activists letters from the World Bank and IDB in which they declined to participate in the process but said they were open to dialogue. The jury included Argentine writer, human rights activist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Nora Cortinas, the president of the Argentine human rights group Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, and representatives of campesino and environmental organizations.

**Environmentalists to watch over biologist’s voyage**

Environmental groups at the SFA from different countries announced that they would be creating a watchdog group for the microbial research that the biologist John Craig Venter is conducting on the world's oceans. Venter is famous for having sequenced the human genome in three years and since 2003 has been traveling the world's oceans compiling microbes to sequence them, an activity which could lead to the creation of artificial life forms.

Silvia Ribiero, researcher for the Mexican Grupo de Accion sobre Erosion, Tecnologia y Concentracion (ETC), said at a press conference that the initiative for a watchdog group emerged from the threat that Venter's research could serve in the manufacture of biological weapons. "We want him to know that henceforth many organizations are observing the course of his research," said Ribiero, after asking why the scientist's project was receiving funding from the US Department of Defense.

In his yacht Sorcerer II, Venter began his passage from the Bermuda Islands and has traveled through the waters of Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, the Ecuadoran Galapagos Islands, and French Polynesia. In the future he plans to go to New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. He will cruise the Indian Ocean toward Madagascar, coming around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, then go to the headwaters of the Amazon River, and end in the Caribbean.

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