



# BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

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## Disturbances in the east: US Ambassador expelled

A major diplomatic rift has opened up between Bolivia and the US which has culminated in the expulsion of US Ambassador, Philip Goldberg. President Evo Morales declared on Wednesday 10 September Goldberg to be “persona non grata”, and ordered that he leave the country immediately. The move comes in the wake of escalating violence in the eastern departments of Bolivia and the announcement by the government that suspected sabotage of a gas pipeline in Tarija had reduced gas exports to Brazil.

The government has long held suspicions about the activities of Goldberg, previously head of mission in Pristina, Kosovo, during its secession from the Yugoslav Federation. It has been critical of USAID’s funding of departmental prefectures in eastern Bolivia. Ambassador Goldberg recently visited the prefect of Santa Cruz, Rubén Costas, who now has declared himself ‘governor’ of an autonomous administration in the department. A number of US congressmen also recently visited Santa Cruz. In announcing Goldberg’s expulsion, Morales accused him of “conspiring against democracy” and seeking to divide the country.

### Magnanimous in victory

The recall referendum of August 10 was a major victory for Evo Morales. He was ratified as president with 67.41% of the vote, and in 95 out of 112 provinces nationwide. Voters therefore expressed confidence in the process of change he is leading. Only in Santa Cruz (59.25%), Beni (56.28%) and (marginally) in Tarija (50.17%) did the majority of voters opt to revoke him. Evo managed to increase his percentage of the vote in all departments (except Chuquisaca), compared to the 2005 election results.

Following the referendum result, Morales was magnanimous in victory, stressing his concern to build bridges with the opposition and calling for dialogue. By contrast, Rubén Costas, re-elected as prefect of Santa Cruz with a slightly smaller percentage than Morales (66.43%), resorted to intransigent and inflammatory language and refused to engage in dialogue with the government. His message was echoed by other prefects of the *media luna*.

### New Offensive

Before the final votes were in, the opposition staged a series of actions, a one-day stoppage and some roadblocks in parts of the *media luna*, particularly those near to oil and gas transport stations. The ostensible reason for these actions was to build up pressure on the government to restore the amounts taken from the departmental share of the direct oil and gas tax (IDH) to fund the Renta Dignidad, a universal pension scheme for the over-60s. The prefects claim that this is a deliberate ploy to deprive them of cash. An earlier hunger strike for the same purpose had been suspended on referendum day.

Anti-government protests began to escalate over the next weeks, with some local branches of state offices being forcibly occupied in Beni, Tarija and Santa Cruz. Alejandro Colanzi, a member of the opposition party Unidad Nacional, who belongs to the Santa Cruz political grouping Todos Somos Santa Cruz, had his house attacked with petrol bombs. Campesino leaders in Trinidad and Santa Cruz were beaten up. A group took over the airport in the northern town of Cobija (the capital of Pando) and sacked the contents of a small plane brought in by the military. Some oil and gas installations were partially cut off by roadblocks.

However, on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> the violence reached new levels. Crowds of youths (Unión Juvenil Cruceñista and university students among them) stormed government offices in Santa Cruz, including the land reform office, the tax office, as well as the renationalised telephone company, ENTEL. They attacked the state TV studios (Channel 7), and the offices of CEJIS, an NGO which provides legal advice and promotes indigenous rights. This was no peaceful takeover of state offices, but an act of vandalism. People were filmed carrying off booty from the offices that had been occupied. Access to the Santa Cruz airport was blocked, and in the Beni several airports were occupied.

Much has been made in the international press of the difficulties facing the press from government supporters (although this seems to have had no influence on their generally anti-government editorial stance), but less attention has been given to the destruction of the of-

fices and equipment belonging to Channel 7, the forced closure of pro-government Radio Patria Nueva and the threats that forced ERBOL, a national radio network, to shut down transmissions from Cobija, let alone the physical violence that reporters and cameramen of these agencies have been facing.

More poignant however was the way that fresh-faced young military conscripts from the highlands left to guard the telephone company, land reform and tax offices, were later pulled out and beaten with baseball bats. Interviewed on television, General Marco Antonio Bracamontes, head of the army 8<sup>th</sup> Division in Santa Cruz, was obviously angry at the treatment his men had received. He denounced how youths had not just occupied state offices but proceeded to destroy them. In spite of the attacks against his men, he said he was pleased his soldiers had not responded and that no-one had been killed. The military has been mobilised to protect oil and gas installations in particular.

As this day of violence drew to a close, Costas congratulated people for their fight against what he called state terrorism and centralism. He called for civil disobedience, a call previously made by the prefect of the Beni. He put the blame for events on central government, criticising it for its lack of sensitivity in not returning the IDH revenue to departmental governments.

#### Pretexts

Departmental governments are currently receiving more money than ever before from the central coffers, given the increase in tax revenue from gas. This suggests that the real issue has little to do with being starved of finance. Rather it is a pretext to whip up anti-government sentiment. Whilst it is true that many in the *media luna* departments do see excessive centralism as a blight on their development, this has been used by the right-wing opposition to mobilise people.

Thwarted at every step by the right and civic committees of the eastern lowlands, the main issue is the approval of a new constitution, particularly as this relates to land distribution. A referendum, which should take place over coming months to approve the new constitution, involves a question about the maximum size of large landholdings: whether these should be limited to a maximum of 5,000 or 10,000 hectares (1 hectare = 2.47 acres). Since there are some 35 very powerful families who have a great deal more than this in land, it is these that are spearheading resistance to the Morales government. Branko Marinkovic, president of Santa Cruz's civic committee, is one such landowner, as are several families that exercise control over much of the media.

After a weekend of relative calm, Marinkovic returned to Santa Cruz from a visit to the United States precisely on Tuesday September 9, a coincidence too far for many observers of the scene in Santa Cruz. This followed the visit to Costas by four US Congressmen (who entered his office through the garage so as not to be spotted) just after the recall referendum, and the sur-reptitious visit the US ambassador paid to Costas at the end of last month. These events are seen as the catalyst for the expulsion of Ambassador Goldberg.

Politicians of the *media luna* thus seem to be showing their true colours. Santos Ramírez, president of YPFB, the national oil and gas company, has claimed that the mask has been dropped. Marinkovic has come out openly in favour of a federal system of government, rather than the formula of autonomy that has been the rallying cry so far. But beyond the 'civil disobedience' call of the Santa Cruz and Beni prefects, the real threat is now one of full-scale secession. What stands in the way of this is the lack of widespread support from the population, as well as the unlikelihood of this being recognised by any foreign country.

#### Countervailing pressure

Towards the end of August, the government met with social organisation representatives in Cochabamba to gauge their opinion about how to proceed. With a mandate of 67% in favour of Morales, people felt it was high time to push ahead with calling a referendum to approve the new constitution. However, an attempt by Morales to do this by decree was questioned by the National Electoral Court, which claimed that such a move had to be ratified first by Congress. The date of the referendum has now been pushed back to January.

CONALCAM, the grouping of social organisations that support the MAS government, met recently in Santa Cruz and decided that it would pursue two lines of action. First, there would be a march to La Paz to put pressure on Congress to approve the call for a referendum. Second, there would be a mobilisation of social movements to encircle the city of Santa Cruz, to put pressure on their leaders to negotiate. This would be timed to take place at the same time as an international fair, Expocruz, due to open its doors next week. The fair is a key point on the business calendar for Santa Cruz traders. Peasants from San Julián were already beginning to mobilise to this end on September 10.

The government's response to the wave of provocative road blocks and occupations of government offices has been to avoid deploying the military or imposing a state of siege. The army and police have been held in check in spite of the insults they have received. They are determined to avoid creating 'martyrs' for the right. This lenient response has been criticised, though. Most people are horrified by the scenes they see on the television.

#### Shot in the feet?

It may be the case that the leaders of the lowlands are shooting themselves in the foot. Shortages of food and fuel supplies are in evidence in some of the main lowland urban centres, where supplies have been held up by road blocks. People are suffering from having no gas to cook with, particularly in Tarija where most of Bolivia's gas originates, and producers have no diesel to run their agricultural machinery. Attacks on public buildings are applauded only by a small minority, anxious to demonstrate their new-found autonomy by ransacking their contents. Occupying airports alienates the travelling public and blacklists the airport internationally, while disturbances of this sort do little to encourage foreign investors to sink their money into Santa Cruz. Whether Expocruz happens or not, it is not 'business as usual' in Santa Cruz.