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Paraguay: Doubts Persist Regarding Alleged Guerrilla Group

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Alone, challenged by the social organizations that supported him on his road to the presidency, abandoned by most of his own allies, besieged by the right which is only waiting for a good excuse to try to impeach him, and excoriated by the press and large agricultural groups, Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo was forced to adopt the only measure that he never wanted to have to use. That was declaring a state of emergency (formerly called a state of siege), a reminder of the bloody days of the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), who ruled the country for 35 long years under the protection of that legal status, which restricts individual liberties, limits union activity, orders the armed forces to participate in quelling internal conflict, prohibits the right of assembly, and allows indefinite detention of citizens. The state of emergency has been in effect since April 24 in the country's five northern departments approximately one-third of the national territory where Lugo did pastoral work during his years as a Catholic bishop with total commitment and an attitude of participation and support for the poor campesinos displaced from their lands by the "Brasiguayos." Brasiguayos are Brazilian landowners who, simply by crossing an extremely porous border, have taken over a large area of Paraguayan territory and formed associations engaged in soy growing (see Notisur, 2008-11-07, 2009-02-27). The campesinos, who encouraged Lugo to enter politics and organized the first large rallies calling on him to run for president in 2008, are now the target of police and military repression unleashed in pursuit of a phantasmagoric and, for many analysts, nonexistent guerrilla group that the rightist press and rightist elements within the government call the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP). Analysts who doubt the EPP's existence say the group appears on the front pages of newspapers or in the most extreme opposition discourse only when, for various motives, it is convenient to resort to distractions that relegate other societal concerns, especially real and tangible issues, to the back burner. Smoke and mirrors? Reuters news agency and Radio Nederland have quoted unnamed sources saying that the EPP is responsible for between four and six kidnappings of large landowners, through which it has extorted US$4 million in ransom. Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola, one of the rightists in the Cabinet, says that 27 kidnappings have been carried out and US$10 million has been paid in ransom. They all agree, although with no discernable proof, that EPP militants have received military training from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and, to underscore the group's importance, identify it as one of four major active guerrilla groups on the continent, along with the FARC, Colombia's Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and the weakened Peruvian guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso, which waged a bloody insurgency in the 1980s and 1990s. No one has yet been able to explain what the EPP has done with the US$4 million or US$10 million paid in ransoms, a very significant sum of money in Paraguay. No one has been able to say, either, what the EPP's political objectives are. Until now, the group is known only through Carmen Villar, an alleged guerrilla detained in a Paraguayan jail on murder charges, who said in an interview with a local newspaper that the EPP is "an organization that acts throughout the country" and that it arose "from the bosom of the Paraguayan people, from the popular sectors always ridiculed, discriminated against, and stepped on." Villar told the daily Última Hora that "the FARC has absolutely nothing
to do with our organization," and that allegations about the group are "because they are looking for a possible connection between our group and the FARC to get economic aid from the US or even Colombia." Miami's El Nuevo Herald ran Associated Press and Agence France-Presse stories on April 24 saying, "The guerrilla group has defined itself as having Marxist-Leninist origins." However, no political document has yet appeared signed by or attributed to the EPP in which it identifies itself politically or ideologically. Investigators have relied solely on a document found fortuitously in the hamlet of Horqueta in the area under the state of emergency, 480 km north of Asunción. The document says that the group was formed on March 1, 2008, and has just 15 combatants, information on the basis of which police analysts extrapolate that the group might have the logistical support of 70 people. Other sources talk of only 10 combatants and 50 Paraguayans campesinos, who, they say, provide a peripheral base of support. Perhaps because of the poor background information, the government has not come up with a single way of referring to the feared EPP. It uses various phrases to describe the group: "a band of criminals," "armed groups," "narcoguerrillas," or simply "terrorists." Military circles have said nothing, and there has not been a single reference to the EPP's irruption on the national political-criminal stage. Citing Paraguayan legislative sources, the Argentine newspaper Página 12 wrote, "Kidnappings, assaulting and setting fire to police stations, destroying crops and agricultural machinery, and planting a bomb in the Palacio de Justicia in Asunción have been attributed to the EPP." Despite the information in the Argentine paper, those alleged attributions do not appear in any academic, political, police, military, or legislative file. Lugo's pursuit of group cuts other programs Many analysts, reading between the lines, conclude that the EPP could be a fiction, albeit one presented by the media as a real power factor, so that Lugo, isolated and backed solely by South American countries that are determined to isolate the country in the case of a democratic break, as they did with Honduras, would have no other option but to bow to the theory of the EPP as a "fearsome" guerrilla group. For the president to accept being one of those who see a danger where none exists, various pressures came into play. First, after barely resuming its legislative work on March 15, following a 60-day recess, the rightist congressional majority revived the threat of initiating an impeachment process. Second, the military's hidden insubordination pushed the president to give it a role to play by sending soldiers to repress the campesinos in the north. Third, more legislators are joining the pro-coup crusade of Vice President Federico Franco, who unceasingly makes clear his willingness to replace Lugo. Finally, setting up the EPP as an enemy needing to be fought means that Lugo's ambitious plan, Paraguay para todas y todos, 2010-2020, rolled out on March 15, moves down on the list of priorities. The plan calls for establishing a social pact, reactivating the still incipient agrarian-reform program, eradicating child labor, and providing comprehensive assistance to 1.2 million poor people in health, education, housing, and essential services. That would be significant, and it would bolster the administration in a country with the worst wealth-distribution indicators in the region the richest 20% of the population controls 62.4% of the wealth while the poorest 10% controls only 0.7% and where 40% of the 7 million inhabitants, half of them campesinos, are either poor or indigent. Declaring the state of emergency aroused skepticism even among those who always support the president, such as campesinos and human rights organizations. On April 27, the Federación Nacional de Campesinos (FNC), a longtime Lugo ally, made clear to the president its fears about the operations carried out by 3,300 military personnel and police sent to hunt the 10 or 15 alleged EPP militants. The following day, Amnesty International (AI) and three local humanitarian organizations demanded that the president "publically commit to respect human rights while the state of emergency is in effect." Although aware that their demands serve the interests of the rightist pro-coup sectors, the groups that always supported the president found themselves between a rock
and a hard place, forced to publically defend society because the history of the Paraguayan police and military is one of systematic human rights violations. Lugo fell into the trap, and the report by Col. Cayo Arréllaga, head of the forces sent to subdue the north, seemed to show that. "In the first 10 days of the state of emergency," said the colonel, "we have not yet come across any EPP members nor have we been able to find evidence of their presence in the patrolled areas. However, the operation is a success since it was able to detain two dangerous cattle rustlers." Perhaps the only thing certain is that the EPP's existence is not certain.

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