

26 reported killed

Bolivian troops massacre strikers

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Bolivian army troops backed by tanks killed at least 26 workers and peasants and wounded some 90 more Sunday, as the US-backed government of President Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada unleashed murderous repressive force in an attempt to crush a month-long rebellion against his government's International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity policies.

The army moved into the industrial suburb of El Alto, outside La Paz, which has been the center of the movement of strikes and protests that has challenged the government. Witnesses said that troops opened fire with machine-guns on residents of the town, who had nothing more than sticks and stones to fight back.

"They are massacring us," reported Roberto de la Cruz, a union leader and organizer of the strike in El Alto. "There is no battle. They shoot at us at will, firing at the crowd." Among the dead was a five-year-old boy cut down by machine-gun fire. Local hospitals were overwhelmed by the number of wounded, and appeals were made for donations of blood.

An attack helicopter was also used in the assault, which was aimed at breaking a virtual siege of La Paz by strikers and protesters. The army's immediate objective was to resupply the capital's dwindling fuel and food reserves.

El Alto is Bolivia's third-largest city, with a population of 600,000. Located 12,000 feet above sea level, it is a center for both oil refineries and food warehouses. It is also one of the poorest districts in the country. The bulk of its population is made up of indigenous people who have migrated to the city from rural areas in search of work. The majority of Ateños live in a sprawling shantytown.

A statement issued jointly by Bolivia's Catholic Church, human rights organizations and the main press association called upon the government to immediately withdraw all troops and police from El Alto. "We cannot speak any more about confrontations but rather of a true massacre," the statement said. It cited numerous reports that "have confirmed the use of large-caliber weapons, including heavy machineguns against the Bolivian people."

Opposition leaders charged that the US Embassy played a decisive role in urging the government to drown the protest movement in blood. US Ambassador David Greenlee served in the 1980s as the chief CIA agent in the country. He is widely blamed in Bolivia for the implementation of draconian repression against coca growers and in particular for a 1988 massacre at Villa Tunari that claimed the lives of 28 peasants.

In the present confrontation, the US Embassy is promoting violent repression to further the interests of the same handful of politically connected energy corporations whose interests have driven US aggression in Iraq and elsewhere.

Over the past month, hundreds of thousands of Bolivian workers, peasants and students have staged a series of struggles against the pro-Washington government of Sanchez Lozada, in what has been referred to locally as the "gas war."

The demonstrators are demanding the resignation of the president and that the natural gas, the last Bolivian national resource not in the hands of

transnational corporations, not be exported to the US via a Chilean port.

As in the rest of Latin America, over the past two decades Bolivians have seen their country's resources auctioned off to the transnationals, leaving the people in abject poverty. Bolivians justifiably fear that with the proposed natural gas deal, history will repeat itself. The country was devastated by the experience with its silver and tin mining industries, which were exploited by US corporations throughout the 20th Century and then abandoned once they proved unprofitable.

The proposed export of natural gas is a \$7 billion operation assigned to Pacific LNG, an export consortium that includes the Bechtel Group, Amoco, British Petroleum and several other international energy giants. Under a previous deal negotiated on petroleum exports, the foreign oil companies earn \$1.3 billion a year while Bolivia receives just \$70 million in taxes and royalties.

The spark that ignited the present mass upsurge against the government was the September 20 massacre of indigenous people at Warisata that left seven dead and dozens injured.

Following the Warisata massacre, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the country's main union federation, called an indefinite general strike.

At the same time the Trade Union Confederation of Rural Workers (CSUTCB), the largest peasant organization, intensified its policy of road blockades, succeeding in isolating La Paz, the largest city and the center of government.

The coca growers led by Evo Morales, leader of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), the main opposition party to the government, had not supported the strike and was limiting its actions to roadblocks.

In La Paz, the call for general strike received the immediate support of merchants, butchers, cargo and passenger transport workers, miners and peasants. Markets closed and the city came to a standstill.

Over the past two weeks, support for the strike expanded to health workers, schoolteachers, university students, and community groups. There have been daily mass marches in the streets of La Paz demanding the resignation of Sanchez Lozada. Many have been arrested in confrontations with the police. On October 10, thousands marched in downtown La Paz banging pans.

In La Ceja, the most important hub in the Bolivian road network, CSUTCB militants blockaded the roads, paralyzing national and international transport. There are reports that truck drivers threw their cargo into the river in order to return home. There are 17,000 tons of cargo in the Chilean port of Arica that cannot be transported because the railroad between Arica and La Paz has been paralyzed.

Other cities witnessing marches by workers, peasants and students are Cochabamba, El Alto and the mining centers of Oruro and Potosi, the latter one of the poorest regions in the country.

The government responded by militarizing the region around La Paz and El Alto. The 12-kilometer road between La Paz and El Alto was taken over by the army. Meanwhile, soldiers have encircled the international airport to keep it open. In several cities, the army has surrounded

university campuses.

In El Alto there had been many confrontations between the residents and the police and army before Sunday's massacre. In what was clearly an uneven struggle, the Alteños fought with stones, sticks, slings and dynamite, while the army and police had special combat gear and armored vehicles.

After a little girl was killed by a soldier's bullet during a confrontation with the army last month, thousands of angry Alteños called for arms to attack army barracks located in the region. The people of El Alto declared a "state of siege" and said that they could not guarantee the lives of the soldiers and police.

There are increasing predictions of a full-scale civil war in Bolivia. In a symbolic act, the widows of the war of El Chaco took out the Mauser rifles that had been saved in honor of those who died fighting against Paraguay in 1932-35. The only other time these outmoded rifles were used was during the revolutionary struggles in 1952.

A five-year economic recession has deepened what was already grinding poverty for the vast majority of the Bolivian people. Bolivia is the second-poorest country in all of the Americas after Haiti. Nearly 60 percent of the population lives in outright poverty. In the rural areas, where 40 percent of the population lives, nine out of 10 are poor.

Bolivian peasants live under pre-industrial conditions. Lacking electricity, they depend upon oil lamps, guano as fertilizer and wood to cook. They use coca, urine and medicinal plants to heal because there are no doctors or health clinics. Many children die of diarrhea or malnutrition, or are simply abandoned.

Studies show that during the past 15 years the average income of peasant families has dropped by 50 percent. According to government figures, five out of 10 peasants go hungry and another four out of 10 have barely enough to eat.

Over 80 percent of Bolivians are indigenous. These people not only constitute the large majority of peasants, but also a large majority of miners, historically the most militant section of the Bolivian working class, and many more are rural teachers. They are to be found in large numbers in most sections of the working class.

The indigenous population is the most exploited and oppressed sector of the Bolivian people. Their Aymara and Quechua roots go back to the Inca Empire that was conquered by the Spanish conquistadors 500 years ago. They have a long history of struggle against oppression during colonial times and against the governments that have ruled since independence from Spain in 1825.

As in the rest of Latin America, there are two Bolivias: one the Bolivia of the oppressed and poor, and the other that of a thin layer of the population that profits from its relations with US banks and multinationals.

The current president, Sanchez Lozada, 73, is a prosperous mining businessman educated in the US who feels more comfortable speaking English than Spanish, not to mention Aymara and Quechua, the other two official languages of Bolivia.

The president's popularity has sunk to a meager 9 percent. The demands raised by the Bolivian masses in opposition to the sale of natural gas to the US represent a repudiation of the free market policies applied over the last 15 years. During that period, all Bolivia's resources and infrastructure except for natural gas—from oil and energy to railroads and communications—were sold off to the transnationals.

The US embassy played a central role in having Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada installed as president in August 2002, after winning just 22 percent of the vote. To prevent the leader of the coca growers—Evo Morales of the MAS—from gaining the presidency, Washington help create a coalition between the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) of Sanchez Lozada, the Left Revolutionary Movement (MIR) of former president Jaime Paz Zamora, the National Democratic Action

(ADN) of former president and dictator Hugo Banzer, and two other smaller parties.

Washington feared that had the MAS won the presidency, it would have expelled the US coca-eradication apparatus as well as the Pacific LNG from the country. After Colombia, Bolivia is the recipient of the second-largest amount of US funds to fight coca growing.

Sanchez Lozada is committed to implementing IMF-dictated measures that include new taxes, drastic reduction in pensions and incomes, the elimination of consumer subsidies for gas and gasoline, reduction of government spending and increasing exports.

Among the most drastic measures demanded by the IMF is the Law of Citizen's Security, designed to create a peaceful environment for foreign capital to operate in Bolivia. This law permits the government to jail peasant leaders and militant workers who oppose the free market program.

Sanchez Lozada was put in power by the US Embassy and the oil transnationals with the support of the Bolivian army. He remains in power, however, thanks to the timidity and betrayal of those who pose as the leadership of the Bolivian workers and peasants.

Following a mass upsurge in February 2003 that could have toppled the government, the leaders of MAS and the COB signed a social pact with Sanchez Lozada, giving him much-needed breathing space and betraying the struggles by teachers, health workers, landless peasants, miners, and other sectors of the working class.

Because none of the promises included in the social pact was ever carried out, one section of workers and peasants after another has entered into struggle, culminating with the massive march of 150,000 people in La Paz on September 19, the day before the Warisata massacre.

Once again, with the Bolivian masses in a state of open rebellion, these leaderships are making conciliatory gestures to the government.

Evo Morales and the COB leader Jaime Solares are asking the government for a dialogue, which the government thus far has rejected because their demands cut across the interests of its US backers.

In an apparent attempt to defuse the rising anger in the wake of the El Alto massacre, Sanchez de Lozada issued a decree Monday morning announcing that "no natural gas will be exported to new markets" until the end of the year. He claimed that until then, his government would organize "consultations and debate" over the proposed gas deal. Immediately after the decree was issued, however, a government spokesman made it clear that the results of any consultations or debate would not be binding. The government also attempted to organize a "dialogue" with civic leaders from El Alto.

There was no indication that these paltry and tardy gestures have had any effect in dampening the mass protest movement. Public and private transport workers went on strike Monday in solidarity with the people of El Alto. Bakers prepared to follow suit. The coca farmers, who had yet to join the protests, indicated that they would march on La Paz and block the roads. Mass protest demonstrations were called in La Paz, Cochabamba and other areas.

In El Alto itself, despite the government order militarizing the area, protests continued after the massacre, with residents lighting bonfires and throwing rocks at army patrols.



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