



The Americas Report

From the Menges Hemispheric Security Project

Center for Security Policy

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Argentina



Bolivia



Brazil



Canada



Chile



Colombia



Costa Rica



Cuba



Dominican Republic



Ecuador



El Salvador



Guatemala



Haiti



Honduras



Mexico

The Americas Report is the continuation of the work of Dr. Constantine C. Menges' original Americas Report. For almost two years that report chronicled the efforts of the Castro-Chavez axis and their allies in their efforts to undermine the new spirit of democracy and freedom in Latin America, in favor of autocratic forms of regimes throughout the Western Hemisphere. The report also monitors events in the area as they effect regional and US security in this era characterized by the emergence of terrorist groups of global reach seeking international influence. The current Americas Report and the Menges Hemispheric Security Project of which it is a part will continue to support genuine democracy, free trade and the fostering of strong inter-American relationships as well as exposing growing tyrannies in the area.

Nancy Menges

Editor in Chief - "Americas Report"

Nicole M. Ferrand

Editor - "Americas Report"

For any questions, comments, or those interested in receiving this report or seeking to have their email removed from our list please contact **Nicole Ferrand** at: themengesproject@centerforsecuritypolicy.org or themengesproject@gmail.com.

We would really like to hear from you and will publish your comments with your approval in our next edition. Please kindly send them to the e-mails indicated above.

Highlighted Story - [Change but More of the Same in Cuba](#)

By Frank Calzon*

In the early morning hours of February 20, 2008, **Fidel Castro posted an e-mail to the world.** The ruthless, revolutionary dictator, who has ruled Cuba for almost fifty years, **took to the Internet to announce he would not be returning to his post as President of the Republic.** The message was anticlimactic as **"Raúl, the Young"** has been acting **President of the Republic since July, 2006.** Seventy six year old General Raúl Castro is Fidel Castro's younger brother and head of Cuba's armed forces. Despite some recent propaganda pronouncements, he has made no significant changes in how Cuba is run.

Still, Fidel's announcement was interesting, if for no other reason than the fact that it was posted on the internet. Clearly, the man who called himself Cuba's "Maximum Leader" **no longer thought himself**



Nicaragua



Panama



Paraguay



Peru



The United States



Uruguay



Venezuela

capable of making a brief appearance on television or radio, much less of delivering one of his six hour speeches.



Fidel and Raul Castro: the elder still much in control. Source: Peruanista.

There are 12 million Cubans on the island and more than a million-and-a half abroad, but few had anything much to say about the transfer. It was the international media and foreign pundits who had a field day. BBC World TV put me on the air and asked “who among several Cuban-government officials might be a candidate for president?” Other foreign journalists called to ask who would take the place of General Raúl Castro. In Cuban government circles, as well as the general population and Cuba’s political dissidents, no one was speculating. Foreign journalists kept asking, what were the chances that top level government officials might take the place of General Raúl Castro? To these questions I responded with a question: **“Who is the Cuban government official willing to nominate someone “more charismatic and better qualified” than Raúl to run the affairs of Cuba?”** Who would take the risk? Of course, the National Assembly unanimously elected Raúl Castro to head Cuba’s government. Unanimous elections are a 50 year long Castro tradition.

There are many questions that linger and the answers will greatly determine the future governance of Cuba. Among them are:

What is the importance of Fidel’s announcement?

While Fidel Castro gave up his title, whether he will remain a controlling factor in the future of Cuba remains to be seen. That he will have a role was foreshadowed when Raúl, who has been acting as president for 19 months, formally requested the National Assembly to give him the authority to consult with his ailing brother on important matters. How do you weigh the significance of that request? **Does Raul believe he has to consult out of courtesy, habit and brotherly love, or some uncanny fear of responsibility and sinister retribution?**

Is Raúl Castro, who some foreign analysts have described as a reformer, “the anti-Fidel?”

Again, it remains to be seen whether he will some day initiate substantive changes. So far he has introduced no significant economic or political reforms. As the Washington Post editorialized: “Yes, any Cuban who can spare a year’s worth of his salary may now buy and activate a cell phone”. Yet there’s little indication that Mr. Castro intends even the sort of change that has transformed formerly communist countries such as China and Vietnam into more prosperous dictatorships, much less a political opening. Of course, General Raúl could awake one morning and decide to turn Cuba, which has for all

intents and purposes been run like a family fief, into a functioning democracy. However, to date, there has been no Gorbachev-style *glasnost* or *perestroika*.

Has any actual transition of power taken place?

Raúl's succession has been called a transition but there is scant evidence that any power has actually been transferred. Right now no one appears to be challenging the succession, but within Cuba there is widespread dissatisfaction, and that provides a foundation for later protests and change. The underlying issue is whether Raúl will allow Cuba to recover from its disastrous dalliance with communism or has the interest or power to reform Cuba's economy or re-establish political rights and the rule of law.

When Haiti's "Papa Doc" Duvalier died in 1971, he transferred power to his son "Baby Doc" Jean Claude Duvalier. Baby Doc wasn't driven out of office until 1986. By then, twenty eight years of Duvaliers had wreaked such havoc on Haiti's economic, political and legal institutions that the island has yet to recover.

North Korea's communist dictator, Kim Il-Sung, held office for 40 years, turning his country into a military dictatorship, isolating it from the rest of the world, and using the same communist model the Castro brothers have embraced to destroy the Cuban economy. When Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, power was transferred to his son Kim Jong-Il. By then, agriculture had collapsed and the enigmatic Kim Jong-Il presided over a succession of famines through the 1990s into the new century.

Even so, isn't it significant that for the first time since 1959, Fidel Castro is no longer the President of Cuba?

The premise of the question misstates Cuba's history. Fidel Castro's revolution dates its victory to 1959, but for the first seven months of that year Cuba's president was Manuel Urrutia. He was a judge who had courageously opposed General Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. **Castro picked Urrutia to be President, but when Urrutia began objecting that the democratic ideals promised by the Revolution were being betrayed, Fidel kicked him out of office and placed him under house arrest.** Disguised as a milkman, Urrutia escaped his home and sought political asylum in a foreign embassy.

Fidel Castro then picked Dr. Osvaldo Dorticós to become President. He served until 1976, and in 1983 Dorticos committed suicide. A title means little to Fidel Castro; **it is Fidel's iron fist, not the title, that determines who is running Cuba.** Now elderly and infirm, he might not have the strength to continue to deal with the day to day operations of the regime, but **the people, who have ruled at Fidel's side, from the very beginning of the revolution, remain in control.**

Isn't Fidel Castro's retirement significant in the Latin American context?

Yes, although Cuba's "out reach" to Latin America was curtailed by the loss of seven billion dollars in Soviet subsidies, along with the lack of hard currency due to the American embargo, **his influence remains a factor. It provides an ideological underpinning for leftist heads of state such as Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who parrots the anti-American "Fidelista" message.** While Chavez provides three to four billion dollars worth of free oil to prop up the Castro dictatorship, Cuba reciprocates by sending medical and secret service personnel to Venezuela and other Chavez friendly countries.

Has political repression in Cuba declined under General Raul Castro's rule?

No, the **Castro dynasty remains as cruel and repressive as it has been for years.** In December 2007, for example, Cuban police and government thugs gathered in front of a Catholic church in Santiago de Cuba where a small group of men, women and children were petitioning to hold a mass for Cuba's political prisoners. Police finally raided the church seizing the petitioners and took them and their children away. In mid April, 2008 ten women, members of the **Ladies in White**, a group of mothers, wives and daughters of political prisoners who had gathered at a Havana park were roughed up and detained. **It is a measure of the weakness of the regime that the peaceful gathering of ten women dressed in white triggered the mobilization of one hundred government thugs, police officers and security agents.**



Ladies in White being taken away by Cuban police. Source: Cubanet.

The International Committee of the Red Cross visits America's detainees at the U.S. Navy's facility in Guantanamo, Cuba. Has the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch been allowed to visit Cuba?

Amnesty International was allowed to visit Cuban prisoners only in 1988, but has since been barred from entering Cuba. Neither the Red Cross nor Human Rights Watch has ever been allowed to visit Castro's prisons. Some European human rights activists have been expelled from the island for meeting with relatives of Cuban prisoners of conscience.

What is the position of the European Union in regard to the Cuban situation?

Human Rights Watch, in its January 2008 Report said that the EU decided in 2006 and in 2007 to continue some of its sanctions on Havana because of Castro's detention and summary trials of 75 dissidents and activists in 2003. At the same time, the EU "offered to resume discussions with the Castro government, stipulating that if it were to accept the invitation, the Cuban government must be willing to discuss human rights, political prisoners and democracy." In response, the Cuban foreign ministry indicated that "Cuba would not participate in talks unless the sanctions were fully dropped."

Years earlier, Havana dropped its effort to join the Cotonou Agreement on tariffs through which France, Spain, England and other European countries assist developing countries. The Europeans had insisted that Cuba abide by the human rights and labor standards of the agreement. The European Union is scheduled to review its common position on Cuba this June.

Have there been any changes under General Raúl Castro regarding the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Cuban government?

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone visited Cuba in early 2008, but **relations between the church and the state remain anchored in the Office of Religions and Cults**, a department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba that is responsible for government relations with all Cuban churches. When John Paul II visited the island in 1998 he urged the government to discard this arrangement, but to this day **whenever a priest needs a permit for a procession, wants to travel abroad, needs to purchase paper or supplies or to make repairs to the church, the request must be channeled for approval through the Communist Party.** In spite of the Pope's pleas, Havana has not permitted the reopening of Catholic schools.

Besides Latin America, how has Havana acted in other parts of the world?

Havana has signed various agreements of cooperation with Teheran and continues to play a role in the anti-Israeli campaign at the United Nations and elsewhere. After Hillel Neuer, Executive Director of UN Watch, spoke to the United Nations Human Rights Council in opposition to a resolution condemning Israel for "grave violations" against Palestinian civilians but not mentioning Hamas, Islamic Jihad or other Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Cuban government called UN Watch "the antithesis of a non-governmental organization" and urged the Human Rights Council to lift its credentials.

Has Havana stopped supporting violent anti-American groups around the world?

No, Cuba continues to appear on the State Department's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. A Washington Times article on February 8, 2008 cited a statement by National Intelligence Director, Michael McConnell, saying **the influence of Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, has spilled into Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador where they are "pursuing agendas that undercut checks and balances of democratic governments."**

How many political prisoners are in Cuba?

Human rights advocates inside and outside Cuba estimate that there are about 300 political prisoners on the island. They include labor leaders, writers and journalists, teachers and librarians, lawyers, physicians and economists who have dared to challenge the regime in some way. Many are serving ten, fifteen, or twenty years sentences. If the number were to decline significantly while General Raúl Castro holds the reins, it will indicate that real change is taking place in Cuba.

**Frank Calzon is the Executive Director of 'The Center for a Free Cuba.'*

From the Menges Hemispheric Security Project, we look forward to hearing from you and with your authorization we would like to publish your thoughts in the next upcoming issue. If you would like to comment on this story or on previous articles, please send your thoughts to: themengesproject@centerforsecuritypolicy.org or themengesproject@gmail.com.

*Regards,
The Staff of "The Americas Report."*

News Stories –The following are a summary of several news stories found in different media outlets. To access the information, we have provided the hyperlink below each news story.

[US leaves Venezuela out of the list of countries that sponsor terrorism – El Universal.](#)

The US Government does not think that Venezuela is sponsoring terrorism for lack of evidence, said on Wednesday US State Department’s counter-terrorism head Dell Dailey. Dailey introduced on Wednesday the 2007 “Patterns of Global Terrorism” report, prepared annually by the US government as instructed by the Congress, DPA stated. Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria remained in the list. As it happened in 2006, Venezuela was included as a country does “does not cooperate fully” with the US counter-terrorism efforts. However, Dailey noted that the United States was "worried" about the ties between the Venezuelan Government and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). “We are watching over it. As soon as we see enough indications, we will study it. But, for the time being, we do not see such indications,” the official added.

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/30/en_pol_art_us-leaves-venezuela_30A1548693.shtml

[Argentinian economy minister resigns – CNN.](#)

Argentina’s economy minister resigned last week in the wake of a crippling farmers’ strike that emptied store shelves and cut exports, the country’s news agency reported. Martin Lousteau’s departure comes 4½ months into the administration of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. He is the first senior member of the new president’s team to step down. Officials didn’t disclose a reason for Lousteau’s resignation. Farmers in Argentina went on strike last month to protest a 44 percent export tax on products such as soybeans and sunflowers. They suspended the strike earlier this month after three weeks. During the nationwide protest at hundreds of locations, the farmers and their supporters blocked more than 400 roads. They were demanding the government repeal the tax, which was implemented March 11. The bitter lockout left grocery shelves empty and led to major friction between the new government and the country’s large agricultural sector. Carlos Fernandez was named Argentina’s economy minister to replace Martin Lousteau.



Economy minister Martin Lousteau, resigns. Source: Correo, Peru.

http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/04/25/argentina.resignation/index.html?eref=edition_americas

[Smoke chokes Argentina’s capital – CNN.](#)

Smoke blanketed the Argentine capital Friday as brush fires apparently set deliberately consumed thousands of acres in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos. The smoke, from about 300 fires, is blamed for at least two fatal traffic accidents that left eight people dead. Sections of major highways and the Buenos Aires port, among the busiest in the world, were closed. Incoming flights to the city’s domestic airport, Jorge Newbery Airpark, have been diverted. The Argentine government has blamed farmers looking to clear their land for crops and grazing for the fires, which are estimated to cover 173,000 acres (70,000 hectares).

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/04/18/argentina.fires/index.html>

[Argentina's country risk reaches highest since June 2005 – Merco Press.](#)

Argentina's country risk according to JP Morgan signaled last Friday a new high, matching the June 2005 mark, following Standard & Poor's negative rating of Argentina's foreign debt. The EMBI rate for Argentina which measures the additional interest rate on local bonds over the US Treasury benchmark jumped last Friday to 603 units. In June 2005 the EMBI was normalized in Argentina following the massive restructuring of its 2001/02 defaulted debt. On Thursday President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner sacked her Economy minister Martin Lousteau following his proposal for a plan to cool the Argentine economy and help contain inflation, particularly consumer prices. S&P said it had downgraded Argentine bonds' risk rate precisely because the Kirchner administration refuses point blank to apply any cooling policies and insists that inflation is under control. In spite of the fact that the overall consensus is that inflation contrary to the "official" statistics of just below two digits is in the range of 18 to 24%. <http://www.mercopress.com/vernoticia.do?id=13270&formato=HTML>

Excellent article: [Friends of Terror in Peru. By Mary Anastasia O'Grady – The Wall Street Journal.](#)

Thursday's vote by the European Parliament to take the Peruvian guerrilla group known as the Tupac Amaru (aka MRTA) off its terrorist list has Peru in an uproar. For good reason: The MRTA is notorious for kidnapping, torturing and murdering civilians to advance its political agenda. More recently, Peruvian officials have linked it to Hugo Chávez's "Bolivarian Movement," which seeks to destabilize democracies in Latin America, and to the Colombian rebel group FARC. **The Europeans' decision is maddening. But it is also instructive, in that it shows how terrorists can advance their cause with the help of nongovernmental organizations.** Under such headings as "human-rights" advocacy, NGOs that share the ideology of the far left toil away daily in Peru, trying to legitimize their buddies who, behind the scenes, continue their "armed struggle." The kicker is that **these NGOs are often funded by foreign governments and philanthropists.** Mr. Chávez's Bolivarian Movement sits on a three-legged stool. Two of the legs are legal, the third is not. The first leg is official Venezuelan "diplomacy." **Discounted oil** shipments have bought the allegiance of 19 countries in the region. Other ploys, such as the purchase of Argentine debt and aid for Ecuadorian energy projects, are likewise designed to create dependence and establish Venezuelan dominance. The second leg of the stool is the effort to **establish ideological control within unions and grassroots organizations.** These organizations or NGO's have created a series of nonprofit "associations," which operate internally like political parties. Openly, the associations administer eye clinics, literacy programs and health centers manned by Cuban doctors. The third, illegal leg of the stool is the most dangerous. Two groups: the "Continental Bolivarian Coordinator" and the "Bolivarian Congress of the People" which are recruiting and using the most extreme elements of the country: anarchists, terrorists and the radical left, to produce the necessary "chaos" to create the impression that democracy is not working. Once this is accomplished, the grassroots organizations, nurtured by the NGO's, are standing by, ready to bring the extremists to power through the ballot box. The strategy was used in Bolivia to bring down the Sánchez de Lozada government in 2003 and bring Chávez puppet Evo Morales to power. **The Peruvian "human-rights" group Aprodeh labored in Europe to get the MRTA off the terrorist list there, even though Peru still considers it a grave threat to its security.** In 2007, according to government records, Aprodeh received funding from Oxfam America, **George Soros's** Open Society, the John Merck Foundation, the city of Barcelona, the Dutch embassy and a U.S. government agency called the Inter-American Foundation, among others. On Friday, the Peruvian government

asked Aprodeh to explain how its NGO status allows it to intervene on behalf of terrorists, as it did in the European Parliament.



George Soros. Source: El Economista.

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120934263440048541.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

Peru's congress rejects European Parliament's MRTA terrorist group decision – LIP.

After the European Parliament did not list the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) as a terrorist organization, Congressional representatives in Peru immediately convened and voted on a resolution to reaffirm that the MRTA was indeed an insurgent group. All the members of congress present voted in favor of classifying the organization as a terrorist group; there were no votes against. "With over 80 votes, congress has established that the MRTA is a terrorist group; this act is of huge importance and has great democratic value because all of the political parties have drawn a clear line in deciding that this group has committed crimes against humanity," said Luis Gonzales Posada, the head of congress. At the same meeting, members of congress passed a resolution in which legislators rejected the decision made by the European Parliament to omit the group from its list of terrorist organizations. The motion serves two purposes: the first is to protest the decision made by the European Parliament and the second is to exhort the Parliament to evaluate the MRTA's behavior and consider them terrorists. It was reported that Peru's congressional representatives would begin a campaign to inform Parliament members on the crimes committed by the MRTA. The matter is to be discussed further during the upcoming EU-LAC summit.

<http://www.livinginperu.com/news-6261-politics-perus-congress-rejects-european-parliaments-mrta-terrorist-group-decision>

France pushes for FARC hostage release – Clarin.

The French Foreign Minister has traveled to Latin America to renew efforts to release high-profile hostages held by the Colombia's FARC. France wants Colombia allow the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to restart his mediation and help him arrange prisoner swap, hoping that this could bode for the release of the French-Colombian hostage Ingrid Betancourt. Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe, however, is against any exchange of hostages for imprisoned rebels. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner met for 45 minutes late Monday with Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe and his top advisors, but emerged from the meeting tight-lipped. Uribe said his government would accept only the Catholic Church or three European countries -- France, Spain and Switzerland -- as mediators for the hostage exchange. FARC has rejected both. It considers the church biased and believes the Europeans may have been the source of information that led Colombia to locate and bomb a FARC camp on March 1, killing their second-in-command. Kouchner travels Tuesday to Ecuador to meet President Rafael Correa in Quito, then on to Caracas.



French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. Source: Clarin, Argentina.

<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/04/30/um/m-01662426.htm>

Cuba to Raise Pension Payments, Some Government Worker Salaries – VOA News.

Cuba's government says it will raise pension payments to retirees and increase the salaries of some government workers. Sunday's announcement says the pay hikes will target those workers who earn the least amount of money. A statement from the government says the increases will apply to pensioners and some employees who work in the Cuban court system. It says other workers will have to wait for pay increases because the country "doesn't have the necessary resources at the moment." The move comes after much speculation that pay hikes were coming. New Cuban President Raul Castro has spoken publicly about making changes to the government's salary structure. Since taking office, Mr. Castro has instituted a series of reforms, among them authorizing Cubans to buy mobile phones and computers.

<http://www.voanews.com/english/Cuba-to-Raise-Pension-Payments-Some-Government-Worker-Salaries.cfm>

Major blackout hits most regions in Venezuela – El Universal.

Minister of the Interior and Justice Ramón Rodríguez Chacín Tuesday informed that a major blackout hitting most of Venezuela at 3:59 pm (local time) was the result of a power outage in Guri dam, in southern Bolívar state, which caused a 800-KW high tension line to overheat. "Because of such overheating, another high-tension line that was operating had to be brought out of service, in order to make the necessary repairs. When the second high-tension line was brought out of service, a blackout occurred in 13 states nationwide. Power supply has been resumed progressively." The states most seriously hit were central Carabobo state, northwestern Zulia state, northern Miranda state, north central Capital District, north central coastal Vargas state, eastern Nueva Esparta state, eastern Sucre state, central Aragua state, western central Yaracuy state, northwestern Lara state, southwestern Mérida state, southern central Portuguesa state and y southwestern Apure state. According to Rodríguez Chacín, no serious emergencies emerged amidst the blackout in hospitals and the Caracas subway other than power outage. In a hospital in Coche, southwest Caracas, the standby powerhouse would not operate, "but an auxiliary power plant was installed already to face any problems." Power supply is expected to be restored fully Tuesday night. "Some substations are likely to take two hours until power fully restores." He asked Venezuelans to be patient, as the blackout was caused by "mechanical problems" that "will be solved soon." **Despite Rodríguez Chacín's statements, the Vice-Ministry of Energy published a press release claiming that the blackout was the result of a forest fire in central Guárico state.**

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/30/en_pol_art_major-blackout-hits_30A1547039.shtml

Venezuela: Chávez threatens to expropriate Sidor – *El Universal*.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez threatened to initial an expropriation decree of Orinoco steelmaker Sidor if a “fair settlement” on the company’s value was not agreed by next Tuesday. This move would return the company to the state’s hands. In his weekly TV and radio program *Aló Presidente*, he said, “Do they consider themselves the owners of that company? Do they take us for fools? We are not. According to them, Sidor valuation is at USD 4 billion. I just laughed at that. I will not pay that amount because that company is not worth it. Sidor used to be larger before.” In Chuao, central Aragua State, the Venezuelan president instructed Vice-president Ramón Carrizalez to meet with Minister of Basic Industries and Mining (Mibam) Rodolfo Sanz and Sidor representatives to “establish a fair cost for the company. However, we are not going to pay the amount proposed by them.” Chávez stated, “If no fair settlement is reached regarding this issue by next Tuesday, I will sign a nationalization decree and order the company's takeover.” Furthermore, he said that “false accountancy books and taxes, as well as environmental and labor liabilities are surfacing. If they are not serious, I will expropriate the company. Stop playing the fool!”

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/28/en_eco_art_chavez-threatens-to_28A1542559.shtml

Venezuelan Congress declares Sidor a public utility – *El Universal*.

While the Venezuelan government was negotiating with Argentinean steelmaker Ternium Sidor to set the sum it would pay to nationalize the company, the National Assembly moved to declare the steelmaker a public utility. In a decree reviewed by the Venezuelan Parliament on Tuesday, steelmaker Siderúrgica del Orinoco (Sidor) “was declared a social interest public utility. This company is oriented to strengthen the strategic national industrial sector transforming iron into different steel products such as plates, blocks, bars, flat plates, induction coils, wire rods, reinforcing bars, among others. It also deals with distribution and marketing, as well as the creation and protection of jobs.” The move also included declaring Sidor shares as public utility. The lawmakers loyal to President Hugo Chávez stated that their move was also aimed at advocating the workers', retired people's, and pensioners' rights.

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/30/en_eco_art_venezuelan-congress_30A1547963.shtml

Newborn 2D Movement wants referendum results to be observed – *El Universal*.

A group of renowned people at odds with the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez organized a political movement in order to enforce the outcome of a constitutional referendum held last December 2nd. Miguel Henrique Otero, Pablo Medina, Elías Pino Iturrieta, Simón Alberto Consalvi, Froilán Barrios, Ana Julia Jatar, Jose Rafael Revenga, Perkis Roche, Gustavo Sosa, Antonio Ecarre, Pedro León Zapata and Carlota Sosa, among others, rallied at the Venezuelan Engineers Association to submit their proposal. Otero read out the manifesto where they ask President Chávez to retake the constitutional way and abide by the 1999 Constitution and the law. “We ask for restoration of lawfulness; we urge both political parties and the society to embark upon this initiative.”

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/29/en_pol_art_newborn-2d-movement_29A1546207.shtml

Pdvsa is not transparent according to report – *El Universal*.

All of oil and gas Latin American companies, except for Venezuela, are models of transparency in the information released on their revenues, according to the report Promoting Revenue Transparency, prepared by Transparency International. “The message from Latin America is a positive one. Its companies lead transparency,” Juanita Olaya, the author of the report, told Efe on Monday. Olaya said that the governments in the region do not restrict the information that companies may release, but said that Venezuela is the exception to the rule. According to the amount of information published by 42 companies from different countries throughout the world, particularly in terms of the payments made to the state for right of use, the report groups them in three categories: high, middle and low. Only one third of the

companies are within the “High” category, including Brazilian Petrobrás and Mexican Pemex. On the contrary, state-run oil holding Petróleos de Venezuela (Pdvsa) is in the “Low” category. “In the case of Pdvsa there is still a long way to go. It would have to improve the information published on payment of rights,” said Olaya.

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/28/en_eco_art_pdvsa-is-not-transpa_28A1543041.shtml

Belarus to help build socialist towns in Venezuela – *El Universal*.

The Venezuelan Ministry of Housing plans to build socialist cities this year. Progress in this field is expected to be made under international agreements. Minister of Housing Edith Gómez pointed out that the first phase of a program to build socialist cities is slated to start under an agreement with Belarus. She added that a number of Ministry specialists would travel to Belarus to learn about the construction of such cities. The creation of socialist cities has been planned under social welfare program Misión Villanueva, which is focused on developing town-building projects. Under Misión Villanueva, socialist towns are intended “to promote the endogenous potential and prioritize social economy.” Therefore, small- and medium-size businesses, cooperatives, family businesses, micro-businesses, and any other form of communitarian associations have to be promoted.

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/28/en_eco_art_belarus-to-help-buil_28A1542803.shtml

Venezuela’s inflation takes off – *El Universal*.

The cost of food in Caracas increased dramatically to 42.6 percent from March 2007 to March 2008. This was the highest variation in the last eleven years. In February 2003, the Venezuelan government controlled the price of a wide range of food products. This measure led to a food shortage as businesspeople opted to sell non-regulated goods or reduce their production. In view of the short supply of staples, the Venezuelan government had no choice but re-pricing in the first quarter of this current year. This move had a severe impact on low-income families that use more than half of their salaries to buying food.

http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/04/29/en_eco_art_venezuelas-inflatio_29A1546201.shtml

Colombia: most wanted “drug lord” killed – *El Diario Exterior*.

A man accused of being one of Colombia’s biggest drug bosses was killed in a shootout with police. Miguel Angel Mejia Munera, who was gunned down Tuesday, was not only one of Colombia's most wanted men, but the United States also had promised a 5-million-dollar reward for the capture of the former paramilitary member who was accused of trafficking cocaine from Colombia into the United States via Mexico. Authorities were continuing their search for Mejia Munera’s brother Victor Manuel, also on drug-trafficking charges, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said Tuesday. Together, the siblings were known in trafficking circles as “The Twins.”

<http://www.eldiarioexterior.com/noticia.asp?idarticulo=20157>

Brazil: Colombia’s FARC will be met with bullets – *The Miami Herald*.

Brazil’s defense minister says that if Colombian rebels enter his country’s territory they’ll “be met with bullets.” Minister Nelson Jobim made the comment Monday in Colombia, where he met with foreign and defense ministers and President Alvaro Uribe. The two nations share a 1,022 mile border. Colombia is in a diplomatic row with Ecuador over that country's alleged harboring of Colombian rebels. It claims rebels fired mortars from Ecuador into Colombia on Friday, wounding one soldier. Ecuador denies the claims. Jobim has said there is no evidence the FARC has a presence on the Brazilian side of the border with Colombia.

<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/americas/story/513038.html>

Thousands Protest Mexico Energy Reform Plan – *VOA News*.

Thousands of Mexicans took to the streets of Mexico City to protest an energy reform proposal that would allow more private investment in the country's oil industry. Those taking part in Sunday's protest included former presidential candidate **Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador**, who was quoted by the French news agency AFP as saying the plan by President Felipe Calderon violates "the spirit and letter" of Mexico's constitution. Earlier this month, lawmakers allied with Lopez Obrador camped out in the legislative chambers in an effort to delay approval of the legislation. The bill would give state-owned oil company Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex) more flexibility to hire private companies to help with refining, deep water exploration and production. Opponents say opening the industry to private investment would threaten Mexico's sovereignty. Mexico's constitution has severely restricted private investment in energy since 1938. Mexico is a major supplier to the United States.



Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Source: Vivir Latino.

<http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-04-28-voa6.cfm>

Laptop reveals ties to leading member of National Assembly in Ecuador – *Miami Herald*.

A leading member of Ecuador's constitutional assembly, charged with reshaping that country's political landscape, may have been a longtime supporter of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. **María Augusta Calle** -- also the head of Venezuela's Telesur TV network in Ecuador and a supporter of President Hugo Chávez -- let the rebels use her bank account for at least one transaction and helped promote their ideas through another news agency she directs, the Colombian official said. In one of the newly disclosed e-mails, "Alicia" talks about her ties to the Venezuelan embassy in Quito. She says she is hopeful she will soon get a job with the Venezuelans and offers to broker communications between the rebels and the embassy. **Calle -- whose résumé says is a sociologist and journalist -- was appointed head of the Ecuadorian division of the Chávez-supported Telesur network sometime in 2007.** In the last month, the Ecuadorian press has mentioned Calle, elected to the Constitutional Assembly in 2007, as an alleged FARC supporter. At the end of March, Newsmagazine Vistazo published photos of Calle with FARC leader Rodrigo Granda; Reyes' daughter, Lidia Devia; and Nubia Calderón, alias "Esperanza," the FARC's representative in Ecuador.



María Augusta Calle. Source: The Miami Herald.

<http://www.miamiherald.com/457/story/511273.html>

Bolivia: Crisis worsens – *El Nuevo Herald*.

A crisis that threatens to split Bolivia has worsened, with the government freezing the accounts of the eastern province of Santa Cruz just days before the territory holds a referendum on whether to declare autonomy. The move, announced by Economy Minister Luis Alberto Arce, deepens tensions between Santa Cruz's opposition governor and the leftwing administration of President Evo Morales. Morales has said he views the province's plans for the May 4 referendum as an illegal separatist bid, and has vowed to ignore any autonomy declaration. But three more low-lying provinces in the landlocked South American nation (made up of nine provinces in total), have said they, too, will follow suit with their own pushes for autonomy. **The four autonomy-seeking territories account for 65 percent of the country's gross domestic product.** The crisis was triggered by Morales's plans to overhaul Bolivia's constitution to redistribute much of the wealth of the eastern provinces to the poorer Andean highlands.

<http://www.elnuevoherald.com/opinion/story/198304.html>

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Menges Hemispheric Project • Email: mengesproject@centerforsecuritypolicy.org. • Direct: 914-325-9504. 1901 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. Suite 201. Washington, D.C. 20006 • (202) 835-9077 • Fax (202) 835-9066 www.CenterforSecurityPolicy.org