

Latin American presidents meet with Bolivia on brink of civil war

US ambassador an expert in partition

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The presidents of nine Latin American nations assembled in the Chilean capital of Santiago Monday for an emergency summit of the recently created Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to deal with the crisis in Bolivia.

The Bolivian government of Evo Morales has been under attack by a right-wing coalition of landowners and businessmen in the eastern part of the country with covert backing from Washington. They have launched a series of violent demonstrations, the looting of government offices, sabotage of the economy and a massacre of peasants supporting the government.

Morales won the presidency in 2005 on a national reformist program of land distribution and greater government control of the energy sector. Last month, Morales won the support of nearly two-thirds of Bolivia's voters in a referendum that ratified his mandate and rejected his recall.

The defeat at the polls has only emboldened the right, however. It has unilaterally declared "autonomy" in four of the country's eastern provinces and has rejected central government control over profits from the country's natural gas reserves, which are centered in the region.

Under the onslaught of the right wing, Morales is attempting to find a negotiated way out that will placate the rich landlord class while maintaining support from the Bolivian masses.

This is also the aim of the Latin American heads of state meeting in Chile. Their fear is that the descent of Bolivia into full-scale civil war could destabilize the entire region and create economic disruption with the cutoff of crucial energy supplies, particularly to Brazil and Argentina.

Upon arriving in Santiago, Morales declared that he had come to "explain to the presidents of South America the civic coup d'état by governors in some Bolivian states in recent days."

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez charged that Bolivia is the victim of an "international conspiracy." He added, "They are trying to overthrow President Evo Morales and the conspiracy has been elaborated, manufactured and supported by the imperialist government of the United States."

Chavez volunteered to send Venezuelan troops to Bolivia, an offer that was swiftly denounced by the Bolivian military command.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is playing a leading role in the summit's deliberations, asserting the hegemony of Brazilian capital, which dominates much of the Bolivian economy. Brazil, by far the dominant economy in Latin America, is also Bolivia's most important trading partner, accounting for the largest share of its natural gas exports.

Both the Morales government and the opposition issued statements welcoming Brazil's mediation of the conflict. For its part, Brasilia has made formal statements about "non-intervention" in relation to Bolivia—a proscription apparently aimed more against Venezuela than Washington—while at the same time supporting the country's

constitutional government.

The Lula government has reportedly called for "caution" and urged the summit to "spare" Washington in any declaration that it issues.

Given the bitter character of the conflict in Bolivia, the success of such mediation is by no means assured.

On September 11, a column of 1,000 peasants on their way to a pro-government rally in the city of Cotija in the northwest corner of Bolivia was intercepted by paramilitary gangs while crossing the Tahuamanu River. The peasants were met with indiscriminate machine-gun fire. Witnesses at the scene describe how women and children were gunned down as they fled toward the river. Many of those who managed to reach the bridge across the river were pushed into the water, while gunners fired from above. The death toll now stands at 25, with 106 missing. Cotija is the capital of Pando Province. President Morales accused Leopoldo Fernandez, Pando's governor, of organizing the massacre.

On September 12, Morales declared a state of siege and sent troops into Pando Province. Pando is one of five insurgent eastern provinces threatening to secede from the country. The five—Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz, Chiquisaca and Tarija—comprise what is known as the eastern crescent region. Lying east of the foothills of the Andes mountain chain, it contains the lion's share of the country's natural gas reserves, Bolivia's most lucrative resource. The governors of the five provinces coordinate their actions through the National Democratic Council (CND.).

As troops moved on Cotija to enforce the state of siege, they were met with machine-gun fire that resulted in two more deaths. Fernandez called on the area's inhabitants to resist the army's intervention. There are reports that peasants are being hunted down in the forests near El Porvenir.

The five insurgent provinces are dominated by semi-feudal estates. In Bolivia less than five percent of the landowners control 91 percent of the arable land. On the other end of the scale, 80 percent of the rural population is forced to subsist on three percent of the land, one of the most unequal land distributions in the world.

Most of the giant estates exist in the eastern crescent region while the mini estates exist on poorer land west of the Andes Mountains. The estates exploit the peasants, mostly Guaraní Indians who have virtually no rights and exist under conditions of virtual indentured servitude or slavery. The Bolivian constitution as amended by the Morales government provides that some of the land that is lying fallow or for which there is no clear title be transferred to the peasants. Minimal as it is, such measures are unacceptable to the eastern landlords who exercise political control over the eastern region.

Earlier in the week, armed gangs in Bolivia's Santa Cruz Province attacked and looted offices of the Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA), the Telephone company (ENTEL) and the tax collection office in the city of

Santa Cruz.

Such criminal provocations notwithstanding, Morales' reaction so far has been been conciliatory. In his press conference, the Bolivian president called on the governors of the five rebel states—who are at the head of this insurrection—to stop their assault on natural gas and fuel pipelines and refineries. Brazil reported that its supply of natural gas from Bolivia had been cut by 10 percent over the past 15 days as a result of the violence.

Morales pointed out that talks have taken place with Mario Cosío, Tarija's governor, as evidence that the government is ready to engage in negotiations and to accept some of the demands for autonomy. Cosío declared that the President had demanded that occupied government buildings and oil facilities be vacated by the rebels and that he would convey the request to his fellow governors.

In response, the anti-government gangs took over the offices of the Election Commission the next day.

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Over the weekend, Bolivian authorities expelled US Ambassador Philip Goldberg for meeting with leaders of the secessionist provinces. Goldberg is apparently something of a specialist in imperialist-engineered partitions of existing states. During the breakup of Yugoslavia, he was the State Department's desk officer on Bosnia and participated in the negotiation of the Dayton Accords. Later, he became the US ambassador to Kosovo following the NATO war against Serbia that secured the province's breakaway from Serbia.

Millions of dollars of US government aid are funneled each year into Bolivia through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). USAID has refused to disclose to which groups the money is being sent. The NED is notorious for supporting right-wing groups around the world, from the Ukraine to Haiti.

The Bolivian government also pointed out that the last week's incidents in Santa Cruz began immediately after Santa Cruz civic leader Branco Marinkovic returned from a trip to the United States. For his part, Goldberg met in secret with Rubén Costas, the Santa Cruz governor who also leads the separatists' hardline wing, days before the uprising in Santa Cruz.

In parallel with the insurrection against Morales, the Venezuelan government reported the discovery last week of a coup d'état to depose President Hugo Chavez. As in Bolivia, there is strong evidence of a "destabilization campaign" by the US government.

In both cases, the aim is to replace the current regimes with governments that will be more pliant towards the demands of US-based energy corporations. At the heart of this campaign is the struggle for control of Bolivian and Venezuelan oil and natural gas.

In Venezuela, a radio program played recordings of active and retired military personnel discussing plans for a coup to overthrow Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. The coup plan was aimed at the Miraflores Palace, Venezuela's House of Government. The recording included the voices of vice admiral Carlos Alberto Millan Millan, who was also Inspector General of the National Armed Forces, National Guard General Wilfredo Barroso Herrera and Eduardo Baez Torrealba, who was involved in the short-lived April 2002 coup.

The conspirators discussed the possible takeover of the Miraflores Palace and of TV broadcasting facilities. Herrera is heard counseling that all effort be directed "towards where the 'señor' is. If he's in Miraflores, the effort goes towards there." The 'señor' is understood to be Chavez.

They also discussed the possibility of either capturing or shooting down Chavez's airplane en route from one part of the country to another, indicating that they have access to air force planes, and to pilots who can fly them.

In a speech on September 12, Chavez denounced the plot and announced the launching of an investigation. He recalled the Venezuelan ambassador to the US and announced that Venezuela—in solidarity with Bolivia—was also was expelling the US ambassador, Patrick Duddy. Using strong language directed at Washington, Chavez said: "Enough with so much garbage from you." He also threatened that in case of an intervention, Venezuela would stop exporting oil to the US. The United States imports 20 percent of its oil from Venezuela.

In his speech, Chavez also referred to two TU-160 Russian strategic long-range bombers that landed in Venezuela to conduct maneuvers. He declared that this will not be the only visit. A naval squadron will arrive later this year for joint maneuvers with the Venezuelan Navy.

Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, who called for the emergency summit of UNASUR, proclaimed that the purpose of the meeting was to support Morales and to prevent a repeat of the coup that overthrew Chilean President Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973, 35 years ago.

Kirchner's comparison was apt in more ways than one. Like Allende, Morales' reaction to his enemies' attacks consists of a set of half measure while negotiating with those who would cut his throat. While his enemies massacre peasants, sack government buildings and take over roads, refineries and gasoducts, cutting off the supply of fuel to western Bolivia, Brazil and Argentina, Morales' reaction to the destabilization campaign of US imperialism and the right wing is consistent with the class character of his administration, that of a national bourgeoisie that fears most of all the movement of the working class. Its watchword is: negotiate at all cost!

Chavez's attempt to use Russian bombers to counterbalance US threats, an illusory attempt to revive Cold War rivalries, recalls nothing so much as Marx's adage: the first time tragedy, the second time farce.

The defeat of the right-wing conspirators aligned with US imperialism in Bolivia and Venezuela cannot be secured on the basis of Morales' "Andean socialism" or Chavez's "21st century socialism," both of which express the interests of sections of the national bourgeoisie. It requires first of all the independent mobilization of the Bolivian and Venezuelan masses. This means the political unification of the working class in alliance with the peasantry in the struggle to establish a workers' government based on a revolutionary program of genuine expropriation of the vast landholdings, energy reserves and financial institutions and a socialist planned economy that makes use of the region's wealth to improve the living standards of Bolivian and Venezuelan workers and peasants.



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