

Nearly 90 killed by troops

Bush administration backs massacres in Bolivia

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With at least 86 workers, peasants and students confirmed killed by army and police bullets and hundreds more wounded during the last three weeks of mass protests, the Bush administration has solidarized itself fully with the repressive regime of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada.

There is also mounting evidence that the CIA and US military are playing a direct role in organizing the bloodbath that has been unleashed against Bolivia's rebellious population.

"The American people and their government support Bolivia's democratically elected president," the US State Department declared in the aftermath of last Sunday's massacre of poor and indigenous residents of El Alto, the sprawling industrial suburb of La Paz that has been the center of the strike and protest movement. Adopting a threatening tone toward the popular revolt, it warned that Washington "will not tolerate any interruption of the constitutional order in Bolivia, nor will it support a regime that results from undemocratic means."

The statement was seconded by the US Embassy in La Paz, which declared its "full support for this constitutionally and democratically elected government. This government should not be replaced by one imposed by criminal violence." It added that "sticks and stones are not a form of peaceful protest, nor is the burning of vehicles or businesses." Washington had no such words of condemnation, however, for the machine-gunning of unarmed demonstrators, including a five-year-old child, last weekend.

Soldiers moved into the shantytown neighborhoods of El Alto on Sunday and Monday with shoot-to-kill orders. Their objective was to break the siege that protesters had imposed on the capital city of La Paz as part of a nationwide protest over the government's plan to sell off Bolivia's natural gas to a consortium of energy multinationals seeking to export the fuel to California and Mexico. Opponents of the government have charged that, while the gas plan will yield ample profits for the foreign firms and their Bolivian partners, it will produce scant public revenues.

The fight against the gas deal has awakened mass resentment against the deepening poverty and social polarization produced

by two decades of International Monetary Fund-dictated "free market reforms." Large sections of the Bolivian working class, including tin miners and public sector workers, have seen their jobs wiped out by the wave of privatizations and budget-cutting that has swept the country. At least 60 percent of the population subsists on \$2 a day or less.

The government's attempt to drown the mass protests in blood has for the moment produced the opposite effect. The killings in El Alto were answered Monday by a mass protest in La Paz in which another 11 people were killed. The capital remains completely paralyzed by a general strike, with banks, businesses and public offices closed and no vehicles moving on the streets.

Meanwhile, two columns made up of an estimated 20,000 peasants and another consisting of over 2,500 miners are converging on the capital. Two miners were killed and dozens more wounded in a confrontation with troops in the town of Patacamaya, about 60 miles from La Paz on the route of their march.

Thousands of residents of El Alto poured into the capital for demonstrations this week, some carrying the bodies of relatives killed in Sunday's massacre. The protesters said that they were no longer seeking the president's resignation, but rather his head. Sanchez de Lozada remains holed up in the presidential palace, which, like other government buildings, is ringed by tanks and machine-gun emplacements.

Residents of El Alto have reported that security forces are continuing to make house-to-house raids in the city in an attempt to capture strike leaders.

The general strike has spread to Cochabamba—where residents attempted to burn down the government building—as well as Potosí, Oruro and Chuquisaca.

Meanwhile, an issue of the weekly magazine *Pulso* published a detailed account of the extensive US role in organizing the government's murderous repression against the protest movement. Security forces confiscated the edition as soon as it was distributed. Also seized was the daily newspaper *El Diario*, which carried a headline "Bolivians have the right to demand the resignation of the president." Security forces have also shut

down a radio station that broadcasts in the Aymara language and have threatened to move against other media.

According to the report in *Pulso*, a US military command has taken effective control of the Bolivian army in the face of the mass upheavals. Leading this operation, according to the magazine, is the US military attaché, Col. Edward Holland. Another officer has been assigned to oversee troop deployments and tactics, the article said, adding that it was he who made the decision to bring in units from Bolivia's eastern lowlands, for fear that local troops would hesitate in firing on civilians. According to one report, a Bolivian officer shot and killed an Aymara Indian conscript who refused to shoot down the predominantly Aymara protesters.

Another US official has been assigned to organize logistical support for the military repression, assuring adequate supplies of ammunition, food and materiel for the Bolivian army, the magazine added. It said that the US military has organized regular flights from Miami for this purpose, a charge that has also been confirmed by opposition legislators. Paulo Bravo, an opposition deputy, reported that a US Hercules military transport landed Tuesday at an airfield near La Paz with a cargo for the Ministry of Defense that apparently included fresh weapons.

The declarations of support from the State Department and the US Embassy in La Paz marked the third time thus far this year that the Bush administration has felt compelled to throw its weight behind the Bolivian president to prevent his ouster. During the same period, at least 200 Bolivians have lost their lives in police-military repression.

Sanchez de Lozada was installed in the presidential palace in August 2002 largely through US intervention. On the eve of last year's presidential election, the US ambassador threatened that if Sanchez de Lozada's principal opponent—Evo Morales, the former coca grower and candidate of the MAS, or Movement towards Socialism—won, Washington would impose an economic blockade on Bolivia. After neither candidate secured a majority, the US Embassy maneuvered to secure Sanchez de Lozada's victory by cobbling together a majority in a run-off vote by the Bolivian Congress.

In Sanchez de Lozada, the Bush administration has a fitting representative for its "free market" policies. One of the richest men in the country, he is widely known as "el gringo," for having grown up in the US and gone to the University of Chicago, as well as for his servile attitude toward Washington. As a recent protest statement issued by the association of Bolivian sociologists noted, the 73-year-old Sanchez de Lozada is "profoundly linked to the United States, the country in which he lived the better part of his life, to the point where he cannot even speak Spanish correctly."

The apparent direct US military intervention in Bolivia is aimed not merely at rescuing a trusted servant, but at quelling a social revolt that Washington fears could spread throughout Latin America, where in country after country successive IMF-

backed austerity and privatization programs have produced mounting poverty, unemployment and unrest.

Moreover, the Bush administration is pursuing a strategic policy that is directly linked to its unleashing of military aggression in Iraq, Colombia and elsewhere. Having built up its military presence in Bolivia under the guise of combating the production of coca, the plant from which cocaine is made, Washington has sought to gain control over the country's natural gas supplies and divert them to the US market. Similarly, in Colombia, an intervention carried out in the name of fighting drug trafficking and "terrorism" has evolved into a military program for securing the country's significant oil reserves.

For his part, Sanchez de Lozada made an implicit case for further US intervention, claiming that the mass upheavals against his government were the result of "sedition" by "anarchists and narcos" who have been "organized and financed from abroad." Meanwhile, the president's spokesman charged that the protesting workers and peasants were supported by "the Colombian and Peruvian guerrillas."

The Bolivian president has attempted to defuse the protest movement by promising to put off any decision on the natural gas project until the end of the year and offering to organize a popular referendum on the issue.

The Confederation of Bolivian Workers (COB) as well as other opposition groups have rejected these proposals, demanding that Sanchez de Lozada resign. In the wake of last Sunday's massacre in El Alto, four ministers have resigned from the government and Carlos Mesa, the vice president, announced he had withdrawn his support for Sanchez de Lozada.

Morales, the deputy of the MAS, has indicated he is willing to accept Sanchez de Lozada's replacement by Carlos Mesa, insisting this would be a "constitutional" solution. There is no reason to believe, however, that such a replacement of one representative of the ruling oligarchy by another will do anything to satisfy the pent-up social demands of the country's workers, peasants and the majority indigenous population that have erupted in Bolivia's so-called "gas war."



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