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Farc attack damages Santos and guerrillas

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos is resisting intense pressure to suspend the peace process with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc). Renewing aerial bombing was his immediate response to the killing of 11 soldiers in a military patrol by Farc guerrillas on 14 April but as details of the savagery of the attack which violated the terms of the indefinite unilateral ceasefire declared by the Farc last December have come to light public indignation has mounted and Santos was compelled to deliver a strong message demanding that the Farc pick up the pace of negotiations and show a genuine commitment to peace. The Farc can risk pushing Santos but if the public attitude hardens against a peace deal then whatever is agreed in Cuba will be academic when it comes to an eventual referendum on the accord.

Nearly 4,000 soldiers have died in the last 10 years of Colombia's armed conflict but few if any of those deaths have received such widespread and virulent condemnation as that of the 11 soldiers (a further 20 were injured) who were "ambushed", according to the armed forces, with grenades, explosives and firearms while sleeping in a gym in the municipality of Buenos Aires in the south-western department of Cauca. President Santos attended one of the funerals in Bogotá, where he even acted as a pallbearer, but he has been jeered at every public event he has attended over the course of the last week.

Santos's most vociferous critic, Senator (and former president [2002-2010]) Álvaro Uribe of the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD), has capitalised on the public uproar. The father of one of the fallen soldiers invited Uribe to his son's funeral in El Carmen de Bolívar in the northern department of Bolívar; Uribe cancelled a trip to Brazil to attend and was photographed embracing the distraught father. A mother of one of the dead soldiers said that when he had spoken to her days earlier he had said they had been ordered not to fire on the guerrillas. Speaking after visiting one of the wounded soldiers in a clinic in Cali, the capital of the department of Valle del Cauca where Santos had been booed on a visit days earlier, Uribe said that the peace talks should be suspended until the Farc "ceases its criminal activities".

Santos did briefly suspend the peace process when General Rubén Darío Álzate was kidnapped by the Farc in the northernmost department of Choco last November, but this was only for a finite period as he stressed that talks would recommence as soon as Álzate was released, which he was within a matter of days. Suspending talks would be much more difficult now. Santos said that he could understand that all Colombians were feeling "grief and anger, a lot of anger" after the Farc attack in Cauca but he said it was his "obligation to turn this anger into actions that end the war" (renewing aerial

Deadlines

“It’s easy to keep talking about war while sitting at a desk or from the trenches of social media,” President Santos snapped this week, alluding to his predecessor Álvaro Uribe. Despite the tension, just three days after the Cauca attack, the military sub-commission, led by the head of the joint command of the armed forces, General Javier Flórez, recommenced talks with Farc counterparts in Cuba. Several key figures in government have called for the talks to be expedited since the attack. Vice-President Germán Vargas Lleras, who has kept his own counsel about the talks until this point, came out publicly to demand that deadlines be set, and the interior minister, Juan Fernando Cristo, followed suit, calling for “accelerating the negotiations and establishing a deadline”.

bombing aside presumably). He called on the security forces not to lower their guard, insisting that “this peace will be your victory”.

Santos warned the Farc that “patience is wearing thin”; that “time limits to negotiations need to be put in place”; and that the guerrilla group needs to “show with actions and not just words” that it wants peace. But ultimately these are hollow words from Santos too. He has made peace the fulcrum of his government’s policy and invested so much time and energy in trying to achieve it that he cannot countenance abandoning the talks.

The Farc is well aware of Santos’s unswerving commitment to peace. It has been adept at spinning out the talks in Cuba, which have now been going on for two years and five months even though when they began, in September 2012, Santos said they would be “measured in months rather than years”. While the Farc can string Santos along, however, knowing his bark is much worse than his bite, the Colombian public’s bite could be fatal for the peace process. The ferocity of the attack in Cauca, during a unilateral ceasefire, increases hostility towards the Farc, undermines the guerrilla group’s credibility and strengthens public opinion against a peace accord, especially one which would offer generous gestures on the issue of prison sentences as demanded by Farc commanders. The attack plays into the hands of Uribe, who lacks sufficient strength in congress to strike down an eventual peace accord but could influence public opinion to reject it in a subsequent referendum.

On 16 April, two days after the attack in Cauca, the Farc negotiating team released a statement in which it stressed that “the country and the world know our position on these tragic events, which we deeply regret”. But it laid the blame full square with the State for not consenting to a bilateral ceasefire and insisting on continuing talks in the middle of a conflict. The statement also denied that the attack constituted a breach of the terms of the Farc’s unilateral ceasefire. It argued that the guerrillas who carried out the attack were being tracked by the soldiers in that area, and that it was therefore fundamentally a defensive rather than an offensive action.

“You have to understand that sometimes offensive actions are deployed in the course of legitimate self-defence,” ‘Iván Márquez’ (Luciano Marín Arango), the Farc’s chief negotiator, clarified five days later at a press conference in Havana. Márquez added, however, that despite the “rash” decision to renew aerial bombing, “we are maintaining the indefinite, unilateral ceasefire, as long as we are not subjected to a permanent siege by troops”.

This all sounds like an *ex post facto* justification of what bears the hallmarks of a premeditated attack (only one guerrilla was killed) and suggests either that the Farc leadership does not exercise full control over guerrillas to prevent them from reacting to continued military pressure or that, with so many commanders taking part in the talks in Cuba, it cannot get orders out. That said ‘Pablo Catatumbo’ (Jorge Torres Victoria), part of the Farc secretariat and negotiating team, leads the Farc’s ‘Western Bloc’ to which the guerrillas who launched the attack, belong. ‘Pablo Catatumbo’ is a champion of the 80-strong Miller Perdomo column (nicknamed ‘soft tread’ within the Farc and part of the elite Bloque Móvil Arturo Ruiz) responsible for the attack, and close to ‘Juvenal’ (Luis Palomino Masmela), the column’s leader.

Two Farc guerrillas have already been killed since aerial bombing began again, but there is a risk that, like the Farc leadership, the government might not have full control over the military which could launch a major retaliatory attack. This, in turn, could lead to an escalation of the conflict which both sides have taken strides to de-escalate in recent months, including an unprecedented agreement in March to embark on a joint demining effort.

Gerrymandering infuriates the opposition

The national assembly (AN) approved new population data on 22 April prepared by the national statistics institute (INE) for this year's pending legislative elections, which the national electoral council (CNE) will now use to draw up the 2015 electoral districts. Jesús Torrealba, the executive secretary of the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), last week demanded an audit of the INE's population statistics, suggesting that they were being "openly falsified" to allow the CNE to gerrymander electoral districts to favour the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). Torrealba said that technicians from the INE, which prepares the population data for the CNE (and where Torrealba once worked), had raised the alarm with him about data manipulation.

The CNE appears to be redrawing electoral districts so as to eliminate a number of safe opposition seats in the capital and several states (including Aragua, Barinas, Miranda and Nueva Esparta). Districts were also controversially redrawn ahead of the 2010 legislative elections, giving rural districts loyal to the PSUV more weight than populous urban areas in which the opposition concentrates its support. Torrealba and others have also accused the president of the AN, Diosdado Cabello, of openly breaching the constitution and electoral law in proposing that the 11 Venezuelan deputies to the Latin American parliament (Parlatino) be chosen by the PSUV-dominated assembly this year, rather than being directly elected by voters, as has been the case in previous years.

Ahead of the AN vote, PSUV Deputy Pedro Carreño defended the INE data, stating that some of the population changes between districts reflected the impact of the government's flagship social housing scheme, Misión Vivienda Venezuela. He noted that President Nicolás Maduro had already delivered the keys to 700,000 new homes (he did not specify exact dates), with a further 59,882 due to be handed over by year-end – the INE apparently took account of this when re-calculating district sizes.

As such, it appears that the capital district municipalities of Baruta, Chacao, El Hatillo and the parish of Leoncio Martínez, all opposition-held, will henceforth elect one deputy instead of two, while municipalities in the Valles del Tuy, a PSUV stronghold, will gain a deputy. Three other districts located in the states of Aragua, Barinas and Guárico, again PSUV-held, will also gain an additional representative each. Meanwhile, the unicameral AN will have 167 deputies from January 2016, up from the current 165, based on a national population of 30.8m.

The MUD won 65 seats and the PSUV 98 in the last legislative polls in 2010. According to estimates by local political scientists, in order to win a simple majority (83), the MUD this year may need to hold onto its traditional districts, win another 35 seats in heavily-contested areas, as well as a further five in traditionally *Chavista* districts, a herculean task.

Until the CNE finalises the districts, it remains difficult to try to map out an electoral strategy. While the MUD and the PSUV are due to hold primaries in May and June respectively, the actual polls have yet to be scheduled by the CNE. They are meant to be called six months in advance and must be held by December (the new deputies sit in January 2016). The monolithic PSUV can roll out its well-oiled electoral machinery almost immediately; the MUD, in contrast, is not known for its organisational capacity, not least because it comprises no fewer than 29 different parties.

Observers thin on ground this year?

The MUD's international affairs coordinators last week went to the US to petition the United Nations and others to press for official invitations to observe this year's polls. To date, the only confirmed observer mission is from the Union of South American Nations (Unasur). Missions from the Organization of American States (OAS), the US Carter Centre and the European Union have typically been invited to observe elections in Venezuela. Under former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), when the PSUV was confident of easy victories, Chávez made a big show of inviting in observers to show off Venezuelan democracy in action. Chávez got major mileage from a comment from the former US president Jimmy Carter, who in September 2012 declared the election process in Venezuela "the best in the world".

And then there were two...

International cause for concern

In its observer mission report, the Organization of American States (OAS) had flagged up the decision by the electoral authorities (TSE) to cancel the Unidad Demócrata (UD)'s legal status in Beni as cause for concern. The OAS said that the decision led to confusion and called for a political and legislative debate in order to safeguard civic prerogatives established in international treaties and the constitution. Even before the vote, on 24 March, the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) called on the Bolivian State to provide more information on the ruling against the UD.

Bolivia's national electoral court (TSE) has cancelled the 3 May run-off for the gubernatorial election in Chuquisaca department after declaring Esteban Urquizu, the candidate of President Evo Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), as the outright winner of the first round of the election on 29 March. The move, which means that run-offs will now be held in just the eastern departments of Tarija and Beni, is fuelling concerns regarding the TSE's independence. These had already emerged over the TSE's decision to cancel the legal status of the opposition Unidad Demócrata (UD) in Beni [WR-15-12] just nine days before the first round, preventing the then-frontrunner, Ernesto Suárez, from taking part.

The TSE's decision, which was announced on 13 April, was in line with a unanimous ruling by Chuquisaca's five-member departmental electoral court (TDE) in favour of annulling the votes cast for the Frente Revolucionario de Izquierda (FRI) in the gubernatorial first round. The FRI candidate, Adrián Valeriano, took 3.8% of the vote in the first round despite having announced his decision to withdraw his candidacy and back Urquizu just days ahead of the election. The TSE accepted the MAS's argument that the votes cast for Valeriano should be annulled as he did not actually take part in the election [WR-15-14]. This increases the percentage of the valid vote won by Urquizu to 50.8% (up from 48.91%) – giving him the 50%+1 margin of votes necessary to avoid a second round (or 40% with a 10-percentage-point victory margin). Urquizu's main challenger was Damián Condori, a MAS dissident, now of the local opposition outfit, Chuquisaca Somos Todos (CST), who took 44.2% of the vote.

The TSE has since rejected an appeal by the CST (on 16 April) and the local opposition outfit has indicated that it intends to take measures, with plans to stage a march to arrive in La Paz on 27 April and present an appeal before the constitutional court (TC) against the electoral authorities' decision. Either way, the decision in favour of the MAS – which now gives it outright victories in five of Bolivia's nine departments (Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí and Pando), with two going to the opposition (Santa Cruz and La Paz) is likely to again subject the electoral authorities to international scrutiny (*see sidebar*).

Alliances continue

Meanwhile manoeuvring continues in both Tarija and Beni ahead of the 3 May run-offs which, unlike the first round, will not be monitored by international observers, the TSE spokesperson, Ramiro Paredes, has said.

On 19 April Adrián Oliva, the candidate for local opposition, Unidad Departamental Autonomista (UD-A) in the eastern department of Tarija, who defeated the MAS candidate, Pablo Canedo, by 45% to 36%, announced an alliance with Luis Alfaro, a MAS dissident who ran for Tarija para Todos (TPT) and took 14% of the vote.

Meanwhile, in Beni – the one department where the MAS did not manage a majority vote in the October 2014 general elections – Edward Bruckner, the departmental leader of the opposition Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) announced that the MNR was backing Carlos Dellien, the candidate for the also opposition Nacionalidades Autónomas por el Cambio y Empoderamiento Revolucionario (Nacer) against Álex Ferrier of the MAS.

The MNR took 27% of the vote in the first round, to 41% for the MAS and 31% for Nacer. Yet MNR members are reportedly divided over the decision (despite the party leadership threatening to expel anyone who does not toe the party line), suggesting an opposition victory is far from guaranteed. The government news agency, *Abi*, cited Víctor Hugo Abularach, the MNR sectional head in Beni's Riberalta municipality, as saying that in five of Beni's 19 municipalities (Riberalta, San Ramón, Magdalena, Santa Rosa and San Ignacio de Moxos), MNR members had opted to back the MAS candidate rather than Dellien.

AMX-1

On 14 April Claro Colombia, the subsidiary of Mexican telecoms giant América Móvil, inaugurated its 'AMX-1' submarine fibre optic cable, the highest capacity cable of its kind in Latin America. The 17,500km US\$500m AMX-1 cable starts and ends in Puerto Colombia, Atlántico department, but runs across the Caribbean area with connections to the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Mexico, the US and Brazil. According to Claro Colombia the AMX-1 will increase Colombia's internet connection speeds by a factor of 50 as well as support 846m simultaneous phone calls. Claro Colombia added that the new cable would help to cover Colombia's current demand for more mobile 4G and high-speed internet. Colombia's communications & information technology minister, Diego Molano, said that AMX-1 would help "to reduce Colombia's digital divide".

TRACKING TRENDS

BOLIVIA | Adapting to climate change. On 21 April Nemesio Quispe, the director of Bolivia's plurinational Mother Earth authority (Autoridad Plurinacional de la Madre Tierra), announced that the Bolivian government will be investing B\$205m (US\$29m) in projects that will help the country adapt to climate change. According to Quispe the projects, which will mainly be concentrated in the departments of Pando and La Paz, include plans to counteract the greenhouse effect through the sustainable management of local forests.

Quispe explained that the initiatives are related to "the integral and sustainable management of forests and cocoa and coffee plantations to develop products that respect the rights of Mother Earth and indigenous peoples". Quispe added that the initiatives would be partly funded by the development cooperation agencies of Denmark and Sweden and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

ECUADOR | New oil contracts. Ecuador's strategic sectors' coordination ministry announced last week that the Chilean and Belarusian state-owned oil firms had signed two new joint venture contracts with local state-owned oil firm, Petroamazonas, which will bring in some US\$100m in investment to Ecuador's oil sector over the next four years.

A ministerial statement said that one of the new contracts involves the awarding of a concession to exploit Bloc 28, located in the Amazonian Pastaza province, to a consortium comprised of Petroamazonas EP (which will have a 51% stake); Chile's Enap Sipetrol (42%); and Belarus's Belorusneft (7%). According to the statement, the three firms have agreed to invest an initial US\$25m to explore Bloc 28; and an additional US\$375m to exploit any deposits that are found to contain recoverable hydrocarbons. Petroamazonas believes that Bloc 28 may contain 30m-50m barrels of oil.

Meanwhile, the second new contract involves a modification to the existing hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation service provision contract that Enap Sipetrol has in place with Petroamazonas in Bloc 47 of the Paraiso Biguno Huachito e Intracampos (PBHI) field, also located in Pastaza province. The modifications extend Enap Sipetrol's service provision contract until 2034 in exchange for which the company has pledged to invest some US\$80m to drill two new wells in the PBHI; and to build new production facilities and a new pipeline.

PERU | Strengthening ties with South Korea. The governments of Peru and South Korea announced on 20 April that they had signed five bilateral cooperation agreements covering the areas of public administration, customs, industry & technology and health. The agreements were signed during a meeting between President Ollanta Humala and his South Korean counterpart, Park Geun-hye, during the latter's four-day visit to Peru.

In a joint press conference, Humala said that bilateral relations with South Korea had reached "their best moment" and the agreements would help to further boost ties that are currently focused on "strengthening Peru's [production] capacity via creative technology transfer mechanisms". In this sense, Humala said that both countries were currently "developing a technological corridor based on information technology and communications".

Park concurred that the two countries have "grown closer" in recent years and said that she had a "deep discussion [with Humala] on how to enrich our mutual cooperation... we both decided to go beyond traditional trade and to expand towards other fields".

Peru and South Korea signed a free trade agreement in 2011 and bilateral trade has been steadily increasing since then, reaching US\$2.59bn last year. However, Humala said that his government's objective was for Peru to be among South Korea's top 20 trading partners.

The following day Humala and Park delivered the first of a fleet of military training aircraft jointly developed by the two countries to the Peruvian air force (FAP). The 'KT-1P' plan was developed by the FAP with the help of Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) as part of a US\$208m technology transfer deal [WR-14-21]. According to Humala production of the KT-1P is a "historic industrial achievement for Peru...[and] the direct result of the co-production programme that sets the benchmark for future cooperation, innovation and technology transfer endeavours" with South Korea.

Park's visit to Peru is part of a wider South American tour that has included a previous stop in Colombia and will also see her go to Chile.

Nisman's case runs out of road

On 20 April Javier de Luca, the chief prosecutor in Argentina's highest appellate court, dismissed the case against President Cristina Fernández brought by the late special prosecutor, Alberto Nisman. With the dismissal of the case by what is, in effect, Argentina's highest judicial authority for appeals, Nisman's criminal complaint against the President appears to be over. De Luca himself said that his decision was "equivalent to a definitive sentence", though there is another formal step at the supreme court. Speculation by the political opposition is bound to continue, but De Luca's decision spares the Fernández government a damaging, drawn out legal process.

Opposition notches up electoral successes

The Argentine provinces of Santa Fe and Mendoza held their open and simultaneous primaries (Paso) on 19 April. Santa Fe, an agricultural powerhouse, was the more significant of the two. Here, the final results had the opposition gubernatorial candidate, Miguel Del Sel, from the centre-right Propuesta Republicana (PRO) as the overall winner, although by a narrow, contested margin. His victory is good news for Mauricio Macri, the mayor of Buenos Aires, and presidential contender. In Mendoza, Alfredo Cornejo, of the opposition Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), supported by both the PRO and the Frente Renovador (FR, the dissident wing of the Peronist Partido Justicialista) of presidential candidate Sergio Massa, won comfortably.

Santa Fe

Del Sel won 5,493 votes more than the combined sum of the contenders from the ruling left-wing Frente Cívico, Progresista y Social (FCPyS), Miguel Lifschitz and Mario Barletta (32.2% versus 31.8%) in the province of Santa Fe Paso. Del Sel, a television comedian turned politician, ran an eccentric and populist campaign, but one with a clear hardline message on security. Rising crime related to drug trafficking in the province appears to have undermined confidence in its current government. Macri joined Del Sel in the province to celebrate the result; the victorious candidate described him as "the next president of all Argentines".

President Cristina Fernández's Frente para la Victoria (FPV), the biggest party within the PJ, was unhappy with the result. Omar Perotti won 22% of the votes, but claimed that fraud had been committed in the counting process. Perotti was also confident that he could overcome the difference with Del Sel in the actual elections, given that Del Sel was a known quantity to the electorate, having run in 2011, whereas Perotti argued that he was still unknown to a large number of Santa Fe's residents.

Mendoza

Historically, Mendoza has proved a stronghold for the UCR, although it did fall to Peronist allies of President Fernández in 2007 and 2011. The clear victory of Alfredo Cornejo with 45% of the vote, versus just under 40% for the three FPV candidates combined, suggests he should have little trouble winning the governorship. What this means on a national level is not entirely clear, given the UCR's skill in courting both Massa and Macri. Neither travelled to the province to claim victory, but Macri was quick to congratulate Cornejo and claim the UCR was a fundamental part of the PRO coalition for winning the presidency.

Massa, a former Kirchnerista, is in danger of being squeezed out of serious contention in the presidential race. An opinion poll published in *La Nación* this week showed Daniel Scioli, the incumbent governor of Buenos Aires province and a likely FPV presidential candidate, leading voting intentions with 33.4%, followed by Macri on 27.3% and Massa on 20.1%.

On Sunday 26 April, the city of Buenos Aires is due to hold its primaries. Macri's successor is almost certain to come from the PRO, though it could be a tight contest between Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, the current cabinet chief of the city government, and Gabriela Michetti, a senator. Macri has thrown his weight behind Larreta, but Michetti has her own support base within the PRO. But whichever of the two wins, Macri wins.

FHC plays down impeachment idea

On 24 April, a small group of activists from the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), one of the main groups organising the recent street protests in Brazil, will begin a long march, on foot, from São Paulo to Brasília. The libertarian group aims to spread their philosophy of economic liberalism through the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Goiás. But when they arrive in Brasília, their real task awaits: a rally to demand congress begin impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff. While some opposition parties are openly seeking legal mechanisms to begin impeachment proceedings, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) is divided over the issue, with cooler heads, including that of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), urging caution.

Calls for President Rousseff's impeachment received a boost following claims made by Jonathan David Taylor, the former head of the Dutch oil-platform company SBM Offshore. In a newspaper interview with *Folha de São Paulo*, published on 14 April, Taylor said that he had passed on evidence between August and October 2014 to Brazil's financial ombudsman (CGU) that his company paid bribes to the State oil company Petrobras, but that the CGU only acted after Rousseff had secured re-election in October. "The only conclusion I can draw from this is that they wanted to protect the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and President Dilma by delaying the announcement of these investigations so they did not impact on the elections," Taylor said.

The arrest and preventive detention of João Vaccari Neto, the treasurer of the PT, last week also brought the Petrobras scandal a step closer to Rousseff. And some opposition politicians claim that the government engaged in illegal fiscal "manoeuvres" to sign off its accounts for 2014, and that this could constitute grounds for impeachment. Constitutional experts, however, are divided on the question, as is the PSDB. In an interview on 22 April, Cardoso sought to play down those divisions, arguing that the debate within the party was merely an "expression of the sentiments of society". Earlier in the week, Cardoso and the influential senator José Serra, declared that any discussion of impeachment would be precipitous.

"Impeachment cannot be a thesis," Cardoso said. "There are either objective reasons or there aren't. Those who decide are the judiciary, the police, the courts. Political parties cannot anticipate this. It doesn't make sense." Eduardo Cunha, the speaker of the lower chamber of congress, and member of the nominally government-allied Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), has repeatedly said there are, as yet, no grounds for such a process.

Aécio Neves, the PSDB's former presidential candidate, has avoided committing himself on the issue. He decided against participating in the anti-government street protests on 15 March and 12 April, although he did make sure he was photographed on his balcony with his young son, wearing the Brazil football kit, the de facto uniform of many of the protesters. Still, last week, Neves met with representatives of Vem Pra Rua, which is arguably the best-connected and funded of the street protest movements.

The organisation enjoys the backing of some significant business leaders, and it has flip-flopped on the question of impeachment. Despite its spokesperson, Rogerio Chequer, claiming before the demonstration on 12 April that the Vem Pra Rua movement was merely a vehicle for Brazilians' indignation with official corruption, he has subsequently said that the organisation is "not against impeachment."

Majority favour impeachment

Ahead of the 12 April demonstration, a survey published by Datafolha showed that, in theory, 63% of Brazilians would support impeachment proceedings against President Rousseff. On closer inspection, however, the survey also showed an acute level of political ignorance, with only 12% of those in favour of impeachment knowing what that would actually mean (that vice-president Michel Temer, from the PMDB, would become president).

Weak PT defeated again over outsourcing law

There was another reminder of the weakness of the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) this week. On 22 April, the federal lower chamber of congress approved, on its second reading, a bill that would allow Brazilian companies to outsource potentially all of their activities, despite a concerted campaign by the PT and its union allies, the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT), to stop its progress. It now goes to the senate for approval, where it may meet stiffer opposition. Should it pass, however, President Dilma Rousseff will be under severe pressure to veto the bill.

Although President Rousseff has taken some steps to patch up her relationship with the PT's key congressional ally, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), principally by appointing Michel Temer, the vice-president, to liaise between the executive and the legislature, many within the PMDB are in open defiance of Rousseff, meaning she needs the robust support of the PT. But the PT itself is increasingly divided, with many activists unhappy at the policy choices Rousseff has taken since the start of her second term.

The PT finally ditched its treasurer, João Vaccari Neto, after he was placed in preventive detention for his role in the Petrolão scandal, but it struggled to find a replacement. Eventually, it settled on former federal deputy Marcio Macedo, but only after three other people turned down the offer from the party president, Rui Falcão. The party has also attempted to get ahead of the scandal by declaring it will no longer accept donations from private companies for its election campaigns, although that move will be put to a vote at the party's national congress, between 11 and 14 June in Salvador.

Attempting to take a lofty approach, however, has its price. Earlier this week Rousseff was criticised for failing to veto a bill which will triple the amount of State funds available for political parties. Originally, the government set the ceiling at R\$289.5m (US\$95m), but this was amended by the bill's sponsor in the senate, Romero Jucá, from the PMDB, who raised the figure to R\$867.5m (US\$285m). The decision by Rousseff not to veto the budget runs counter to her government's efforts to rein in spending elsewhere, but it would also have made life extremely difficult for the PT.

Petrobras counts its losses

On 22 April, the state-run oil company Petrobras finally published its long-awaited audited results for 2014 and calculated how much it had lost due to corruption. Based on witness statements that between 2004 and 2012 Petrobras paid 3% over the actual value of its contracts with 27 construction firms, the company calculated the losses caused by this corruption at R\$6.2bn (US\$2bn). The company itself admitted that this figure was "conservative" and "provisional".

It has also taken a R\$44.6bn impairment charge over delays and other problems at flagship projects such as the Complexo Petroquímico do Rio de Janeiro (Comperj) and the Abreu e Lima refinery. These losses were a result of "problems in planning", as well as the falling value of the assets, the Real and the lower price of oil.

Petrobras also said it had made a net loss last year of R\$21.6bn compared with a net profit of R\$23.6bn in 2013. It was the worst result for the company since 1991, when it posted losses of R\$1.21bn, according to the consulting firm Economática. In his first presentation to investors, the new president of Petrobras, Aldemir Benedine, apologised on behalf of Petrobras employees for what had happened at the company. "From this moment, Petrobras turns over a new page," he said.

Petrobras scandal

Paulo Roberto Costa, the former head of supply at Petrobras, has been sentenced to seven years and six months for organised crime and money laundering. Alberto Yousseff, the black-market money dealer, was sentenced to nine years and two months for money laundering. Both have had their sentences reduced due to their cooperation with the authorities in the 'Operation Car Wash' investigation.

IMF praises “credible” Brazil plan

On 16 April the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, said that a “credible” fiscal plan was being implemented in Brazil. While the IMF has slashed its economic growth forecast for Brazil this year, predicting a contraction of 1%, it expects the country to return to growth in 2016, and forecasts an expansion of 2.2% in 2017. In a press conference in Washington, where the Brazilian finance minister, Joaquim Levy, met Lagarde, the IMF managing director praised the measures the new minister has taken in support of Brazil’s domestic economy.

REGION | Pooling efforts to fight climate change, agricultural pests. On 21 April the agriculture ministers of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay agreed to boost their cooperation in the area of agriculture in order to better face the problems derived from climate change and agricultural pests. The agreement was signed during the two-day meeting of the Southern agricultural council (CAS) held in Chile’s capital, Santiago.

Chile’s agriculture minister, Carlos Furche, said that the agreement answered to the fact that the challenges posed by global climate change and the spread of plant pests and animal diseases demanded joint and coordinated action by regional neighbours. “We need to coordinate joint action to control or eradicate the various animal diseases or plant pests,” he said. “The pressure from the flow of goods and people transported across the region means that help from all countries is needed. If we want to eliminate the fruit fly, for example, it is not enough to eradicate it from Chile, we also need to do so in neighbouring countries”.

Meanwhile, addressing the issue of climate change, Furche said that “in our case, we know that climate change is producing a very serious impact, in fact we currently have 194 communes under a state of agricultural emergency due to drought, and therefore this is a highly relevant issue”.

This was seconded by the head of Uruguay’s agriculture, livestock & fisheries (MGAP) ministry, Tabaré Aguerre, who said that climate change was something to which the entire region has to adapt. “We need to adapt to this and be more efficient in the use of water and better soil management, because this will allow us to have more sustainable and resilient production systems,” Aguerre said.

The ministers added that during the meeting, the CAS members also agreed to come up with a common position on climate change in order to present it at the next United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) to be held in Paris in November-December. At the end of the CAS meeting Chile transferred the pro-tempore presidency of the council to Uruguay, which will be in charge of organising the next CAS meeting.

URUGUAY | Warding off economic concerns. On 21 April Uruguay’s economy ministry, Danilo Astori and the head of the central bank (BCU), Mario Bergara, dismissed concerns that the rapid appreciation of the US dollar, which is stoking inflationary pressures in Uruguay, could tip the country into an economic crisis.

Uruguay’s inflation rate is currently running above the BCU’s top target range of 7% (cumulative inflation was running at 7.55% to in the 12-month rolling period to March) mainly due to a number of external factors including the appreciation of the US dollar and the lower imports of goods from Brazil and Argentina as a result of the contraction in production levels in those two countries.

All of this has sparked concerns that the Uruguayan economy could be in for a difficult year with inflation higher than the 8.26% with which it closed 2014, coupled with lower growth as a result of lower global demand and less favourable terms of trade. However, in a forum with local economists organised by the BCU, Astori said that “The figures show that on the issue of growth Uruguay has managed to maintain a reasonable evolution of its economy in even tougher circumstances than those currently faced globally and by our region”.

Bergara said that the Uruguayan economic authorities had dealt with rapid appreciations of the dollar in the past and that they had built a platform to ensure that the depreciation of the national currency does not have major consequences. “The vulnerability to exchange rate risks has been mitigated,” Bergara said. He added that “The US will continue to strengthen its currency but we are calm and serene that... [although] Argentina and Brazil are currently stagnant, we will continue growing, even if at a lower rate”.

Uruguay’s GDP increased by 3.5% last year and the government is banking on a similar result this year. As for inflation, Bergara said that the authorities were working to bring it down but insisted that it was “not out of control”. “We are working with a target range of 5% with a tolerance of two percentage points... it is hardly dramatic that inflation is currently at 7.5%,” Bergara said.

Successes and failures of militarisation strategy

The issue of human rights abuses committed by Mexico's security forces has been deeply contentious for some time but it has burst to the fore over the course of the last week. Two cases related to massacres and one to torture implicating the army, the federal police (PF) and state police hit the headlines in the space of three days. This is the dark side of the militarisation of public security in Mexico. The federal government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto has not denied its existence but it stands accused of not doing enough to counter it, preferring instead to focus on the successes of the militarisation strategy, such as the capture of two drug kingpins in operations by Mexico's security forces in the last week.

Three state police officers went on trial in the state of Baja California (BC) for torture on 16 April. On the same day deputies in the Distrito Federal (DF) presented the results of an investigation into the massacre of 22 alleged criminals by the army in the municipality of Tlatlaya in the Estado de México in June 2014, which painted the authorities in a very bad light. On 19 April the local media presented evidence of the alleged massacre of 16 unarmed civilians by the federal police (PF) in the troubled western state of Michoacán last January.

The interior minister, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, has acknowledged some of the particular difficulties that combating organised crime has provided for Mexico, but it is not clear that the relevant authorities are doing enough to get to the root of these deeply troubling episodes.

Torture case

There have been a number of allegations of torture against the security forces so in some respects the trial of the three state police officers in BC is a positive development. The BC state police arrested Adrián Vázquez Lagunes in 2012. During a period of 12 hours in police custody Vázquez was threatened, beaten and semi-asphyxiated. Only later did the federal attorney general's office (PGR) charge him with carrying illegal firearms and of being a leader in the Sinaloa drug trafficking organisation (DTO).

The offence of torture was only added to the criminal code in 1991 since when there have been just seven convictions at a federal level. This is the first trial for torture to take place in BC. It was portrayed by the NGO Amnesty International (AI) as "a landmark moment for justice" in the state, although it added that there was "still a long way to go" as Vázquez, who also accuses the state police of fabricating evidence against him, remains in detention.

Carolina Jimenez, AI's Americas deputy director for research, described Vázquez's arrest and conviction as "another example of the Mexican authorities riding rough-shod over justice in their race to address the country's so-called 'war on drugs'. Police and armed forces continue to use torture and other ill-treatment of suspects in an attempt to make hasty prosecutions, and in doing so breach international law themselves." She called on the authorities to investigate the issue urgently.

AI is far from alone in expressing concern about the use of torture. The United Nations (UN) special envoy on torture, Juan Méndez, released a scathing report on 9 March claiming that "torture and ill treatment during detention are generalized in Mexico, and occur in a context of impunity". The federal government did not take kindly to this criticism and announced that it would no longer work with Méndez. More than two dozen human rights groups subsequently signed a letter expressing "profound disgust"

Supreme court suicide

The head of the Baja California supreme court, Marco Antonio López Magaña, was found dead on 16 April, the same day as the trial against the three state police officers for torture began in the state. López Magaña had only been in the post for five months and had just returned home from accompanying President Enrique Peña Nieto during a visit to the state. He is believed to have committed suicide.

WTO final ruling on 'dolphin safe' tuna

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) published its final decision last week on the complaint raised in 2008 by Mexico against the US's 'dolphin safe' canned tuna labelling programme. Mexico argues that the programme is discriminatory against Mexican fishermen and has negatively affected its fishing industry. The WTO has sided with Mexico in a number of resolutions but these have all been contested by the US, leading Mexico to ask the WTO to convene an arbitration panel to issue a final ruling [WR-14-15]. This panel has ruled that the programme does unfairly restrict trade and discriminate against Mexican fishermen and called on the US to make the necessary modifications to address this. The US still has 60 days to present a final appeal.

with the government and condemning the "alarming increase in the number of registered complaints over torture and mistreatment."

Tlatlaya massacre

The undersecretary for human rights, Juan Manuel Gómez Robledo, described the Méndez report as having "no basis in reality", the sort of denial that led to serious criticism of the federal government's commitment to investigating any alleged abuse by the security forces. As chance would have it, on the very same day as the trial began in BC the report into the Tlatlaya massacre was published by a special cross-party commission of DF deputies. It found that there had been an "illegal, excessive, and a disproportionate use of force" by the army, but most shockingly, given the severity of the incident, the report claimed that neither the PGR nor the government of the Estado de México had provided any documents to assist their probe, while the defence ministry (Sedena) had furnished deputies with "insufficient information".

The report called for greater accountability in a case in which serious human rights abuses occurred and that the overlapping of institutional responsibilities could not be an obstacle. It also recommended that the armed forces be removed from public security duties in a gradual and ordered manner, something that President Peña Nieto promised before taking office but has not delivered. It also urged the government to produce a plan to preclude a recurrence of this type of event.

Apatzingán massacre

Three days later the Mexican magazine *Proceso* ran an article providing evidence for a similar massacre, this time allegedly carried out by the federal police (PF) in Apatzingán in the western state of Michoacán on 6 January. Dozens of PF vehicles burst into the centre of Apatzingán, located within the conflict-torn region of Tierra Caliente, and allegedly opened fire on members of a unit of the Fuerza Rural, which had taken over the town hall, according to testimony collected from 39 witnesses and relatives of those killed.

Members of former 'self-defence' groups who made up this unit of the Fuerza Rural were protesting against the unit having been dissolved by then federal security commissioner Alfredo Castillo 20 days earlier without being paid. The leader of the unit, Nicolás Sierra, is believed to be the leader of Los Viagras, the estranged armed wing of the DTO Los Caballeros Templarios (LCT). Castillo, who was removed from his position on 22 January, had claimed at the time that the majority of the victims had died in friendly fire.

The national security commission, which oversees the PF, also reported at the weekend that it had received an anonymous video "from which the alleged excessive use of force or abuse of power by federal police in Apatzingán can be inferred". The interior minister, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, said that the PGR and the PF's internal affairs unit would carry out an investigation to "clarify events". He promised that the public would be kept abreast of any developments in these investigations while the national commission of human rights (CNDH) would carry out a parallel probe.

Osorio Chong maintained that the government had worked tirelessly to ensure that the security forces were always "shining examples of honesty, and acted in strict accordance with the law and with unconditional respect for human rights", but that when they fell short of these standards they would be held accountable. The fact that Osorio Chong opted to speak out the day after the *Proceso* report is a sign that the federal government is beginning to understand the urgency with which these issues need to be addressed; its vacillating response to the disappearance and presumed murder of 43 trainee students in Iguala, Guerrero, last September played a big part in Peña Nieto's sinking approval rating.

State Department warning

On 13 April, days before the violence in Reynosa surrounding the capture of José Tiburcio 'El Gafe' Hernández, the US State Department released a travel warning for Mexico, which included a section advising against all non-essential travel to Tamaulipas.

"Throughout the state violent crime, including homicide, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion, and sexual assault, pose significant safety risks. State and municipal law enforcement capacity is limited to nonexistent in many parts of Tamaulipas. Violent conflicts between rival criminal elements and/or the Mexican military can occur in all parts of the region and at all times of the day."

'Decapitation strategy'

Despite these failings of the security forces, notable successes have been registered in just the last week. Firstly, an army and PF convoy intercepted José Tiburcio 'El Gafe' Hernández, the presumed leader of the Golfo DTO, in the border city of Reynosa in the north-eastern state of Tamaulipas. Little was known about 'El Gafe', who had proved to be difficult to track as he went under eight false identities, except that he was seen as a key player in the violent struggle for control of drug-trafficking routes in the northern border region.

After 'El Gafe' was captured he was taken to the local state attorney general's office in Reynosa. A group of some 60 armed men in 15 vehicles mounted a rescue attempt but after a three-hour gunfight the security forces, who learning from previous failures had anticipated such a development, repelled the attackers, three of whom were killed. The attackers then went on the rampage, burning buses and cars and blocking roads in a level of violence not seen for several years in Reynosa, which has been accustomed to deadly clashes between the Golfo and Los Zetas DTOs over the years.

The federal government's 'decapitation' strategy swiftly claimed another scalp with the arrest by the PGR and PF of Jesús Salas Aguayo, the presumed leader of the Juárez DTO, operating in the border city of Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere in the northern state of Chihuahua. The national security commissioner, Monte Alejandro Rubido, said that Salas was wanted for drug-trafficking, arms trafficking, homicide, kidnapping and the theft of oil.

Rubido said that Salas had been in charge of the armed wing of the Juárez DTO and was involved in "some of the cruellest incidents that have taken place in Ciudad Juárez", ordering kidnappings and murders to eliminate rival groups. He is also on the 'most wanted' list of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and stands accused by the US government of being behind the murder of a protected witness in El Paso, Texas, in May 2009.

With the capture of Salas, the government took out number 93 on its kingpin list containing 122 names. The effectiveness of the decapitation strategy has been questioned. Detractors argue that for every kingpin arrested there is another hardened criminal waiting to take his place. But it is worth noting that Salas only took over control of the Juárez DTO after the previous leaders Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and David Aarón Espinosa were captured last October and last January respectively. If the security forces continue to hit the leaderships of DTOs with this kind of frequency it should damage their capacity to operate as nobody will have the opportunity to assert their authority and establish control.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Impact of drug-related violence. The costs of combating drug trafficking are estimated at US\$9bn a year, nearly as much as the Mexican government spends on social development, a report by the World Bank published this week argued. The report, entitled 'Shared Prosperity and Poverty Eradication in Latin America and the Caribbean', explores the performance of eight countries to understand what has driven progress, and what it will take to sustain it.

In the case of Mexico the report argued that drug-related violence has hindered economic growth and is associated with "higher unemployment and poorer school performance and can have long-run detrimental consequences in human capital accumulation".

The report also contended that "a 1 percentage point rise in the Gini coefficient translated into an increase of more than 10 drug-related homicides per 100,000 inhabitants between 2006 and 2010".

PP cracks up over corruption crackdown

The findings of one of the biggest investigations by the United Nations (UN) backed anti-impunity commission in Guatemala (Cicig) and the attorney general's office (AG) into official corruption is wreaking major damage on President Otto Pérez Molina's right-wing Partido Patriota (PP). The scandal has had an immediate impact. Alejandro Sinibaldi, the PP's presidential candidate for the general elections this September, has already jumped ship. The party is yet to name a replacement.

Those implicated in corruption include not only the head of the tax agency (SAT), Alvaro Omar Franco Chacón, and his predecessor Carlos Enrique Muñoz Roldán (2013-2015) but also Juan Carlos Monzón Rojas (see sidebar), the (now sacked) private secretary to Vice-President Roxana Baldetti. The whereabouts of Monzón, the alleged leader of the contraband ring, known as 'La Línea', are unknown.

The arrests of Franco, Muñoz and 19 others on charges of tax fraud and forming part of a contraband ring, were announced in a press conference on 16 April by the head of Cicig, the Colombian jurist, Iván Velásquez Gómez; the head of the special anti-impunity prosecutor's bureau (Feci), Oscar Schaad; Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla, and AG representatives. The authorities have not revealed the total amount involved in the corruption scandal, but Velásquez said it was "millions".

Schaad said that the Feci first became suspicious after the SAT failed to register a single tax fraud complaint over a two-year period. The accused allegedly pocketed bribes in exchange for charging reduced customs duties, with port officials amending the paperwork for shipping containers going via customs at Guatemala's two main seaports, Puerto Quetzal and Puerto Santo Tomás. In October 2013 President Pérez Molina intervened in five customs posts – including Puerto Quetzal and Puerto Santo Tomás – with military support [WR-13-43], as part of efforts to combat organised crime and boost the country's notoriously low tax take which reached just 10.8% of GDP in 2014 – one of the lowest in Central America.

The government was already under international pressure to renew Cicig's mandate, which is due to expire in September [WR-15-10]. Pérez Molina sought to limit the damage by hailing the arrests and telling reporters that he had requested the investigation, which began back in May 2014, in the first place.

However, three days after the arrests were announced, Sinibaldi, who was running second in pre-electoral surveys behind Manuel Baldizón, of the main opposition Libertad Democrática Renovada (Líder), announced that he was quitting the party. Citing "the shameful corruption and tax fraud scandal involving senior State officials, with the private secretary of the Vice-President at the top", Sinibaldi also accused Baldetti of blackmail, without providing further details. The bitter fallout between Baldetti and Sinibaldi, who had been locked in a power struggle for control of the PP, is likely to cause more damage to the ruling party ahead of the elections.

Sinibaldi is now reportedly considering running for another party. One possibility floated by the local press is the smaller, neo-liberal Movimiento Reformador (MR), which formed part of the Gran Alianza Nacional (Gana) which brought Oscar Berger to power in 2004.

Who is Monzón?

In a November 2013 report, *elPeriódico* alleges that Juan Carlos Monzón Rojas – one of the founders of the PP – was arrested in March 2001 for trying to steal a car. At the time the local media reported that he was part of a gang of car thieves, along with the brother and nephew of the late Alfredo Moreno Molina, known as the "capo (kingpin) of contraband", who died in 2013 having headed up a contraband ring in the 1990s comprising former military officials. Monzón himself was a lieutenant, serving in the army between 1993 and 1998, according to *elPeriódico*, which also reported that he was sanctioned for disobedience, poor conduct and dereliction of duty, among other things.

PAC praises Alfaro appointment

President Solís lamented the fact that Melvin Jiménez had been “mistreated” but he said he had to let him go because he could not allow “instability and uncertainty” to develop. The PAC, which has been openly critical of Solís, praised the appointment of the former PAC deputy Sergio Iván Alfaro to replace Jiménez. Ottón Solís, the founder of the PAC, congratulated his namesake for “rediscovering the PAC’s roots, principles, values and ethics”. President Solís has indicated he will make some further cabinet changes as he approaches his first anniversary in power on 8 May.

Baldetti

Vice-President Roxana Baldetti herself has also been implicated in corruption. In September 2014 the leading investigative daily *elPeriódico* published an article questioning funds used to build a luxury apartment registered to Baldetti.

Only last month, a local NGO, Centro de Acción Legal Ambiental y Social (Calas), presented a criminal complaint against Baldetti and Environment Minister Michelle Martínez in relation to a project to clean up Lake Amatitlán for which an Israeli company, M. Tarcic Engineering, received a Q\$137.8m (US\$18m) contract. The complaint – for dereliction of duty – alleges that the company failed to carry out the necessary environmental impact assessment (EIA).

The same month, another NGO, Acción Ciudadana, presented a separate complaint against Baldetti in relation to the same case, alleging irregularities and influence trafficking. In late March, the government suspended the project pending an investigation.

COSTA RICA | POLITICS

Solís parts company with chief lieutenant

President Luis Guillermo Solís has dismissed his minister of the presidency, Melvin Jiménez, just under a year after he took office. Jiménez was always a controversial choice. A Lutheran bishop, he was a fringe member of the ruling Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), immediately putting Solís at odds with his adopted party. Jiménez did not excel when it came to performing the main remit of his job – operating as a go-between with the 57-seat legislative assembly, where Solís is totally reliant on the goodwill of opposition parties, or skillful horse trading, in order to advance any legislative initiatives. The PAC is much happier with Jiménez’s replacement, Sergio Iván Alfaro, a party stalwart.

This is by far the most significant of the four cabinet changes President Solís has made and follows fast on the heels of his dismissal of the science, telecommunications, and technology minister, Gisela Kopper [WR-15-15]. Solís thanked Jiménez for his “decisive” role as his campaign chief in last year’s elections. He praised Jiménez for his “stoicism, wisdom and serenity” but added that a “great quantity of tension” had weighed down on him, “limiting the possibility of his being an effective link between the government and different political parties [in the legislative assembly]” and, as such, making his position untenable.

The left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) had expressed “delight” when Jiménez was appointed, saying it had worked with him for years and respected his close ties to social organisations. But the political establishment was suspicious of his intentions to turn Costa Rica into a secular State when the constitution defines the country as Roman Catholic. Ironically his appointment was challenged on legal grounds because the constitution also stipulates that those that take up religious orders cannot become cabinet ministers, although the constitutional chamber of the supreme court rejected the legal challenge last November on the grounds that this only applied to Roman Catholics. Jiménez has also been tarnished by controversy surrounding alleged influence trafficking. He strenuously denied the allegations but they further alienated the PAC, whose founding objective was making Costa Rican politics more ethical.

Ensuring harmonious relations with the legislative assembly is absolutely essential for Solís as the PAC is a minority party. This left him little choice in the end but to replace Jiménez. Alfaro, a lawyer and public notary, was the president of the national insurance institute (INS). Alfaro said he was hopeful that having served as a deputy for the PAC (2007-2010) he would be in a better position to build consensus with the legislative assembly.

Papal visit

“The presence of his holiness in Cuba will be memorable. He will receive the warmest hospitality of the Cuban people,” Cuba’s Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said in Brussels in response to the Vatican’s announcement. Rodríguez made his comments following talks with the European Union (EU)’s High Representative and vice-president Federica Mogherini, who announced that the EU and Cuba had agreed to set up a “structured human rights dialogue”, in parallel with the current talks on a new political dialogue and cooperation agreement, which the EU wants to finalise by year-end. The EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, will lead the human rights dialogue, with a first round in Brussels in June.

Cuomo falls for Cuban beauty

The governor of New York state, Andrew M. Cuomo, became the first US governor to visit Cuba since ‘D-day’. Cuomo seemed genuinely thrilled to be in Havana, and was particularly taken with one local beauty, ‘Lola’, a gleaming restored 1956 pink Chevrolet Bel Air, for lack of original parts now running with a Toyota diesel engine. “I had to come to Cuba to see this,” the self-professed vintage car obsessive enthused over the hood, suggesting to the owner that the restoration of relations between the US and Cuba might allow Lola’s eventual restoration to her full former glory, by way of a rebuilt Chevy engine from the US.

Cuomo, who spent a hectic 26 hours in the Cuban capital with a sizeable trade delegation, including executives from JetBlue, MasterCard, Pfizer, dairy company Chobani and others, noted that his father and predecessor Mario Cuomo, a prominent US Democrat elected New York governor three times (serving between 1983 and 1994), had always been critical of the US embargo on Cuba, and had met Cuba’s former president Fidel Castro. “There is a long history with New York. Fidel Castro met with my father in New York. My father was always a supporter of ending the embargo. We have had a friendship that went on for decades. It is about rekindling that friendship. Cuomo also argued in favour of engagement as a way of nudging Cuba towards more political and civil freedoms. How do you foster the human rights dialogue that everybody says must progress? It’s not through isolation, it’s through engagement,” he insisted.

While the process to restore full diplomatic relations (including the latest decision to remove Cuba from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism), will certainly spike US interest in doing business with Cuba, the considerable legal and technical hurdles to doing so under the embargo remain firmly intact, without much hope of removal any time soon. Nonetheless, it is not impossible (President Barack Obama can grant federal licenses to businesses to trade with Cuba, for example, although these are rare) and indeed the Cuomo-led delegation came away with a couple of interesting deals, including one for a New York-based medical facility to run clinical trials of a lung cancer vaccine developed in Cuba, whose highly regarded medical sector is carving out a potentially lucrative niche as a global biotech pioneer.

The Roswell Park Cancer Institute, based in Buffalo (upstate NY), will work with the Center for Molecular Immunology in Havana to bring a lung cancer vaccine to the US for clinical trials, while a Manhattan-based software company, Infor, will provide healthcare software to a Cuban university, senior executives from the two companies announced at a press conference at Havana’s José Martí airport prior to the delegation’s departure.

Cuomo had personal meetings with Cuba’s foreign trade and investment minister Rodrigo Malmierca Díaz; the first vice president Miguel Díaz-Canel, and other trade officials. The delegation was given a tour of the new deep-water Mariel Port and special development zone, which Cuba hopes will provide a major stimulus to economic growth. Mariel Port, pointedly, is US-facing, and could become a key Caribbean hub in future.

Finally, Cuomo also met Cardinal Jaime Ortega, whose role in the country he praised fulsomely. Cardinal Ortega will receive papal recognition of his role in mid September, when Pope Francis will stop off in Cuba en route to the US, the Vatican has confirmed, capping the Pope’s era-defining diplomacy between Presidents Obama and Raúl Castro.

POSTSCRIPT

Quotes of the week

“The easiest decision today is to say war, war and more war. But I was elected by Colombians to make peace and that is my mandate.”

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos.

“We're working not for future elections, but for future generations.”

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa.

“Spain is financing and supporting logistically, politically and diplomatically, using all the power of the Spanish government, a conspiracy to try and topple [...] the Venezuelan government [...] In the face of [Prime Minister Mariano] Rajoy's aggression [...] I have prepared a forceful response, but I will wait for the right moment. Mend your ways Rajoy or the response of our Venezuelan government [...] will be a million Bolívares.”

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro responds to the decision of Spain's parliament to pass a motion calling for “arbitrarily detained” Venezuelan opposition leaders to be released.

Ecuador's Correa denounces death threat

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa cut short a visit to Tabacundo, 60km north of Quito in the province of Pichincha, on 14 April after receiving a death threat. Correa, who started the visit by inspecting public works, had been scheduled to have lunch in a local park with some 5,000 local *campesinos* but was warned by his security detail that the mayor of Tabacundo, Frank Gualsaqui, had received threatening text messages directed at both him and Correa.

President Correa had planned to use the lunch to defend his government's controversial social security reform measures [WR-15-15], which triggered the resignation of his industries minister, Ramiro González, last week and the rupture of an alliance between González's party Avanza and Correa's ruling Alianza País (AP).

“What did you think? That you were the one that saved the people? We will kill you together with Correa,” one of the text messages sent to Gualsaqui read. “You will see today how many people will die in the park.” Correa said that he received these sorts of threats on a daily basis but that because the mobile phone from which the texts were sent was traced to somebody near the site of the lunch, the level of risk was much greater and he decided to suspend all activities for the rest of the day. All of those who had gathered for the lunch were evacuated. Correa told journalists that he had changed both the place and the time of a later press conference to be on the safe side.

The owner of the mobile was subsequently arrested, but he maintained that his phone had been taken from him by assailants who then sent the texts. He also said that he was a member of the AP and showed his party membership card to prove it. He was placed under preventive detention, however, while the case is investigated.

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