



BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

Bolivia Information Forum Bulletin

Special Edition, September 2008, No. 2

Dialogue follows Pando violence

Pre-accord involves political truce

The announcement of a 'pre-accord' between the government and opposition prefects in eastern Bolivia raises hopes that the damaging political violence perpetrated by the latter in recent weeks will be called off – at least for the time being. Talks are due to get underway on September 18, in the city of Cochabamba under the auspices of the UNASUR (the grouping of South American presidents), the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations, the European Union and the Bolivian Catholic Church. The 'pre-accord' represents a tentative convergence on key issues in dispute.

It followed the signing of a historic declaration on September 15 by almost all South American presidents that expresses full support for Bolivia's democratically-elected government in its dealings with those seeking to destabilise the country in recent weeks. The presidents thus distanced themselves from the United States, whose ambassador was expelled from Bolivia because of his alleged involvement in support of those destabilising the democratic government. The UNASUR grouping also condemned the massacre of peasants that took place on September 11 in the department of Pando. It offered to send an investigative team to report on exactly what happened. Since then, the prefect of Pando, Leopoldo Fernández, has been arrested.

The massacre in Pando

Some thirty to forty people were seen swimming across the river when bursts of machine gun fire were heard, with bullets spraying the shallow waves. Men and women alike caught up in the ambushes in Pando talk of people being run down and killed like dogs. The well-known journalist, Amalia Pando, described it as like taking pot shots at ducks in a fairground booth.

Peasant men and women were travelling to Cobija, the capital of Pando, on September 11 to take part in an assembly to protest against the takeover of state institutions by those linked to the elite civic committee. They came on foot and packed into lorries from several small towns, such as Filadelfia, Puerto Rico (ironically a prison encampment for many trade union leaders in the past) and Porvenir. Ambushes were laid in different places, with the road partly dug up. The police tried to stop their advance. Finally, vehicles from the prefects'

office and the local road works board arrived, and paramilitary units opened fire on the marchers.

According to the initial tally, 16 people were killed, but over a hundred people are still unaccounted for. Many escaped into the forest, and others into the river. Witnesses describe how bodies were thrown into the river, including children. Three of the dead were students from La Paz attending a teachers' training college in Puerto Rico. They were hunted down because of their skin colour and obvious highland origins. Together with the denigrating racist attacks on peasants in Sucre last May, this is one of the most shameful moments in recent Bolivian history.

When 67% is not enough ...

Following the holding of the recall referendum, in which President Evo Morales achieved 67.41% of the vote and prefects of the eastern lowlands were also reaffirmed in their posts, leaders of the civic committees and prefects of these regions launched an open offensive against the national government. Measures quickly escalated from a one-day stoppage and sporadic roadblocks in the Chaco to the violent occupation and looting of state offices, the organisation of roadblocks across the eastern departments, the takeover of oil and gas installations and airports, and setting one oil well on fire. However, the violent rhetoric and racist behaviour that have accompanied these actions are perhaps the most worrying aspect, obviously carried out to contribute to a climate of fear.

The military moves in

The response of the armed forces to these moves was one of restraint, focusing on the defence of oil and gas installations. However on September 12, the day after the massacre, Evo Morales imposed a state of siege on the department of Pando and dispatched a military force to re-establish order. This met with some resistance when it took over the airport. Acting under government orders to avoid civilian casualties, the army proceeded to take over the town of Cobija. They allowed a march by people carrying white flags to take place, but also moved in on the houses of some of the local ringleaders. On September 16, they arrested Leopoldo Fernández, the prefect of the department, who is widely thought to have been behind the massacre.

The army also reinforced its presence in Samaipata, in Santa Cruz, on September 13, an important oil pumping station feeding the western highlands. It appears they are waiting to take over other oil and gas installations in the Chaco and eastern lowlands.

Expulsion of US envoy

President Morales declared the US ambassador, Phillip Goldberg, persona non grata on September 10 for his role in aiding and abetting opposition prefects. Goldberg left Bolivia on September 14, saying that this was a grave error. The following day, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez did likewise to the US ambassador in Caracas in solidarity with the Bolivian position. In the same vein, President Zelaya of Honduras refused to receive the credentials of the new US ambassador in Tegucigalpa.

UNASUR declaration

Most important, however, and possibly groundbreaking in terms of South American integration, was the UNASUR meeting in Santiago on September 15, bringing together the presidents of all the main countries, except Peru. The 9 presidents and other political representatives expressed their "fullest and decided support for the constitutional government of President Morales, whose mandate was ratified by a wide margin in the recent referendum." They rejected any attempt at a civil coup, the rupture of institutional order, or any move to subvert the territorial integrity of Bolivia. They also condemned the attacks on government buildings and the police and army by groups seeking to destabilise democracy in Bolivia. They called for the government buildings to be returned as a condition for dialogue to take place. They condemned the massacre which took place in Pando, and decided to set up a commission to help Bolivia investigate what happened.

Process of Dialogue

On September 11, Mario Cossío, the prefect of the southern department of Tarija, indicated his willingness to talk to members of the central government. How much this was a result of the levels of violence in Tarija or whether it responded more to a master plan shared with the other prefects is still not clear. A first round of talks was held on the evening of Friday 12, after which Cossío travelled to Santa Cruz to meet with the prefects of Santa Cruz and Beni. He returned to La Paz for the next round of talks on Monday September 15. On Tuesday 16, it appeared that the process of dialogue might fail. Though the government negotiators, led by Vice-president Alvaro García Linera, signed the agreement, the prefects - on the pretext of the state of siege in Pando and the detention of Fernández - said they would not sign. However, this it seems was bravado; later that day the prefects of Tarija and Santa Cruz signed the 'pre-accord' and pledged to attend the Cochabamba talks.

The initial agreement signed lays down that the full process of dialogue will start on September 18 in Cochabamba. The issues to be discussed include areas of taxation and royalties (the direct tax on oil and gas in particular), autonomies and the proposed new

constitution, and elections to national posts that need approval in Congress. As a set of pre-conditions, it requires public offices to be handed back, roadblocks to be lifted and violence to be ended. The government will delay presenting the proposal to Congress for the holding of the referendum on the new constitution for one month. The situation in Pando is to be clarified with the help of international and national organisations, and a congressional committee. The agreement also stipulates that there will be no judicial action taken against those departmental authorities and leaders who acted in pursuit of departmental demands, and that adverse publicity against them would stop. Cossío also asked for the state of siege in Pando to be lifted.

Mobilisation by social movements

Different social movements have been actively involved in support of the government. Cooperative miners, coca producers from the Chapare, peasant and indigenous organisations all agreed that they had to mobilise to defend the government and force the opposition to stand down. CONALCAM, the political coordinating group which brings together the social movements that back the government, called for the city of Santa Cruz to be encircled. Their members are still poised to move in on the city in order to force the prefect, Rubén Costas and the civic committee, the Comité Pro Santa Cruz - the mainspring of opposition to Morales - to stand down.

The elite agenda

The Comité Pro Santa Cruz represents elite interests in Bolivia's economically most powerful department. Powerful landowners and agroindustrialists are particularly well represented in this and other civic committees. These are trying to channel a real sense of grievance among people from the lowland departments against central government. This has a long history. Morales has called the campaign of violence unleashed by the civic committees as an attempt at a "coup" in the sense that they wish to seize power by violent means. This should not be confused with a more 'classic' military coup d'état.

This small elite has been trying to prevent at all costs that the benefits it has received from the state in the past - land, public office, privilege and power - be wrested from it. To this end, it is keen to see the back of the Morales government and, in particular, to prevent the final approval of the new constitution.

What may happen next...

It is difficult to foresee how the Cochabamba talks will progress. In spite of the international pressure to strike a deal, this will not be a meeting of minds. For the *cruceño* business elite, an immediate issue is what happens to Expocruz, an annual business fair in Santa Cruz, a key date in the commercial calendar. It is due to take place as of September 22. However, with some international flights suspended until next week, it is unlikely that it will attract the interest it normally does. Still, for the civic authorities in Santa Cruz, it is important that the fair takes place. After it has finished, it is quite likely that the campaign of direct action against the government will be resumed.