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For one month, Paraguay returned to a state of siege (see NotiSur, 2010-05-14). The regimen of strict restrictions on all individual and collective liberties took the country back to the dark days of the dictatorship led by Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), 35 uninterrupted years in which the general governed under the authority of a state of emergency. The current suspension of constitutional rights is, however, called an estado de excepción the name adopted with the return to institutionality and with the aim of forgetting, at least by name, those terrible years. The measure, which was in effect in the five northeastern departments, limits political and union activities, directs the armed forces to participate in quelling internal conflict, suspends the right to assemble, and authorizes indefinite detentions. The operation in which 3,300 soldiers armed for war were sent in search of some 20 members of an alleged guerrilla group the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP) ended in a categorical and absolute failure, which gave the opposition an excuse to say that Lugo is complicit with that imaginary guerrilla force and deserves to be removed from office by impeachment (see NotiSur, 2010-02-19). In this atmosphere, landowners in areas where the EPP supposedly operates, accustomed to depending on armed guards who function as a veritable private police force, are now touting the advisability of creating paramilitary commando groups. Media question existence of EPP Most analysts contend that the EPP does not exist and that it is merely a phantom that the right makes appear and disappear depending on circumstances of the moment. Print media not caught up in the internal situation also doubt the group's existence. Le Monde Diplomatique describes it as a "phantasmagoric guerrilla force." BBC Mundo asks, "Phantom or threat?" In an unusual move within diplomatic circles, Marco Aurelio García, the chief foreign policy advisor to Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, told the Argentine daily Tiempo, "The EPP is a joke or a piece of fiction." Le Monde, without any proof, reported that many are saying EPP members come from the ranks of Patria Libre, an organization without parliamentary representation, and others believe that it acts in concert with the drug cartels. In fact, the newspaper says, Concepción department one of the five included in the state of emergency is controlled by drug traffickers, and Brazil's two most powerful cartels, Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Verhelho, operate there. BBC describes the north as "a succession of large estates of open land and patches of impenetrable forest. Forest of dense vegetation, clouds of dust, unrelenting sun, and outsized ants' nests. There, authorities say, the EPP leadership is hiding....But there are others who believe that this rebel army is more of a phantom, reminiscent of the Yasy-Yateré. Yasy-Yateré is a character from local Guaraní mythology [the Guaraní are the original people of Paraguay from whom most of today's Paraguayans are descended] who roam about while people siesta and lures naughty children into the woods with a whistle. 'Yasi-Yateré, you can hear him, but you can't see him,' is a local saying which has become synonymous with the elusive EPP." The BBC quotes one commander in charge of operations during the state of emergency who was asked how a fight pitting so many (3,300 soldiers) against so few (20) could have failed. The military leader replied, "What happens is that they are a highly trained group, they resist anything, and they fear nothing. They count on the support of people who remain silent either because they sympathize with the EPP's aims or are afraid of it."
With a touch of irony, the BBC summarized the results of the military operation in the north: "But the military crackdown, known as Operativo Py'aguapy tranquility in the indigenous Guaraní language had seen little success. An alleged member of the EPP's 'logistics network' was arrested, while another attempt to capture a man believed to be the group's leader failed after he managed to escape into the woods, injured and barefoot." Various press reports said that the military presence brought both fear and calm. Calm in the cities, street patrols managed to reduce crime but in rural areas the reality is very different. The campesinos do not want to leave their homes, wrote the BBC, "because the soldiers demand our papers and there's a lot of people who don't have any. They have lived without papers since they were born," said local Nilda Mendoza." The BBC said that the government had assured locals that the operation would not affect campesino activities, but organizations to which they belong complain of intimidations and arbitrary searches, and they fear that their social and economic demands are being criminalized. Two days before Operativo Py'aguapy ended, on May 23, the BBC risked making a call that today is shared by most analysts. "The deadline for finding 'the most wanted' is approaching. Failure could mean a political judgment against the president. But others describe the situation as oparei a word that could best be summed up in English as 'much ado about nothing.'" Concern with president's rightward shift For some, not only are the results of the operation negative but the portent of militarization and the setback to the democratic process begun in 2008, with Lugo's taking office, have become worrisome and that worry is growing. For Juan Martens, a member of the Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos de Paraguay (CODEHUPY), the state of emergency was never justified, it was a decision made by the government against its will to reduce the pressure exerted by the rightist opposition and the mass media, particularly the daily ABC Color. Analyst Marcial Cantero says that the measure served only to back campesino organizations into a corner, "increasing the criminalization of protests." What concerns everyone is that now both the administration and Congress are signaling their willingness to look for legal cover to allow the military to remain in the northeastern departments, fulfilling police duties prohibited under the national defense law (Ley de Defensa Nacional y Seguridad Interna). "This is very serious. Putting armed military in the streets, without obtaining prior congressional authorization, will mean that the state of emergency, which was enacted legally, will become a de facto measure. It would be a setback, because the Paraguayan Army would become an occupation force that takes aim at its fellow citizens," said jurist Andrés Ramírez. Lugo's closest collaborators say he never favored invoking the state of emergency and asked for it only to calm the right, even knowing that the measure went against his natural base: the campesinos in the north alongside whom he struggled as a Catholic bishop before entering politics. Now, however, perhaps carried along by the need to maintain institutionality or to remain in office he has gone so far as to call for modifying the Ley de Defensa Nacional and even to try to establish good relations with the political groups most committed to the dictatorship. On May 26, he visited the headquarters of the Partido Colorado (Asociación Nacional Republicana, PC), the party of Stroessner, and called it "a bulwark of democracy" the only thing the Partido Colorado definitely is not. Until the end of 2009, Lugo characterized Stroessner's party as "an organization of oligarchs that never prioritized the needs of the poor." Le Monde Diplomatique says, "Lugo's political survival seems a miracle; he has against him the entire Congress [the support of only one deputy and two senators], the judiciary [a preserve of the old corrupt politics], the fraudulent bourgeoisie [which, although it continues doing business with the state, does not trust the president’s leftist entourage], the press [which conspire without any urging in favor of impeachment and unceasingly conger up the fantasy of equating Lugo with Venezuela President Hugo Chávez], and Vice President Federico Franco [who daily expresses his pro-coup stance by saying that he is willing to replace Lugo]." Within this framework, adds Le
Monde, only divisions within the right and popular mobilizations (or the threat of them) can keep in office the former bishop who in 2008 ended the Partido Colorado's 60 years of absolute domination, including the more than three decades of the Stroessner dictatorship. The polls that ABC Color does not publish say that the majority of Paraguayans oppose the possible impeachment threatened by the right, something that, given events in Honduras, cannot hide its smell of a coup. Now, says Le Monde, opposition sectors want to revive the threat after the state of emergency's lack of results. In this context, it is not surprising that, on May 26, Colorado Deputy Luis Gneiting blackmailed Lugo telling him that Congress would not vote for any law requested by the executive unless he fired two ministers whom the right dislikes. And, on May 28, Colorado Sen. Hugo Estigarribia threw out the idea transmitted to him from the large landowners in the north: form paramilitary squads "to wipe out the EPP guerrillas."

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