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## **BOLIVIA: A SITUATION ANALYSIS**

**A Writenet Report by Natalia Springer**

**commissioned by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,  
Protection Information Section (DIP)**

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## Acronyms Glossary

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| ADN     | Acción Democrática Nacionalista – Nationalist Democratic Action  |
| AIETI   | Asociación de Investigación y Especialización sobre Temas Iberoamericanos - Association of Research and Specialization on Ibero-American Issues  |
| APDHB   | Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos de Bolivia - Permanent Assembly for Human Rights in Bolivia  |
| CIDOB   | Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia – Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (originally Confederación de Indígenas del Oriente de Bolivia – Confederation of Indigenous [Peoples] of Eastern Bolivia) |
| CIRABO  | Central Indígena de la Región Amazónica de Bolivia - Indigenous Union of the Amazonian Region of Bolivia   |
| COB     | Central Obrera Boliviana – Bolivian Labour Federation  |
| COMIBOL | Corporación Minera de Bolivia – Bolivian Mining Corporation  |
| CSUTCB  | Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia - United Trades Union Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia   |
| EU      | European Union   |
| FSTMB   | Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia - Trades Union Federation of Bolivian Mineworkers   |
| FULIDED | Fundación Libertad, Democracia y Desarrollo – Foundation for Freedom, Democracy and Development  |
| GDP     | Gross Domestic Product   |
| IISEC   | Instituto de Investigaciones Socio Económicas – Institute for Socio-Economic Research  |
| IDB     | Inter-American Development Bank  |
| IMF     | International Monetary Fund  |
| MAS     | Movimiento al Socialismo – Movement towards Socialism  |
| MIP     | Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti – Indigenous Pachakuti Movement  |
| MIR     | Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria – Movement of the Revolutionary Left  |
| MNR     | Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario – Nationalist Revolutionary Movement  |
| NEP     | New Economic Policy  |
| NGO     | Non-Governmental Organization  |
| OCHA    | [United Nations] Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs   |
| RECAL   | Red de Cooperación Euro-Latinoamericana – Network for European and Latinamerican Cooperation   |
| UNDCP   | United Nations Drug Control Programme  |
| UNDP    | United Nations Development Programme   |
| UNICEF  | United Nations Children’s Fund   |
| USAID   | United States Agency for International Development   |
| WOLA    | Washington Office on Latin America   |
| YPFB    | Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos – Bolivian National Hydrocarbon Resources   |

## Executive Summary

Multiethnic and multi-lingual Bolivia is not only the poorest and least developed, but also the least integrated nation in South America. An exceptionally weak State is coupled with a precarious sense of nationhood. Historically Bolivia has been very unstable, and has experienced frequent changes of government and constitutions. After redemocratization in 1982 and structural adjustment, which brought inflation under control, Bolivia has evolved according to international prescriptions, but this strict compliance has not had any measurable impact on the quality of life of ordinary citizens. Popular discontent with the current economic model and a newly found ethnic consciousness among the country's indigenous majority have contributed to mass mobilizations by new movements and trade unions against the government. These increasingly violent protests have not only persuaded the administration to terminate urban water supply contracts with multinational companies, but also forced the unpopular President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada ("Goni") to resign, after security forces killed dozens of protesters in October 2003. The current president, Carlos Mesa, remains popular, but politically isolated, and his 18 months in office have been characterized by endless conflicts and increasingly radical demands, which Mesa has found very difficult to handle. The traditional parties hardly contribute to improving governance and the armed forces have so far opted to stay on the sidelines.

More than half of Bolivia's population is of indigenous origin, divided into around 30 different tribes, many of which live under the worst socio-economic conditions and suffer from poverty, discrimination, and abuse. Both the highland majority peoples (Aymara and Quechua) as well as the lowland indigenous tribes are now better organized and express their discontent more openly. Their increased activism makes these communities more vulnerable to intimidation and violence aimed at silencing them. It is possible that with increasing mobilization, public and para-State repression against these peoples will also intensify.

Children and adolescents aged under 18 constitute 45 per cent of the Bolivian population, and a majority live in circumstances where their basic rights are not protected. Women and children are not only the groups most affected by high national levels of poverty, but are also more frequently affected by preventable illness, labour and sexual exploitation, and other forms of discrimination. Female participation in political and economic decision-making is very low.

Although religious freedom is not restricted and there are no reports of political prisoners in Bolivia, it can be dangerous to be involved in defending human rights, especially those of indigenous communities. Prison conditions fail to meet international standards and most prisons lack even basic facilities. Essential rights and guarantees of inmates are routinely violated and denial of justice, especially in pre-trial detention is a major problem. The political and social turmoil of 2003 led to a reduction in press freedom, and some government restrictions on independent reporting were imposed. As the confrontation between opposing camps in the current debates on Bolivia's political future continues to intensify, a climate of mutual intolerance is fostered which might trigger larger political violence in the country, especially against non-conformists like the coca growers.

Bolivia has traditionally not been a country with a large refugee population; the current number is 548 registered refugees, mainly from Peru and Colombia. New refugee inflows are highly unlikely, but the unstable political situation and economic crisis are causing a slow

and silent exodus of Bolivians, who go abroad in search of economic opportunity. These economic migrants, especially if they emigrate illegally, are vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking, problems which are neglected by the Bolivian government. If the current structural crisis results in a economic or political breakdown such a situation would not only put the refugee population on Bolivian territory at risk, but probably activate a completely new wave of refugees and internally displaced people, who would seek refuge from the violence in the cities and move into the countryside or abroad.

Given the extreme dependence of the country on external financing, the international community has had a very important responsibility in Bolivia but it appears that the impact of accumulated development aid on the social fabric has not been as decisive as intended, because efforts have not advanced much beyond the alleviation of the worst symptoms of underdevelopment and poverty. The sacrifices international donors ask them to make to comply with international adjustment mandates are perceived by ordinary Bolivians as mechanisms of foreign exploitation. International financial institutions and foreign investors in general become the targets of nationalistic attacks, which in turn creates an unfavourable climate for any kind of economic development. Their dominant position in Bolivia has led some international donors to abuse their authority by making the country a testing ground for untried policies, which have then failed and left widespread frustration in their wake.

The country currently finds itself in a prolonged, structural crisis which simultaneously affects the political system, the economic model and all social sectors. Recent events have shown a pattern of chronic instability, punctuated by major crises in February and October 2003 and March 2005. These crises have not resolved the underlying problems but have merely led to a temporary realignment of the contending factions, some being strengthened, others weakened. A new crisis could easily slide into more generalized violence and provoke the collapse of democratic institutions. The international community has a manifest interest in preventing such a development and needs to take all available measures to help avoid the breakdown of the current government. At present it seems very unlikely that a compromise will be reached on contentious issues such as drug eradication, regional autonomy movements, natural gas exports and external debt. Therefore the country will remain extremely vulnerable to violent conflict, and the risk of system breakdown is considerable for the foreseeable future. Conflicts may well come to a head around the issue of the drafting of a new Constitution, which is planned for the second half of 2005.

# 1 Historical, Political and Cultural Background

Bolivia is the fifth-largest and the poorest nation of South America. Since the War of the Pacific (1879-1882), when it lost its access to the Pacific Ocean, the country is land-locked. Its approximately 8.7 million inhabitants<sup>1</sup> has the highest proportion of indigenous people of any of the Latin American republics, with more than 50 per cent of indigenous origin. Until recently, monolingual Spanish speakers were a minority. At the same time Bolivia remains one of the least integrated nations in Latin America.

The fundamental historical weakness of the Bolivian State can be attributed to many factors. Composed of fractious regions separated by difficult geographical obstacles and each with highly developed identities, the country is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual with a precarious sense of nationhood. The majority of its population lives on the highland plains (*altiplano*), at an average altitude of 4,000 m, and in the slightly lower valleys of the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes mountains. The subtropical and tropical plains farther to the East, which make up more than 70 per cent of Bolivian territory, were sparsely populated until fairly recently. Bolivia is a predominantly rural society with an undeveloped industrial sector, but an important producer of primary materials, including silver, tin, rubber and, more recently, petroleum and natural gas, most of which are exported.

Since independence in 1825, society has been dominated by a White, Spanish-speaking, Europeanized elite, which controlled economic and political power and exploited the Quechua and Aymara speaking peasantry. The *mestizo* (mixed descent) and usually bilingual urban lower classes, lower middle class, and rural freehold farmers occupied an uneasy intermediate position between the elite and the indigenous masses. In such a system, political power was ultimately based on force. The political evolution of the country has been dominated by the attempts of the elite to maintain its exclusive position, which nevertheless went into a slow decline at the end of the nineteenth century. The established institutions received a major blow by the disastrous Chaco War (1932-1935), when Bolivia lost a substantial part of its territory to Paraguay, and they finally collapsed in the 1952 revolution.<sup>2</sup>

The revolution was the result of a combination of factors, including a crisis in the mining industry, demographic changes and the rise of socio-populist politics, which were exploited by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR). It had profound effects on Bolivia's social and political system, introducing universal suffrage, nationalizing the mining industry and starting an ambitious programme of agrarian reform. Nevertheless, the impact of the revolution remained limited, as it could not overcome deeply ingrained structures of racism, social hierarchy and economic exclusion. The very government decrees enacting radical reforms were addressed at a majority population that was hardly ever reached by any law, had no culture of literacy and was often not even fluent in the language of administration.<sup>3</sup> Internal divisions in the ruling MNR and the growing independence of the armed forces contributed to a weakening of the civilian government, and the army finally overthrew the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations estimate 2003. According to the last census in 2001, the country had a population of 8,274,325 inhabitants; see, Bolivia, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, *Censo de Población y Vivienda – 2001*, <http://www.ine.gov.bo> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>2</sup> Klein, H., *Bolivia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, L., *The Bolivian National Revolution: A Twenty-First Century Perspective*, in, Grindle, M.S. and Domingo, P. (Eds), *Proclaiming Revolution*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003

government of President Victor Paz Estenssoro in 1964. From then until 1982 Bolivia was ruled by a succession of populist military authoritarian regimes, characterized by marked and radical shifts of policy, coups and counter-coups and increasing corruption, fuelled by the rapidly growing international trafficking of illegal drugs, principally cocaine. After an aborted democratization attempt in 1980 massive civilian opposition, a serious economic crisis and escalating violence finally forced the military back into barracks and power returned to civilian hands in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of crippling hyperinflation, the first civilian president, Hernán Siles Zuazo (1982-1985), soon alienated his former political allies and was unable to govern effectively. His premature withdrawal from the presidency enabled Victor Paz Estenssoro to win a fourth presidential mandate, which he used to implement radical orthodox changes to the economy. A New Economic Policy (NEP), instituted by decree, devalued the currency, eliminated price and wage controls, severely restricted government spending and introduced new taxes. Although inflation was brought under control, severe recession followed and the resulting public discontent was stopped only by declaring a state of emergency. These policies represented a striking departure from the MNR's past. The collapse of world tin prices also accelerated the end of Bolivia's powerful public mining monopoly. Within only two years the State owned mining giant Corporación Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL) was forced to lay off 75 per cent of its workforce, and the traditionally strong organized labour federation, Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), suffered a major reverse in its political influence.<sup>5</sup>

President Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993) expanded and in some instances intensified the NEP, a policy which came to its neo-liberal climax under his successor, MNR president Gonzalo "Goni" Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997), who effectively privatized many public utilities and industries, among them the production of natural gas. General Hugo Banzer, who had won power in a 1971 military coup, made a civilian come-back and was elected president in 1997. Banzer's administration soon faced growing resistance due to his uncompromising anti-narcotics policy (the "Dignity" plan), which promised to completely eradicate illegal coca cultivation in the Chapare region, using aerial spraying and heavy-handed police tactics.<sup>6</sup>

The explosive public mood first came to a head when popular protest erupted in the city of Cochabamba in January 2000. The so-called "water war" arose out of grassroots resistance to rising water tariffs, after the government had given a concession for administering the city's water system to a multinational company.<sup>7</sup> Former president Sánchez de Lozada was re-elected in 2002 but his approval rate fell rapidly with the announcement of a new income tax perceived as unfair to the poor. Clashes between striking policemen and the Army during an attack on the presidential palace in La Paz led to 31 dead on 12 February 2003. The President's vacillation on drug eradication plans to sell Bolivian gas through Chile, and growing economic discontent caused a general strike and blockade of La Paz in September

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<sup>4</sup> Malloy, J. and Gamarra, E., *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia 1964-1982*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988; Bascopé Aspiazu, R., *La veta blanca*, La Paz: Ediciones Aquí, 1982

<sup>5</sup> Grindle, M.S., *Shadowing the Past: Policy Reform in Bolivia, 1985-2002*, in, Grindle, M.S. and Domingo, P. (Eds), *Proclaiming Revolution*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Farthing, L. and Potter, G.A., *Bolivia: Eradicating Democracy*, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 5, No. 38, June 2001; Associated Press, *Reformed Bolivian Dictator Still Stirs Angry Passions*, 27 May, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Nickson, A. and Vargas, C., *The Limitations of Water Regulation: The Failure of the Cochabamba Concession in Bolivia*, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2002

2003. This was met with armed intervention that killed 80 protesters but failed to stop the protests, and Sánchez de Losada was forced to resign in October 2003. Vice-President Carlos Mesa was sworn in for the remainder of his predecessor's term. There were repeated coup rumours in early 2004, and President Mesa surrendered his office on 6 March 2005 only to retract when Congress refused to accept his resignation and major parties signed a national pact to guarantee governability. Nevertheless, the government remains extremely vulnerable. After losing the support of Evo Morales, the coca grower spokesman who leads the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) party, Mesa depends on the same parties that unsuccessfully propped up his predecessor. Partial successes like the affirmative vote in the natural gas referendum in July 2004 and the sealing of the "National Pact" after the March crisis of this year have strengthened the President's hand, but popular protests have not abated and trouble is already stirring again in a controversial and far-reaching autonomy bid by the wealthy eastern department of Santa Cruz, which potentially threatens Bolivia's territorial integrity.

## 2 The Social and Economic Situation

Even though some progress has been made over the last decades, Bolivia's socio-economic situation remains characterized by chronic underdevelopment, placing it bottom in South America in terms of Human Development Index rating (114), life expectancy (63.7 years) and per capita income (US\$ 900 per year or, in purchasing power parity terms, US\$ 2,460).<sup>8</sup> Poverty, marginalization, economic exclusion and lack of political participation on the part of the indigenous majority have been firmly established features of Bolivian society for centuries and are a major factor contributing to increasing social unrest. In 2002, 14.4 per cent of Bolivia's population lived on less than US\$ 1 per day and 62.7 per cent lived below the national poverty line. Poverty is also growing considerably worse, with a 2.57 per cent increase between 1999 and 2002.<sup>9</sup> Income and wealth are very unequally distributed. The poorest 20 per cent of the population have a combined share of only 1.3 per cent of accumulated national income, while the wealthiest 20 per cent claim 63.5 per cent.<sup>10</sup> It is hardly surprising that 92 per cent of Bolivians find the current income distribution unjust or very unjust.<sup>11</sup>

Human rights advocates point out that the failure to protect social and economic rights is calling into question the quality and viability of Bolivian democracy. The enormous social inequality has been at the core of the fragility of Bolivia's democracy.<sup>12</sup> Widespread disaffection with the failures of economic reform is already turning into disaffection with the democratic system, putting at issue the political model institutionalized in 1982. Representative democracy, which has been working uninterruptedly since the re-

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<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise indicated statistics in this section derive from United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2004*, New York, 2004

<sup>9</sup> Landa Casazola, E., *Pobreza y distribución del ingreso en Bolivia entre 1999 y 2002*, La Paz: Unidad de Análisis de Políticas Sociales y Económicas (UDAPE), 2003

<sup>10</sup> Gray Molina, G., *Desigualdad en Bolivia*, La Paz: Unidad de Análisis de Políticas Sociales y Económicas (UDAPE), February 2004

<sup>11</sup> Landa Casazola

<sup>12</sup> Albarracín, W., Bolivia: La difícil defensa de los derechos económicos, sociales y culturales, in, Freres, C. and Pacheco, K. (Eds), *La protección de los defensores de los derechos humanos en América Latina*, Madrid: AIETI; RECAL, 2003

democratization, is not losing its appeal because of the undeniable advances made in terms of participation, but because of the disappointing socio-economic results achieved.<sup>13</sup>

As has already been pointed out, Bolivia is a very poorly integrated country, where many different cleavages and fissures intersect. The various groups and peoples are guided by different value systems and goals, which also create a variety of social behaviours and economic actions. These differences show that structural heterogeneity is a defining feature of Bolivian politics, society and economy.<sup>14</sup> Some parts of the country have formed strong autonomous identities (e.g. the eastern and southern lowlands with Santa Cruz as its centre). Those most affected by marginalization are the indigenous peoples, who are not only impoverished and discriminated against, but also suffer from the ineffectiveness and corruption of institutions set up to support and assist them. One of the most crucial issues is still the access to land and land management by indigenous groups.<sup>15</sup> Marginalized people are disproportionately affected by poor or nonexistent health care, as shown by the more than 9,000 cases of tuberculosis annually reported in Bolivia, most of them from among the undernourished and unemployed.<sup>16</sup>

Some areas of the country are furthermore subject to natural disasters which tend to increase the socio-economic cost of marginalization. The south-eastern Chaco region is an area where drought is endemic. Currently, the Chaco is experiencing an especially severe drought, which is placing the government's limited resources under additional stress. In late 2004, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued an emergency appeal to aid approximately 180,000 people affected by the drought, 26,000 of whom are children under five years of age.<sup>17</sup>

In Bolivia's geographic extremes arable land forms only 2.67 per cent of the whole national territory.<sup>18</sup> In spite of the radical agrarian reform of 1953 which destroyed the old *hacienda* system, and established a new class of communal peasant landowners, distribution of land remains a serious problem. According to official figures, 87 per cent of usable land (28 million hectares) is in the hands of only 7 per cent of land owners. The remaining 93 per cent own only 4 million hectares. Moreover, only 5 per cent of the land belonging to the big proprietors is being exploited, which has provoked landless peasants, organized in the controversial Movimiento Sin Tierra (Movement of the Landless) in the Chaco and Santa Cruz regions, to stage large-scale organized and illegal land seizures.<sup>19</sup>

Reconciling indigenous land tenure interests with the requirements of modern capital-intensive agro-production is a complicated operation, because the European-derived legal

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<sup>13</sup> Toranzo Roca, C., Bolivia: Nuevo Escenario Político, *Nueva Sociedad* [Caracas], No. 182, 2002, pp.12-20

<sup>14</sup> Laserna, R., Bolivia: La crisis de Octubre y el fracaso del Ch'enko: Una visión desde la economía política, *Anuario Social y Político de America Latina y el Caribe*, Vol. 7, fc; also at [http://www.geocities.com/laserna\\_r/boliviaheterogenea5.pdf](http://www.geocities.com/laserna_r/boliviaheterogenea5.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>15</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Bolivia 2003 Annual Protection Report*, Geneva, 2004

<sup>16</sup> Anualmente se presentan 9 mil casos de tuberculosis en Bolivia, *Jornada* [La Paz], 20 February 2005

<sup>17</sup> U.N. Global Appeal Launched to Aid Bolivians Hit by Drought, *Washington File*, 17 November 2004

<sup>18</sup> United States, Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book 2004*, Washington, 2004, updated to 10 February 2005, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bl.html> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>19</sup> Econoticias Bolivia, Se reactiva la toma de tierras, 11 November 2003, <http://www.econoticiasbolivia.com/documentos/notadeldia/tierrastomados.html> [accessed March 2005]

system and its definition of land tenure is basically incompatible with indigenous, non-codified ideas and the claims based upon them. The encounter of these irreconcilable concepts of land tenure and usage inevitably leads to conflicts. Often, land claims by indigenous groups are not taken into consideration by the State, due to their perceived lack of profit potential according to market criteria. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the *altiplano* and the lowland indigenous populations do not see themselves as a unified group, but rather as representing separate interests.<sup>20</sup>

Under the pressure of hyper-inflation, the Bolivian government adopted a drastic programme of structural adjustment in 1985 under the name of New Economic Policy. The reduction of the role of the State, liberalization of domestic markets and the creation of a more internationally oriented economy were its main goals. Trade liberalization and the encouragement of foreign investment were central features of this policy. Bolivia is now one of the most open economies in Latin America, but economic analyses suggest that liberalization has not produced the desired outcome. Reallocation of resources from declining industries, which were forced to close or cut back production under the impact of import competition, has not led to new resources for export activities. Productivity in manufacturing has only grown minimally, and mainly because of reductions of the workforce.<sup>21</sup> Such growth in exports as has occurred has been mainly in the area of primary and semi-processed goods, reinforcing Bolivia's status as a natural resource exporter, vulnerable to external shocks and the fluctuations of international commodity prices.<sup>22</sup>

As the terms of trade have developed very much against Bolivia, the country has a permanent foreign trade deficit and is highly dependent on international development financing and loans. When democracy was introduced Bolivia exported goods for US\$ 1,000 million per annum. In 2003, export earnings amounted to US\$ 1,300 million (in 1982 prices), but imports are in the order of US\$1,600 million annually. This results in a trade deficit of between US\$ 300 million and US\$ 500 million per year, further complicating Bolivia's fiscal problems. Due to its poor credit rating, Bolivia has practically no access to private forms of financing. At present, 99.6 per cent of Bolivian external debt is owed to public creditors and only 0.4 per cent to the private sector. This should be compared to 1981, when 58 per cent of the debt was publicly and as much as 42 per cent privately owed.<sup>23</sup> In 2001, foreign aid amounted to 9.4 per cent of GDP, creating what some have called an "aid regime".<sup>24</sup> Concomitantly, the country's main international creditors have largely taken over the direction of budgetary and economic policy.

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<sup>20</sup> Mertins, G. and Popp, J., *Experience of Development with Tenure Rights of Indigenous Groups in Andean South America, Example Bolivia*, Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 1996

<sup>21</sup> Jenkins, R., Trade Liberalization in Latin America: The Bolivian Case, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1997, pp. 307-25

<sup>22</sup> Nina, O. and Brooks de Alborta, A., *Vulnerabilidad macroeconómica ante shocks externos: el caso boliviano*, La Paz: IISEC, 2001

<sup>23</sup> United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, Effects of Structural Adjustment Policies and Foreign Debt on the Full Enjoyment of Human Rights, Particularly Economic, Social and Cultural rights: Report..., E/CN.4/2003/10, 23 October 2002

<sup>24</sup> Lessmann, R., *Bolivia: Trópico de Cochabamba: Condiciones políticas marco para procesos de autonomía multicultural*, Vienna Proyecto Latautonomy, November 2003, [http://www.latautonomy.org/EstudioPolitico\\_BO\\_Lessmann.pdf](http://www.latautonomy.org/EstudioPolitico_BO_Lessmann.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

Despite debt relief granted by many of its creditors, Bolivia's debt burden has increased in real terms from US\$ 2,652 million to US\$ 4,337 million over the period 1981-2001. Foreign debt represents 51.2 per cent of GDP, while the annual debt service hit a record of US\$ 318 million, or US\$ 70 million more than at the time of the initial Stability and Adjustment Programme in the early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Further complicating matters, the fiscal deficit has spiralled from 3.7 per cent of GDP in 2000 to 8.1 per cent of GDP in 2003, and was only brought down to an estimated 6.1 per cent in 2004 with IMF assistance and considerable cutbacks in public expenditure.

In spite of twenty years of structural adjustment, first under the NEP, later in the form of president Sánchez de Lozada's "second generation" reforms, living standards for average Bolivians have not improved. The country remains poor, and poverty, far from being visibly reduced, is actually on the rise. Fiscal adjustment has not been accompanied by adequate investment in social programmes. Public discontent among the victims of this "inequitable globalization" has been the logical consequence. On the other hand, not all of Bolivia was equally negatively affected by the liberalization and the growing size of foreign direct investment in the country. Large landowners and agro-entrepreneurs, especially in the eastern lowlands, took advantage of the growing paralysis of the central government and the open international economy to diversify and export their produce. These also form a key constituency of vociferous defenders of the current system.

### **3 Political Developments, Structure and Forces**

#### **3.1 Recent Political History**

Historically, Bolivia's political system has always been unstable and since 1938, the country has seen five different constitutions and countless presidential crises.<sup>26</sup> After the turbulent re-democratization in the early 1980s, the country entered a phase of relative stability, based on a policy of pacts between the major political forces, especially the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario), the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria) and General Banzer's ADN (Acción Democrática Nacionalista). Successive presidents, who generally continued their predecessors' policies, were elected from all three parties. The military largely stayed out of politics and even the inchoate party system received a boost by the growing consolidation of the Congress. Bolivia was widely regarded as a rare case of successful democratic transition despite unfavourable socio-economic conditions. Nevertheless, discontent with the liberal economic and democratic political system was already brewing among the excluded majority. On three occasions after 1985 elected governments imposed a state of emergency to deal with labour and other organized protests, employing the armed forces to quell dissent.<sup>27</sup>

Developments since the inauguration of the presidency of Hugo Banzer in 1997 have shown that the assumed stability of Bolivia's democracy was always more apparent than real. There has been popular frustration over the lack of social development and growing controversy

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<sup>25</sup> United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, Effects of Structural Adjustment...

<sup>26</sup> Solimano, A., *Governance Crises and the Andean Region: A Political Economy Analysis*, Santiago de Chile: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2003, <http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/DesarrolloEconomico/0/LCL1860PI/lcl1860i.pdf> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>27</sup> Gamarra, E. A., Hybrid Presidentialism and Democratization: The Case of Bolivia, in, Mainwaring, S. and Shugart, M.S., *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 363-93

associated with the illicit production and the eradication of coca, leading to a newly-found combativeness on the part of peasant organizations and unions. This, combined with an economic downturn, corruption and inept government strategies, produced a hardened opposition, which escalated its resistance against the policies implemented by the government in the capital. As the country entered a succession of crises, the political forces behind the current model were weakened. The escalating crisis of governance came to a first peak with the outbreak of major violence in 2003, on a scale not seen since the time of authoritarian rule. The subsequent resignation of the President under popular pressure showed that Bolivia's political system has reached a crucial breaking point, where the contending forces can no longer resolve their differences within the boundaries of constitutionally established institutions. The current government of Carlos Mesa, while apparently symbolizing a return to normalcy, and experiencing considerable public approval, has not been able so far to resolve any of the underlying problems, which have fed discontent and confrontation in the past. Another outbreak of violence, similar or worse to the one in October 2003, is therefore increasingly possible.

### 3.2 The President

A well-known intellectual and journalist, Carlos Mesa was recruited as vice president by Sánchez de Lozada to make his unpopular second administration more acceptable. In the crisis of February 2003, Mesa stayed loyal to the President, while the rest of the cabinet resigned, but in the October clashes he publicly withdrew his political support for the President, without however, actually stepping down. This enabled him to take over the presidency, avoiding a major constitutional crisis after the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada.

Possibly influenced by the experience of his predecessor, who was abandoned by his own coalition parties in the 2003 crises, President Mesa has not even attempted to resurrect the political pacts which were previously fundamental for governance. This, however, also represents his biggest problem, in that he commands no allegiance among any of the established parties, which control both houses of Congress. For his cabinet, Mesa mainly named technocrats, who were not affiliated with any party, and his government has been largely ignoring or trying to bypass the traditional party leaders, who are understandably frustrated over this development. With the President isolated and his initiatives blocked by the Congress, he has tried to appeal directly to the people via television. This has further added to the tension in his relationship with the political parties, while producing little in terms of results.<sup>28</sup>

Another setback has come from the Constitutional Court, which ruled in November 2004 that Mesa's appointment of 17 interim high judicial officials was unconstitutional. Following this, the government took the unusual step of officially pleading with the Court to annul the ruling.<sup>29</sup> There is general agreement that the government is very weak and has no room for manoeuvre in attempting to fashion policies acceptable to all sides. Mesa often finds himself reduced to the tactic of postponing unpleasant decisions, and prolonging his interim rule which lacks a clear popular mandate. As one Bolivian observer put it "our president does not rule, he is ruled".<sup>30</sup> Boosted by rather solid popular support (his approval rate is around 60

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<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, *Bolivia's Divisions: Too Deep to Heal?*, Latin America Report, No. 7, Quito; Brussels, 6 July 2004

<sup>29</sup> Presidente Mesa pide al Tribunal que anule su sentencia, *Correo del Sur* [La Paz], 19 November 2004, <http://www.tribunalconstitucional.gov.bo/article197.html>

<sup>30</sup> Bolivian political scientist, Madrid. Personal interview, 3 February 2005

per cent), Mesa has shown considerable skills so far in perpetuating his tenure, e.g. by sacrificing half of his cabinet to counterbalance the negative fallout from the unpopular energy price hike in January 2005.<sup>31</sup> Frustrated with the deadlock, the President's resignation announcement on 6 March was a final attempt to rally the country behind him,<sup>32</sup> and at least in the short term, Mesa got what he asked for, as traditional parties made a formal commitment of support (the National Pact of 8 March). However, this did not translate into a willingness to pass a hydrocarbons law according to the government's expectations. In spite of Mesa's warnings legislators chose to raise taxes on profits for foreign energy companies from 18 per cent to 32 per cent.<sup>33</sup> The government had no means of forcing Congress to reconsider and take its concerns into account. Mesa's subsequent bill to dissolve Congress and convoke early elections was rejected as "unconstitutional" by all political forces, and the President was reduced to affirming that he would not resign from office.<sup>34</sup> In sum, recent events have left the already overpowered and outmanoeuvred executive further debilitated in the struggle for Bolivia's political future.

### 3.3 The Political Parties

The political party landscape is highly fragmented and characterized by poor discipline manifested in frequent party switching, by the rise and fall of populist parties, and by a lack of coherent party platforms or programmes. Opinion polls consistently show extremely low levels of public trust in political parties.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, between 1985 and 1997, a party system based on the competition of three major parties evolved, the centrist MNR, the ADN on the right and the MIR on the left, who always between them took more than 50 per cent of the national vote. Governments were usually constituted by an alliance between two of the "big three", with the third excluded from power.

This changed with the 2002 elections, where two new forces, the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) and the MIP (Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti) representing indigenous and peasant communities, received an unprecedented 27 per cent share of the vote. MAS leader Evo Morales came a close second in the race for the presidency.<sup>36</sup> In the second round of the presidential elections, within parliament, the traditional parties were forced to close ranks and – despite considerable misgivings – elect Sánchez de Losada in order to deny victory to the "anti-system" contender Morales.<sup>37</sup>

Evo Morales, who is the son of a poor Aymara peasant on the *altiplano*, as a young man moved to the Chapare region, where his family began growing coca on newly colonized lands. After joining the union of the *cocaleros* (coca growers), he became their leader, and

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<sup>31</sup> Mesa cambia ministros mientras crece el pedido de Constituyente, *La Razón* [La Paz], 1 February 2005

<sup>32</sup> Bolivian Chief, Angling for Support, Offers Resignation, *New York Times*, 8 March 2005

<sup>33</sup> Aprueban diputados proyecto de ley de hidrocarburos en Bolivia, *La Jornada* [Mexico], 17 March 2005

<sup>34</sup> Bolivia Leader to Stay in Office, *BBC News*, 18 March 2005,  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4360157.stm> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>35</sup> Calderón G., F., Cuestionados por la sociedad: los partidos en Bolivia, in Meyer, L. and Reina, J.L. (Eds), *Los sistemas políticos en América Latina*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1992

<sup>36</sup> Mayorga, R., *Las elecciones generales de 2002 y la metamorfosis del sistema de partidos en Bolivia*, [San José]: Observatorio Electoral Latinoamericano, 2002,  
<http://www.observatorioelectoral.org/biblioteca/?bookID=19> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>37</sup> Van Cott

successfully transformed this single-issue movement into a broad left-wing electoral coalition. A gifted politician and so far untainted by corruption, Morales does not hide his ambition for the presidency.<sup>38</sup> Some observers have noted that MAS has shown ambivalence about democracy in the past, but Morales nowadays professes firm allegiance to the electoral process.<sup>39</sup>

Both new political forces, the MAS as well as the smaller MIP led by Felipe Quispe, have played a dual role of political party and popular movement, combining the use of parliamentary debate with direct action in the street if demands are not met. The controversial Felipe Quispe (alias El Mallku) is an Aymara Indian, who started as a guerrilla fighter and spent five years in prison after his capture in 1992. He now holds the post of executive secretary of the Unified Confederation of Peasant Workers (CSUTCB), a major union for Bolivia's large agrarian population, and has founded his own political party, MIP, which preaches radical Aymara nationalism.<sup>40</sup> Quispe, a ferocious critic of the government and foreign influences in Bolivia, has constantly used pressure tactics (blockades, hunger strikes, etc.) to advance his political aims. Quispe has announced his intention to rebuild a communitarian indigenous and socialist society (*qullasuyu*), but remains unclear whether MIP wants to take over power in the whole country or aims at secession.<sup>41</sup>

Evo Morales, on the other hand, adapting to his new position of recognized major presidential candidate has somewhat mellowed his rhetoric.<sup>42</sup> MAS leaders constantly emphasize their democratic convictions and for a time the party quietly supported the government in the National Assembly. More recently, however, MAS has taken a more confrontational line with Mesa and warned the President to give up his "unrealistic projects".<sup>43</sup> In the municipal elections of December 2004 the party won the mayoral races in almost two thirds of mostly rural municipalities, as well as securing 351 seats on municipal councils, more than double the number obtained by its closest rival, the MNR.<sup>44</sup> The results confirmed MAS as the most important political force in Bolivia. As it turns more centrist, reaching out to the urban middle class, the party is also becoming more vulnerable to criticism from the social movements, unions and the more radical MIP, which asserts that collaboration with the government amounts to treason.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Irigaray, M., *Evo Morales: Una contradicción que presta sentido a un pueblo*, Buenos Aires: CADAL, 6 December 2004, [http://www.cadal.org/articulos/nota.asp?id\\_notas=806](http://www.cadal.org/articulos/nota.asp?id_notas=806) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>39</sup> Bruschtein, L., Entrevista a Evo Morales, líder cocalero boliviano, *Página 12* [Buenos Aires], 7 March 2005

<sup>40</sup> Bigio, I., El nacionalismo radical aymara, 25 May 2004, <http://www.bigio.org/nota.asp?IDNoticia=2014> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>41</sup> Vinelli, N., 'Los ayllus y el capitalismo son sistemas antagónicos': entrevista a Felipe Quispe, el Mallku, *Resumen* [Buenos Aires], 20 June 2002

<sup>42</sup> Souviron, A., Más que un candidato indígena, *BBC Mundo*, 10 July 2002, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/specials/elecciones\\_en\\_bolivia/newsid\\_2120000/2120244.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/specials/elecciones_en_bolivia/newsid_2120000/2120244.stm) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>43</sup> Uncos, P. L., Carlos Mesa tiene que entender que el apoyo del MAS no se negocia: entrevista al diputado del MAS Antonio Peredo Leigue, *Nueva Mayoría*, 8 February 2005, <http://www.nuevamayoria.com/ES/ENTREVISTAS/050208.html> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>44</sup> MAS y MNR son fuerzas con más concejales en el país, *La Razón* [La Paz], 15 December 2004

<sup>45</sup> MIP Leader Felipe Quispe vacated his seat in Parliament in 2004, arguing that party politics was useless and the struggle had to be continued in other areas and with other actors. Nevertheless, his MIP participated in the normal fashion in the municipal elections in December. See, Pool de Nuevas Agencias de América Latina,

### 3.4 Trades Union Movement

In the past, politics in Bolivia was intimately connected with unionism. The labour organization COB was a fundamental pillar of the revolutionary government after 1952, when it effectively co-governed for some time, before becoming increasingly alienated from the MNR leadership. For many years afterwards, the COB remained the single most powerful union, capable of paralyzing the whole country through strikes and worker mobilization. In the 1980s, however, many worker and peasant unions were greatly weakened through the impact of structural adjustment policies. A concomitant shift occurred within the COB, where the traditionally strongest member union, the mine workers' federation, Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (FSTMB), was replaced by the coca growers' unions headed by Evo Morales.<sup>46</sup> As a consequence, the COB became much more combative and has taken a leading role in mobilizations and street protests under its current and controversial president Jaime Solares.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.5 Armed Forces

The armed forces number 32,500 soldiers, 55 per cent of whom are conscripts and 45 per cent professionals, and have a long history of interference with politics.<sup>48</sup> Although they command a relatively small portion of State expenses (2.6 per cent of the 2004 budget<sup>49</sup>), the generals have often been important decision-makers behind the scenes. A crucial factor behind this influence is the military's direct connection with the US, where it receives money and training. This connection has been greatly strengthened by the counter-narcotics campaigns beginning in July 1986 (Operation "Blast Furnace"), which are carried out by a special 6,000 strong brigade under US supervision and with US tactical support. In the turmoil of February 2003, the Army defended President Sánchez de Lozada against an angry mob, including many striking police officers. Since then, it has remained largely neutral, staying on the sidelines of the political and socio-economic controversies erupting between *altiplano* and lowland citizens. In the current situation of political stalemate, it is not surprising that President Mesa has tried to draw the military to his side. This has involved confirming the appointments of the current top military leadership,<sup>50</sup> and trying to get the generals to participate in the writing of a new constitution.<sup>51</sup> It remains to be seen whether the military will become more actively involved in day-to-day politics, but it is clear that it will put its institutional weight behind national unity.<sup>52</sup>

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Bolivien: 'Wir setzen auf die Mittelschicht' – Interview mit Ivan [Evo] Morales, 9 January 2005, <http://www.npla.de/poonal/p653.html#bo> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>46</sup> Gamarra, E. A., *The Construction of Bolivia's Multiparty System*, in Grindle, M. S. and Domingo, P. (Eds), *Proclaiming Revolution*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003

<sup>47</sup> La autobiografía de Jaime Solares, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 28 March 2004

<sup>48</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2002-2003*, London, 2003

<sup>49</sup> Fundación Libertad, Democracia y Desarrollo, *The Budget for State Security in Bolivia 2004*, Santa Cruz, April 2004

<sup>50</sup> Mesa firmó la orden de destinos de las FFAA: el alto mando militar y los mandos de las tres fuerzas fueron ratificados, *La Razón* [La Paz], 1 January 2005

<sup>51</sup> Strategic Forecasting Inc., *Bolivia: The Military and the New Constitution*, 7 December 2004

<sup>52</sup> Las FFAA reivindican su presencia en todo el territorio, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 3 January 2005; Las FFAA reafirman que serán únicas y con un solo mando, *La Razón* [La Paz], 1 February 2005

## 4 Socio-economic Factors and Developments

### 4.1 Regional Tensions

The long-neglected and sparsely populated region of the eastern lowlands (departments of Santa Cruz and Tarija) has developed with astonishing speed since the 1960s. Santa Cruz is now the wealthiest department in the country, where big agro-businesses produce soya beans and fruit for export, and most of the large reserves of petroleum and natural gas are found. Santa Cruz de la Sierra has become the fastest growing city and the economic capital of Bolivia. Its inhabitants are mostly descended from European immigrants, lending an ethnic aspect to the conflict with the – indigenous – majority in the *altiplano*. In October 2004, a Civic Committee in Santa Cruz, led by a member of the wealthy business elite, presented an “ultimatum” to the government, demanding an immediate national referendum on regional autonomy.<sup>53</sup> With President Mesa initially reluctant to endorse this demand, and politicians like Evo Morales quick to condemn the initiative as an attempt by “racists and fascists” to sell out the country to foreign interests,<sup>54</sup> massive demonstrations and hunger strikes were held in Santa Cruz, and the Civic Committee issued a declaration on 21 January 2005 that it would establish itself as an independent government.<sup>55</sup> A week later, the central administration agreed to the direct election of local authorities that had previously been centrally appointed, the autonomous administration of finances and a referendum on regional autonomy before August. While most mayors accepted the proposal, radical *altiplano* leaders from peasant indigenous communities and the MAS immediately rejected such departmental elections before the successful completion of the Constitutional Assembly planned for August.<sup>56</sup>

Calls for more regional autonomy have been made before, but three developments coincided to induce the lowlanders to pursue a more aggressive strategy. With 90 per cent of natural gas reserves located in the east, the inhabitants of the region feel a certain reluctance to share this wealth with the economically declining *altiplano* departments. These in turn are now seen as increasingly radicalized, and are especially critical of any attempt to use foreign capital to expand the exploitation and commercialization of natural resources, especially hydrocarbon reserves, which they label as a conspiracy to steal the nation’s wealth. Finally, the obvious weakness of the Mesa administration has served as an invitation to confrontation, which is duly escalating and perceived as a struggle in which only one side can win.<sup>57</sup> This perception has dangerously raised the stakes in the regional conflict, which is already seen by the most pessimistic analysts as a catalyst for civil war and the eventual break-up of the republic.<sup>58</sup>

### 4.2 Grass-roots Mobilization and Political Participation

As the previously described developments have shown, a major, or even decisive element in all political struggles in Bolivia is the ability to mobilize people, to amass sympathizers on

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<sup>53</sup> Strategic Forecasting Inc., Bolivia: Negotiating a Better Deal on Hydrocarbon Wealth, 1 November 2004

<sup>54</sup> Domínguez, N., Carlos Mesa se autogolea: entrevista a Evo Morales, jefe del Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) de Bolivia, *Nueva Mayoría*, 21 January 2005, <http://www.nuevamayoria.com/ES/ENTREVISTAS/050121.html> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>55</sup> El Parlamento de Bolivia apoya el autonomismo de Santa Cruz, *El País* [Madrid], 24 January 2005

<sup>56</sup> Campesinos bolivianos reclaman Constituyente, *La Hora* [Quito] 21 February 2005

<sup>57</sup> Bolivian journalist, La Paz. Personal interview, 21 February 2005

<sup>58</sup> La Otra Verdad News, ONG pronostica el fin de la democracia y guerra civil en Bolivia, 14 October 2004, <http://ar.geocities.com/laotraverdad/bol104a.html> [accessed March 2005]

the street and block lines of communication and traffic, virtually bringing the country to a standstill. This policy of “governing from the streets” has historically been the tool of the miners and other Bolivian unions in their struggles with the government in La Paz. The particular geography of La Paz in a kettle on the *altiplano* makes the city especially vulnerable to this sort of mobilization, because protesters only have to cut off a few key roads to completely block access to the city.<sup>59</sup> Nowadays, this instrument of protest has been perfected and is widely employed by all sorts of social actors and pressure groups. Not only indigenous and labour activists employ them, but also business associations and even bourgeois advocates of regional autonomy. The impression is that popular discontent with the normal mechanisms of interest mediation, such as political parties, has reached such levels that many ordinary Bolivians prefer to take their anger to the streets themselves, instead of trusting some established channel to give voice to their concerns. During the 17 months of the Mesa presidency his administration has had to confront 820 protests and marches.<sup>60</sup> This incessant rhythm of citizen demands carried forward by street pressure puts an almost unbearable strain on the governability of the country. The MAS bears a large responsibility for this development, since it has consistently opted for a strategy of incorporating every available source of opposition to the government into a nation-wide movement and used that instrument of pressure at its convenience.<sup>61</sup>

## 5 The International Aspect

### 5.1 Direct External Influences

Given the extreme dependence of the country on external financing, the most important international players are Bolivia’s donors, multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the IMF as well as bilateral ones, especially the United States. President Mesa made this clear when he said that those who were calling for the country to make no concessions to foreign interests were overlooking the inconvenient fact that the national treasury could not even pay the costs of public salaries with the limited amount of tax revenue generated by Bolivia.<sup>62</sup> It is clear, however, that two decades of foreign aid, foreign direct investment and debt relief have not had a measurable impact on growth rates and poverty reduction. Some data indicate that foreign aid actually increases inequality and deepens poverty.<sup>63</sup> In spite of the proven inefficiency of many of their recipes, organizations such as the IMF have been reluctant to authorize a departure from economic orthodoxy, which puts the government in an untenable position between international pressure and national expectations. President Mesa tried to square the circle by presenting a new development strategy to donor governments, which would have given the State a greater role as driver and promoter of the economy. First reactions were not favourable.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group, *Bolivia’s Divisions...*, p. 10

<sup>60</sup> Bolivia’s Leader Says He Plans to Offer His Resignation Monday, *New York Times*, 7 March 2005; for further background see Chavez, W., Crises et poussées sécessionnistes en Bolivie, Réseau Information Solidarité Amérique Latine, 24 February 2005, [http://risal.collectifs.net/article.php3?id\\_article=1263](http://risal.collectifs.net/article.php3?id_article=1263) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>61</sup> Gamarra, E. A., *Conflict Vulnerability Assessment Bolivia*, Miami: Latin American and Caribbean Center, Florida International University, 2003

<sup>62</sup> Mensaje del Presidente Carlos Mesa anunciando su renuncia a la Primera Magistratura, *La Razón* [La Paz], 7 March 2005

<sup>63</sup> Andersen, L. E. and Evia, J. L., *The Effectiveness of Foreign Aid in Bolivia*, La Paz: Instituto de Investigaciones Socio-Económicas, September 2003

<sup>64</sup> European diplomat, Madrid. Personal interview, 8 February 2005

This almost total external dependency has led to several problematic developments. On the one hand, the repeated injections of international aid into State and non-State institutions has created a bureaucratic and social elite which acts as a “development aid clientele”: it has outwardly embraced western development goals and modernization rhetoric while in reality perpetuating traditional patterns of political behaviour, including authoritarianism and corruption.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, precisely because the effects of modernization have been disappointing for the large majority of the population, the fiscal dependence upon external financing and the sacrifices they are asked to make to comply with international adjustment mandates are perceived by ordinary citizens as mechanisms of foreign domination and exploitation. The international financial institutions and foreign investors in general then become the targets of nationalistic attacks, which in turn creates an unfavourable climate for any kind of economic development. For the international donors themselves, their dominant position in Bolivia has led some to abuse their authority by making the country a testing ground for untried policies.<sup>66</sup>

Another group of actors with a natural stake in the evolution of the situation in Bolivia are the country’s neighbours, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Paraguay. Of these, the most important relations are with Argentina and Brazil, both partners in the South American free trade area Mercosur, while the most conflict-ridden relations are those with Chile, and the most harmonious with Peru.<sup>67</sup> Probably in an attempt to deflate domestic pressure, Carlos Mesa made the recovery of Bolivia’s lost access to the Pacific Ocean into a major plank in his government’s policy platform. Bolivian diplomats everywhere received instructions to present the Bolivian position in this dispute with Chile to their host governments. Chile was embarrassed by the new international attention to this issue, but did not budge, pointing out that previous bilateral negotiations had already brought substantial concessions to Bolivia. Bolivian nationalism continues to run high on the question, but the uncompromising stance of the Chilean government will make progress in the direction desired by Bolivia impossible. The Chilean government even removed its Consul General in Bolivia after an “unfortunate” declaration, which was interpreted as supporting Bolivia’s demand for a land corridor to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>68</sup>

## 5.2 Conflicts over Natural Resources

The allocation, distribution and export of natural resources has been a major factor of conflict in recent Bolivian politics. Drinking water, while not an exportable commodity, has been at the centre of heated controversies, as the government promoted private sector participation in urban water utilities, against the explicit wishes of the affected communities. This resulted in the first massive mobilization against privatization in Cochabamba in 2000, and similar events are now taking place in connection with the water concession in El Alto, a sprawling but impoverished satellite city of 700,000 inhabitants on the outskirts of La Paz.<sup>69</sup> In both

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<sup>65</sup> Mansilla, H.C.F., Manipulated Modernization: The Case of Bolivia, *International Politics and Society*, No. 2, 2004, pp. 162-74

<sup>66</sup> International Crisis Group, *Bolivia’s Tensions...*

<sup>67</sup> Queiser Morales, W., Toward a New Bolivian Foreign Policy? The Past, Present and Future, *Bolivian Research Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, February 2002, pp. 4-36

<sup>68</sup> Chile dismisses its Consul General to Bolivia, *Santiago Times*, 28 September 2004

<sup>69</sup> Shultz, J., The Second Water War in Bolivia, *ZNet*, 19 December 2004, <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=52&ItemID=6893> [accessed March 2005]

cases, the government has been forced to rescind the concession contract with the multinational company, leading to multi-million dollar compensation charges which are currently being arbitrated. It would be tragic, although maybe unavoidable from a legal perspective, if the mass mobilization against foreign investment, which critics and activists have hailed as an important victory against economic globalization, would result in one of South America's poorest countries paying enormous sums in damages to large multinational enterprises.<sup>70</sup>

The 1990s saw the discovery of large natural gas deposits in the southern department of Tarija, which are believed to be the second largest in South America and currently valued at US\$ 70 billion. In recent years, these reserves have become the major focal point of political conflict. Bolivian businessmen and many politicians were eager to develop, process and market these resources, and Congress passed a law in 1996 allowing the partial privatization of the State oil and gas enterprise, Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB). This has led to foreign investment estimated between US\$ 3.5 billion and US\$ 5 billion over the last ten years. Bolivia has signed 78, typically long-term, private concession contracts with major transnational energy companies. Under the terms of these contracts, the foreign company pays only 18 per cent of its export earnings on natural gas to the Bolivian State.<sup>71</sup> Resistance to this policy grew and came to a head when President Sánchez de Lozada proposed that a new gas pipeline be built through historical enemy Chile to export Bolivian gas to the United States. This plan and the government's subsequent refusal to abandon it were the last straw for the opposition and opened the way for the final violent denouement in October 2003, which led to the resignation of the president.

His successor, Carlos Mesa, made several attempts to defuse the tension around this issue, and promised that a referendum on natural gas policy would be held and a new law on hydrocarbon resources drawn up. Nevertheless, the conflicting interests had become so entrenched by this time that it was virtually impossible to come to a mutually acceptable solution. Left-wing nationalists like the COB and the MAS demanded full-scale re-nationalization of the gas industry, whereas the multinational petroleum companies and domestic industrialists insisted on full compliance with the terms of existing contracts. A succession of ministers of mining and hydrocarbons tried to find solutions, but were forced to resign within weeks of taking office. The referendum held on 18 July 2004 was more an attempt to gain some time for the beleaguered government than an effort to really break the deadlock, because the questions put to the voters were sufficiently vague to permit conflicting interpretations.<sup>72</sup> Not surprisingly, the voters answered yes to Mesa's "five artful questions", which left the government with a somewhat wider margin of manoeuvre but left the crucial issues unresolved.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Olivera, O. and Lewis, T., *Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia*, Boston: South End Press, 2004

<sup>71</sup> Chavez, F., Bolivia: Deep Division over Referendum on Natural Gas, *Energy Bulletin*, 30 May 2004, <http://www.energybulletin.net/419.html> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>72</sup> The five questions voters were asked to decide were, whether they agreed that the existing Hydrocarbon Law should be repealed, whether all hydrocarbons should again become the property of the State, whether the State petroleum company YPFB should be re-established, whether they agreed that gas should be used as a resource to obtain a sovereign outlet to the Pacific Ocean and whether Bolivia should export gas under a national policy guaranteeing national needs and the payment of up to 50 per cent of taxes and royalties by foreign companies.

<sup>73</sup> Bolivia's Energy Referendum: Mesa's Middle Ground, *The Economist* [London], 22 July 2004

The real test consisted in the passing of a new law on hydrocarbon policy which would set the terms for the future development of the gas sector. The opposition immediately began organizing protest actions all over the country. In August 2004, farmers occupied the facilities of British Petroleum in the northeast and paralyzed oil production. Further actions interrupted gas exports to Argentina in the south of the country.<sup>74</sup> On the international front, several multinational companies announced that they were preparing billion dollar compensation claims if their rights were to be infringed.<sup>75</sup> On 17 October 2004, President Mesa warned that the time to approve the new hydrocarbons law had arrived, because Bolivia would lose millions of dollars with further delays.<sup>76</sup> Because of the controversies, the government was unable to move Congress to approve the administration's draft bill. In his resignation speech on 6 March 2005, and subsequent messages Mesa strongly criticized Evo Morales for wanting to approve an "unviable and impossible law".<sup>77</sup> The Bolivian Congress finally enacted a law which lies much closer to Morales' preferences than to Mesa's, prompting the government to warn that the country was heading for deep economic trouble. The MAS reacted by announcing that any changes made to the law would provoke a new major crisis.<sup>78</sup>

As one analyst has pointed out, the gas issue is probably not the real problem, but it is just a catalyst for many other social and political problems, most important of which is the fact that more than twenty years of free market economics and foreign investment have increased inequality, have not reduced poverty and have left intact existing social and economic exclusion. The "gas war" is fed by public frustration with an economic model that has not improved peoples' lives and with a political system based on exclusion and elite corruption.<sup>79</sup>

### 5.3 Coca Production, Narcotics Trafficking and the "War on Drugs"

Andean coca production and consumption is a centuries-old indigenous tradition that long predates the invention of cocaine. The international drug control regime explicitly recognizes this fact by exempting coca leaves from criminalization in Bolivia. The traditional zones of coca cultivation in the Yungas, to the east of La Paz, are also legally recognized. Since the late 1970s, however, the growing international demand for illicit cocaine has brought narco-trafficking to Bolivia and stimulated coca production. Many impoverished peasants and miners laid off from the state mining industry moved into the Chapare region, east of the city of Cochabamba, and started cultivating coca for the illegal market. Tens of thousands of coca farmers (*cocaleros*) and their families began living off this new source of income, and contributed to making Bolivia the world's second largest producer of illegal cocaine by 1990.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Econoticias de Bolivia, Campesinos toman campo petrolero, 17 August 2004, <http://www.argenpress.info/notaprint.asp?num=013346> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. Vinson & Elkins, Latin American Practice Group, *Bolivian Referendum on Natural Gas Passes: New Laws Implementing Referendum May Lead to Violation of Investors' Rights and Claims for Compensation*, 21 July 2004, <http://www.vinson-elkins.com/pdf/resources/LA072104.pdf> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>76</sup> Carlos Mesa advierte: se acaba el tiempo para aprobar ley petrolera, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 18 October 2004

<sup>77</sup> Mensaje del Presidente Carlos Mesa...

<sup>78</sup> Evo advierte que si se cambia la Ley de Hidrocarburos no habrá pacto social, *Bolpress* [La Paz], 6 April 2005

<sup>79</sup> Entrevista: Gas, el catalizador, *BBC Mundo*, 15 October 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_3191000/3191766.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_3191000/3191766.stm)

<sup>80</sup> Leons, M. B., and Sanabria, H. (eds.), *Coca, Cocaine and the Bolivian Reality*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997

After unsuccessfully trying to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the United States by interdiction, the government in Washington shifted to a “source country strategy”. For Bolivia this meant that coca had to be forcibly eradicated to bring down production. Under strong American pressure (“certification” as precondition of aid and loans) successive governments in La Paz, starting with the aggressive “Dignity” Plan of President Hugo Banzer, began to eradicate what was called “excess coca” in the Chapare, but also some in the Yungas. This created immediate problems for the peasants of the communities in the coca-growing areas, who were not only deprived of their only cash-crop without compensation, but who fell victim to serious human rights violations by anti-narcotics police and army special forces.<sup>81</sup> While the area planted with coca was substantially reduced (from 48,600 hectares in 1995 to 14,100 hectares in 2000<sup>82</sup>), the government’s refusal to talk to the *cocaleros*, combined with the failure of alternative development programmes and also the use of excessive force during the anti-narcotics campaigns, has moved the coca growers to put up strong resistance against the eradication policy, through self-defence groups setting up road blocks and entering into violent fights with State forces. The US government has also become more directly involved in the “drug war”, by setting up a special “expeditionary task force” in the Chapare, composed of former Bolivian soldiers who receive pay, training and weaponry from the US government.<sup>83</sup>

No government in La Paz has been able to find a solution to the dilemma resulting from irreconcilable expectations and pressure by international actors and *cocaleros*.<sup>84</sup> President Sánchez de Lozada tried over several months to negotiate an agreement, but any chance of a settlement disappeared in the face of adamant US opposition. Protests that had been called off for some time were resumed with increased violence and finally reached their apparent goal, the resignation of “Goni”, in October 2003.<sup>85</sup> President Mesa, equally constrained by external pressure, could not offer any more tangible concessions to the coca growers, but on 8 March 2004 tried at least to symbolically appease their demands by endorsing the proposal that Bolivia would press for the world-wide legalization of the coca leaf.<sup>86</sup> This demand is not new and was unsuccessfully advanced by Bolivia at the United Nations in the early 1990s. Rhetorical commitments of this kind have not been successful in persuading the *cocaleros* to give up their fields, and the renewal of eradication has been met with expansion of the areas under cultivation.

What appears fundamental is that excess coca cultivation is intimately related to poverty and lack of economic development. In spite of the fact that living conditions in the Chapare are

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<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Bolivia under Pressure: Human Rights Violations and Coca Eradication*, New York, May 1996

<sup>82</sup> Valenzuela, P., *Conflict Analysis Colombia, Bolivia and the Andean Region*, Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2002

<sup>83</sup> US Role in Coca War Draws Fire: Bolivian Anti-Drug Unit Paid by Washington is Accused of Abuses, *Washington Post*, 23 June 2002

<sup>84</sup> Enever, A., New Government, Same Old Coca War, *BBC News*, 7 September 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2242739.stm> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>85</sup> Ledeburn, K., *Coca Conflict Turns Violent*, Special Update: Bolivia, Washington: WOLA, February 2003, [http://www.wola.org/publications/ddhr\\_bolivia\\_memo\\_feb2003.pdf](http://www.wola.org/publications/ddhr_bolivia_memo_feb2003.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>86</sup> Contreras, A., Coca Decriminalization in Debate: The U.S. Pressures Bolivia while the Government and Coca Growers Hold Talks, *Narco News Bulletin*, No. 32, 13 March 2004

hardly attractive, and eradication puts an additional strain on people and the environment, there has been almost no registered outward migration, reflecting a lack of opportunity elsewhere in the country.<sup>87</sup> A policy that limits itself to labelling Evo Morales and his sympathizers as narco-traffickers or terrorists cannot work under such circumstances, but may still do much harm because it is totally out of touch with Bolivian reality.<sup>88</sup> Underfunded and often misdirected programmes of alternative development illustrate the lack of commitment to providing real alternatives for affected peasant communities, which continue to suffer under the human rights abuses and economic hardships associated with the current anti-drug strategy.<sup>89</sup>

## 6 Escalating Crisis

### 6.1 The Events of 2003 and Their Consequences

The strikes and violent clashes in El Alto and other parts of the country in October 2003 and President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's decision to call in military troops to put down the protests, leading to dozens of deaths, forced him out of office. The current mix of social unrest, weak institutions and economic crisis has created a dangerously unstable condition. After the events in October 2003, the new President, Carlos Mesa, promised that he would urgently tackle and resolve the most pressing issues, by convoking a still undefined Constituent Assembly, passing a new hydrocarbons law, and prosecuting the officials who had ordered the security forces to open fire on unarmed protesters. In theory, the government has conceded a great deal, but in practice it has found it increasingly difficult to implement the items of this so-called "October agenda".<sup>90</sup>

Politically, the post-October 2003 situation is as unprecedented as it is perilous. President Mesa has been governing "without politicians" and surrounded by a Cabinet of "independents". Congress should be the place where the elements of compromise and a programme for a future alternative are hammered out by government and opposition, but the will and ability to use the constitutional system in this way is absent.<sup>91</sup> The key leaders of the extra-parliamentary opposition prefer to use street power to advance their interests. The Mesa administration is politically isolated, not only within the political system, whose traditional power-brokers the President has largely shunned, but also with regard to the extra-parliamentary opposition and the international community. One of the weakest Bolivian governments in recent history, it has further emboldened demonstrators by repeated assurances that it would never use force to suppress protests. Thus, the executive has essentially surrendered control over government policy to the size and power of demonstrations.

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<sup>87</sup> Farthing, L., *Rethinking Alternative Development in Bolivia*, Special Update: Bolivia, Washington: WOLA for Andean Information Network, February 2004, [http://www.wola.org/publications/ddhr\\_bolivia\\_memo\\_ad\\_feb2004.pdf](http://www.wola.org/publications/ddhr_bolivia_memo_ad_feb2004.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>88</sup> Toranzo, C., *Bolivia: Visiones de Futuro*, La Paz: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung- ILDIS, 2002, p. 13

<sup>89</sup> Potter, G. A., Is the War on Drugs Bringing 'Dignity' to Bolivia?, *The Washington Report on the Hemisphere*, Vol. 19, No. 20, 29 November 1999

<sup>90</sup> Bolivia: Water, Oil and the Mob, *The Economist* [London], 29 January 2005

<sup>91</sup> Booth, D. with Piron, L.-H., *Politics and the PRSP Approach: Bolivia Case Study*, London: Overseas Development Institute, May 2004

The only means the President has left to sustain himself in power are dramatic appeals, populist announcements and political gambles like the resignation offer in March 2005. Such a strategy may work for some time, but its utility is limited and its use further weakens the presidency and puts the chief executive at the mercy of Congress and the social and political forces mobilizing on the streets. It is a clear sign of political exhaustion if the President needs to threaten his resignation in order to have the parties approve a compromise policy that is not even supported by the opposition parties MAS and MIP. To make matters worse, the grandly announced four-point “national accord” of 8 March, which resulted from the President’s challenge, contains a compromise that is apparently more declarative than effective.<sup>92</sup> MAS leader Evo Morales has already announced that the agreement is illegitimate because it does not represent the will of the majority of the people and that mobilizations will continue. Street mobilization by the opposition once again proved more effective than anything the government could have said or done, and the new hydrocarbons law reflects this skewed balance of forces. It is highly likely that the other issues of the “October agenda” will be resolved likewise.

One of the first challenges for the government was to ensure accountability for the October killings. Many of the popular organizations demanded that “Goni” and his ministers should be criminally punished and their economic assets in Bolivia seized. Recently he was even formally accused of genocide.<sup>93</sup> There are several impediments to making these demands a reality. Not only would such an investigation depend on a judiciary which has been traditionally slow and inefficient, but there are also political complications involved. First, the government has to tread carefully so as not to set a precedent for future administrations – including its own. Carlos Mesa was after all Sánchez de Lozada’s vice president, almost until the end of his mandate. Second, the government may want to avoid the impression of administering justice under the pressure of the street, which would further damage the already poor international image of Bolivia. Finally, the question depends on the US, where the deposed president now lives and from where he would need to be extradited, a development that is extremely unlikely.

The issue of the new gas law has been highly contentious and the Mesa administration appears no nearer to an agreement now than it was at the beginning of 2004. The government bill presented to Congress contains a number of items which are designed to reassure international investors, such as a commitment not to raise the level of royalties on exported hydrocarbons above the currently binding 18 per cent. These terms are unacceptable to the opposition and until recently the major parties in Congress were opportunistically seeking to take advantage of popular discontent by not clearly declaring their position. It remains to be seen whether the President’s “tour de force” in March 2005 will be sufficient to force the passage of the law. Even if the legislation should go through, it is fairly safe to assume that this will not be the end of the troubles. MAS and COB will without doubt continue to mobilize the street against the law, and its implementation (and long-term sustainability) against persistent resistance remains doubtful.

In response to popular pressure, especially in the Department of Santa Cruz, the government has promised to hold a referendum on political autonomy.<sup>94</sup> Again, as with other “initiatives”

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<sup>92</sup> Un pacto entre poderes con desenlace aún incierto, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 9 March 2005

<sup>93</sup> Terra and Associated Press, Presentan acusación formal contra Sánchez de Lozada por genocidio, 22 February 2005, <http://www.terra.com/actualidad/articulo/html/act191147.htm> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>94</sup> El pedido cruceño ingresó a la Corte, *La Razón* [La Paz], 19 February 2005

of the administration, this concession appears born out of the desire to avoid further escalation of confrontation and is not part of any long term strategy or vision about Bolivia's political future. It is a further effort to stave off the collapse of the Mesa presidency, even at the cost of long-term governability.

The single most important issue of the "October Agenda", which was already contemplated in the waning days of Sánchez de Lozada's short-lived administration, is without doubt the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. There are a number of problems associated with this proposal, which appears to have widespread support, even among diametrically opposed political forces. In the face of growing tensions, which are threatening to tear the country apart, an Assembly may be a possible means of bringing out the differences and discuss the underlying conflicts. The best possible outcome would be the successful forging of a basic consensus on essential socio-economic and political issues. However, it is at least as likely that the Constituent Assembly will not be able to resolve anything, but only exacerbate the existing tensions and provoke further conflicts. In a worst case scenario, the Constituent Assembly may find itself forced to deliberate under enormous pressure from the masses in the streets, which have been convoked by political forces that want to impose their own agenda onto the delegates. Under such circumstances, the result may well be a Constitution whose terms are dictated by radical activists, or the abortion and break-down of the whole exercise.

## **6.2 Towards Another Breakdown?**

As we have seen from the previous discussion, there are several highly explosive conflict lines running through Bolivia at the moment, and further tension and confrontations may erupt into a major crisis at any time. This crisis situation is exacerbated by the political weakness of the government, which is trying to please all constituencies, even if their demands are diametrically opposed. In a desire to control a situation which in reality has escaped his control long ago, President Mesa has launched numerous ideas, proposals and initiatives, which are not only hardly developed, but may well be incompatible or prejudicial to each other. It is for example, totally unclear how the proposed autonomy referendum, the promise of direct elections for department prefects and the envisaged Constituent Assembly will combine in the territorial reorganization of Bolivia.

While the executive is motivated by securing its political survival, and traditional political parties are free-riders trying to maximize their short-term profit by offering support to whichever cause appears to command majority support for the moment, the ideas of the radical opposition are less easily identifiable. The MAS has so far stated very clearly which policies it opposes, but has refrained from producing any elaborate alternative plan. After initially supporting President Mesa, it now appears bent on his destruction. In late February 2005, MAS initiated an escalating campaign of roadblocks throughout Bolivia. Evo Morales has apparently already opened his bid for the presidency and wants to get rid of caretaker President Mesa as soon as possible. MAS appears to prefer early general elections, in 2005, two years ahead of schedule, instead of convoking a Constituent Assembly. Morales, who is heading most polls, currently has good chances of being elected president.

For MAS it would be more convenient if Morales became president before the constitution is changed so he can draft one according to his own preferences, like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez did in 1999. It is therefore to be expected that MAS will further intensify its pressure on the government. The next few months until the elections for the Constituent Assembly will be crucial in this regard, because they will decide who controls the agenda of

the body charged with writing a new basic law for the country. If Mesa can hold onto the presidency and manages to successfully conclude the drafting of a new constitution, it is clear that Morales' chances of gaining the presidency would diminish significantly.<sup>95</sup>

The President has currently no possibility of winning in a contest of mutual threats with the opposition, as his only weapon is capitalizing on his still considerable approval rates and portraying himself as the last defence against the outbreak of chaos. It will be difficult to catalyze the diffuse and unorganized support among the average citizens who may be tired of permanent paralysis but not sufficiently antagonized, yet, to take to the streets in favour of the government. Mesa is trying hard to produce such a civic counter-force, to set against the thousands mobilized by government opponents, without resorting to the Army, as he has promised. It is hard to imagine that such a strategy can work, but if it does, Bolivia would face a scenario similar to that of Venezuela, where two roughly equal camps are in complete deadlock over the country's political future and the outbreak of civil war is a serious possibility.<sup>96</sup>

While leaders of every political persuasion spin intrigues and accuse each other of corruption or worse, the country is on the verge breakdown.<sup>97</sup> A major future crisis could take the form of a democratic impasse, but could also be much worse, with prolonged blockades, street-fighting and violence which could completely paralyze the national government. Under such circumstances, either the armed forces could reluctantly – because they are ill prepared for such a mission – step back into the political arena, or the business and economic elites, who have already urged President Mesa to secure public order, could take the law into their own hands and start forming vigilante and paramilitary groups to combat the demonstrators.<sup>98</sup> Such a scenario would have unforeseeable consequences for the country, and the whole region.

## **7 Groups at Risk of Serious Human Rights Violations**

### **7.1 Indigenous Groups**

As already mentioned, the indigenous people of Bolivia form a slight majority in the overall population, although they are far from homogenous. A basic distinction exists between highland and lowland inhabitants. In the densely populated *altiplano*, members of the Aymara (1,549,320) and the Quechua (2,298,980) tribes are mostly peasants, though many have migrated to the cities. The eastern, forested, lowlands are populated by more than 30 different smaller language groups, among them the Guaraní (75,500), Chiquitano (61,520) and Moxeño (38,500).<sup>99</sup> The Bolivian State has defended the view that international legal

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<sup>95</sup> Strategic Forecasting Inc., Bolivia: Elections, Constitutions and a U.S.-Brazilian Alliance?, 4 March 2005

<sup>96</sup> International Crisis Group, *Venezuela: Headed Toward Civil War?*, Latin America Briefing, No. 5, Quito; Brussels, 10 May 2004

<sup>97</sup> The MAS has traditionally excelled at cultivating its image of being incorruptible, while lashing out at political opponents, who are routinely accused of being “delinquents and mafiosos”. See, Evo Morales critica al comité autonómico de Santa Cruz, *La Razón* [La Paz], 19 February 2005. However, there have been accusations of corruption against the MAS also; see En el MAS admiten que hay corrupción, pero no división, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 29 May 2004

<sup>98</sup> Empresarios exigen garantías de Presidente Mesa, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 9 March 2005

<sup>99</sup> Bolivia, Viceministerio de Asuntos Indígenas y Pueblos Originarios, *Desarrollo con identidad: Política nacional indígena y originaria*, La Paz, 1998

provisions relating to the protection of indigenous peoples only apply to the forest dwelling populations, but not to the more settled indigenous peoples on the *altiplano*.<sup>100</sup>

The problems and conflicts these groups have had to resolve were traditionally distinct, depending on their cultural and geographic circumstances. The lowland Chiquitano people are struggling to obtain State protection of their lands, as guaranteed in national legislation. The conflict pits the community against a private company that is illegally cutting down their forest reserve and has allegedly issued threats against the lives of their leaders and legal advisers.<sup>101</sup> Only fairly recently, the lowland tribes have come together in CIDOB (Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia – Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia), which has successfully copied the pressure tactics (marches and blockades) employed by the highland Aymara and Quechua to achieve their aims.

The much larger and more modernized Aymara and Quechua communities in the *altiplano* have been a key constituency in national politics since the 1950s, constituting a “stable and conservative anchor” for the MNR party and later for successive military governments in the 1970s.<sup>102</sup> Feeling abandoned by the traditional parties, and under the influence of new ethno-nationalist concepts, indigenous leaders since re-democratization have begun to shape autonomous institutions or to take over organizations like the governmental land workers’ union. A crucial factor in the mobilization of these groups has been the experience of internal migration in search of economic opportunity, while maintaining ties to their traditional communities and often experiencing discrimination based on their ethnic identity. A new-found self-awareness and much better organization characterize the movements led by Evo Morales (MAS) in the Chapare and Felipe Quispe (MIP) in the *altiplano*, which took shape in the 1990s. Members of both communities as well as the lowland indigenous peoples are now more organized and express their discontent more openly. While drawing more national and international attention to their cause, this newly-found publicity also makes these communities more vulnerable to intimidation and violence aimed at silencing their complaints. There is a risk that with increasing mobilization and activism, public and para-State repression against these peoples will also intensify.

There is also a more general danger which is related to the possible further deterioration of living conditions in Bolivia. If one of the crisis scenarios came to pass, the population that would most suffer from the socio-economic deterioration would be precisely the indigenous people. They have already seen a reduction in living standards over the last few years and they will be the worst affected if there is a breakdown of Bolivia’s economic model or political system. This might even lead to large scale displacements of indigenous people internally, and – to a lesser extent – across the border.

## 7.2 Women and Children

According to the 2001 Census, 45 per cent of Bolivians are children and adolescents aged under 18, a majority of whom live in circumstances where their basic rights are not protected.

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<sup>100</sup> Thornberry, P., *International Law and the Rights of Minorities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 340

<sup>101</sup> United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People...: Addendum: Selected Summaries of Communications Examined by the Special Rapporteur, E/CN.4/2002/97/Add.1, 6 March 2002

<sup>102</sup> Van Cott, D.L., From Exclusion to Inclusion: Bolivia’s 2002 Elections, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 35, part 4, November 2003, pp. 751-75

Children and women are the groups most affected by high national levels of poverty. According to the 2002 Poverty Map, 2,500,000 children and 2,600,000 women live under conditions of poverty.<sup>103</sup> The causes of mortality in children aged under five are directly associated with poverty with 36 per cent of children's deaths due to diarrhoeal diseases, 20 per cent to acute respiratory infections, 16 per cent to problems related to childbirth, and an estimated 28 per cent to malnutrition. Almost half of Bolivian children between six and fourteen years, more than 800,000, have to work to survive, about 100,000 of them under inhumane and degrading conditions, e.g. in mining or child prostitution or as rural labourers.<sup>104</sup> Poverty also causes low levels of physical, mental and cognitive development. It is fair to say that in Bolivia a culture of respect for children's rights does not yet exist.<sup>105</sup>

The Human Development Report on Gender in Bolivia 2003 states that "Bolivia treats men better than women". Women are assigned a subordinate, traditional and dependent role. Men receive more and better education, increased and better health care, and have the possibility to generate greater income while working less. The illiteracy rate for women is 19.35 per cent, while the rate for men is 6.94 per cent. Maternal mortality in Bolivia is one of the highest in the world, 390 per 100,000 live births. In rural and indigenous areas the maternal mortality rate is much higher, reaching as many as 887 per 100,000 live births. The number of women in paid employment is constantly increasing. Since 1976 participation of women in the economy has doubled. At present, 44 per cent of women work. In urban areas, women tend to carry out the least productive and the worst paid jobs. This is due to discrimination and to the fact that their levels of education are lower than those of men. The situation of women in rural areas is even worse, in that there they are doubly discriminated against: because of their gender, and because of their indigenous origin. The participation of women in economic and political decision-making is very low.<sup>106</sup>

Bolivia is a country of origin, transit and destination for the trafficking of women and minors for sexual exploitation. Bolivian women and minors are trafficked inside the country and are taken overseas, mainly to Spain, Italy and Japan with false promises of jobs. According to reports from one municipality, between January and July 2004, 105 children were reported missing in the district that includes the capital, La Paz. Other alarming statistics come from the provinces of Beni, Pando, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, where every month an average of 45 to 50 children aged between 12 and 16 are recruited and later forced to work in brothels in the capital. Children and adolescents are also victims of trafficking for false adoption and forced labour. Recently, four children were abducted from the province of Sucre and were taken to work in the fields in the north of Argentina. Young girls are handed over by their families to traffickers who promise them jobs as domestic helpers or caring for the elderly. Once in La Paz, they are forced into prostitution.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Bolivia, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, *Bolivia: Mapa de Pobreza*, La Paz, 2001, [http://www.ine.gov.bo/PDF/PUBLICACIONES/Censo\\_2001/Pobreza/PBolivia.pdf](http://www.ine.gov.bo/PDF/PUBLICACIONES/Censo_2001/Pobreza/PBolivia.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

<sup>104</sup> La mitad de niños bolivianos debe trabajar para sobrevivir, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 9 January 2005

<sup>105</sup> UNICEF, Situación de la niñez en Bolivia, La Paz, 2004, <http://www.unicef.org/bolivia/infancia.infancia.htm> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>106</sup> Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, *Informe de Desarrollo Humano de Género en Bolivia*, La Paz, 2003

<sup>107</sup> Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, *Trata de personas mujeres, adolescentes, niños/niñas con fines de explotación en Bolivia*, La Paz, October 2004, [http://www.iom.int/en/PDF\\_Files/Other/bolivia\\_trafficking.pdf](http://www.iom.int/en/PDF_Files/Other/bolivia_trafficking.pdf) [accessed March 2005]

### 7.3 Political and Social Non-conformists

Bolivia has a culture of political protest, which at times has turned violent. In the tragic days of February and October 2003, the escalation of clashes between demonstrators and the security forces left more than a hundred dead and hundreds more injured. It appears that the authorities applied disproportionate force, firing into the crowds. The official investigation into these events is hardly making any progress, and there have been reports that it may be closed before it has been completed.<sup>108</sup>

While religious freedom is not restricted in any noticeable way, and there are no reports of political prisoners as such, it can be dangerous to be involved in defending human rights, especially those of indigenous communities. This is illustrated by the case of the lawyer Cliver Rocha, who works as an adviser to CIRABO (Central Indígena de la Región Amazónica de Bolivia - Indigenous Union of the Amazonian Region of Bolivia), and who was assaulted when leaving a court house in Riberalta on 23 April 2003, repeatedly beaten and threatened with death unless he left the area immediately.<sup>109</sup>

At the current time of widespread unrest and instability, the general potential for political violence in Bolivia is very high. The main line of confrontation in the immediate and medium future will be the struggle to define the political and economic course Bolivia should take in the coming years. Given the existing “culture of mobilization”, a large part of this struggle will be carried out on the streets, posing a serious challenge for the government. Anti-government protesters will therefore be clearly vulnerable to possible state countermeasures. Although President Mesa has maintained a policy of non-aggression until now, after receiving a renewed mandate from the Congress his most recent comments seem to indicate that he might be considering using force against the protesters.<sup>110</sup> Serious human rights violations are to be expected in a situation where public security forces, untrained in methods of peaceful crowd control, clash with angry protesters who have shown their propensity for violence in previous riots.

A very similar situation is faced by the coca farmers, who also have a tradition of street protest and imposing blockades on major lines of transport. Only in 2003, demonstrations and roadblocks in the El Chapare area staged by coca leaf growers left five peasants dead and dozens more injured during confrontations with the security forces.<sup>111</sup> As it is very unlikely that the government will reverse the current policy of forced coca eradication, the conflict with the coca growers is bound to continue. Their organized resistance to eradication will lead to further violence and human rights violations against *cocaleros*. As the coca growers form a core constituency of the MAS, such events could very well have repercussions in

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<sup>108</sup> Reports appear to indicate that cases of civilians who lost their lives are being transferred to military courts. At the end of July 2004, the two prosecutors in charge of the investigation said the investigation should be closed because it was “technically” impossible to identify those responsible for the deaths. They also referred to the application of Supreme Decree 27234 of 21 October 2003, which established a provisional amnesty for crimes covered by Law 2494, related to social protests between 5 August 2003, the date of publication of this law, and 4 November 2003, the date of publication of Supreme Decree 27234, See, Amnesty International, *Bolivia: Crisis and Justice: Days of Violence in February and October 2003*, London, 30 November 2004

<sup>109</sup> United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers ...: Addendum: Situation in Specific Countries or Territories, E/CN.4/2004/60/Add.1, 4 March 2004

<sup>110</sup> Mesa promete diálogo y ‘mano justa’ contra los bloqueadores, *La Prensa* [La Paz], 11 March 2005

<sup>111</sup> Amnesty International, *Report 2004*

other areas, motivating Morales to declare a more general strike or initiate other forms of mass protest in solidarity with the *cocalero* movement. Government violence against the coca farmers is therefore a possible trigger for widespread popular unrest and a further major crisis.

In the context of land struggles, human rights defenders in Bolivia face harassment and occasional violence in their work, mainly from private actors such as cattle ranchers or foresters. The violence is not part of a systematic government campaign, but more an expression of the inability of the government in La Paz to enforce the law and protect indigenous communities in outlying eastern provinces. Increased *altiplano* migration to the eastern lowlands is contributing to the rise in land seizures by landless peasants and generating violent clashes between the new colonists and the agro-businesses in Santa Cruz.<sup>112</sup>

#### 7.4 Refugees and Asylum Seekers

After re-democratization, Bolivia signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Additional Protocol, on 9 February 1982. The national Supreme Decrees 19639 and 19640 of 1983 define refugee status and the means of securing it and lay down the conditions for authorized stay in Bolivia. Supreme Decree 23763 of 1994 sets up a National Refugee Commission, composed of representatives of various ministries and NGOs.<sup>113</sup> All refugees are registered officially, including their status and addresses. According to an official Bolivian communication, their full freedom of movement and other individual rights are guaranteed under the Constitution.<sup>114</sup> However, as the current rules nevertheless contain some problems, and several provisions are incompatible with the 1951 Convention, UNHCR has lobbied the authorities for the enactment of a new governmental decree to fully implement the Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol.<sup>115</sup>

According to UNHCR statistics, there were 527 refugees and 1 asylum seeker registered on Bolivian territory at the end of the year 2003. Most of these (444) were Peruvian nationals.<sup>116</sup> The Bolivian Ombudsman (Defensor del Pueblo) has received and dealt with several complaints by Peruvian refugees, mostly because of unacceptably long waiting periods for identity documents. The residence permit is valid for one year, but the average duration of the registration procedure is six to twelve months, which forces the refugees constantly to present new applications, while their situation continues in legal limbo.<sup>117</sup> Following representations by UNHCR the Bolivian government has agreed to accelerate the issuing of identification documents to refugees. However, there have also been cases like that of Justino Soto Suárez, whose extradition to Peru was authorized by the Bolivian Supreme Court in 2000, despite his being a recognized refugee. The constitutional complaint filed by the Ombudsman against

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<sup>112</sup> Gamarra, *Conflict Vulnerability...*

<sup>113</sup> Feller, E., Türk, V. and Nicholson, F. (eds), *Refugee Protection in International Law: UNHCR's Global Consultations on International Protection*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003, pp. 165, 172

<sup>114</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Committee, Fifty-ninth Session, Summary Record of the 1563rd Meeting... Second Periodic Report of Bolivia, CCPR/C/SR.1563, 16 February 1997

<sup>115</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Global Report 2003, Geneva, 2004, p. 475

<sup>116</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Global Appeal 2005: Southern South America, Geneva, 2004, p. 319

<sup>117</sup> Bolivia, Defensor del Pueblo, *II Informe Anual de la Defensora del Pueblo al Congreso Nacional: Abril de 1999 a Marzo de 2000*, La Paz, 2000, p. 321

this decision (violation of the non-refoulement principle) was rejected by the Bolivian Constitutional Court.<sup>118</sup>

Like all other residents of Bolivia refugees and asylum seekers are also affected by the current economic and political instability, though not subject to any specifically targeted human rights violations. In spite of the apparent xenophobia of some radical elements in Bolivia's political system, it is hardly conceivable that this would lead to the persecution of foreigners (whether or not they are legally recognized refugees). It can be expected, though, that further unrest will diminish the – already rather limited – attraction of Bolivia as a destination for asylum seekers.

At the end of 2003 264 Bolivians were living abroad as officially recognized refugees, mostly in Germany and in Sweden.<sup>119</sup> 497 Bolivians filed asylum petitions during 2003, mainly in European countries and in Canada.<sup>120</sup> Since democratization, neighbouring countries in general do not accept requests for asylum from Bolivians. A case in point is Peru, which asked UNHCR to apply the “ceased circumstances” provision of the 1951 Refugee Convention to Bolivian refugees in January 1983, barely three months after the establishment of a democratic government in La Paz.<sup>121</sup>

The difficult socio-economic conditions in Bolivia make emigration attractive, but with the progressive closing of regular possibilities to obtain residence permits, more and more people are forced to migrate illegally. The number of Bolivians living abroad as legal or illegal immigrants is impossible to ascertain, as there exists no comprehensive statistical survey, but some evidence indicates that the numbers are considerable. A UNDP survey carried out in 1998 showed that 45 per cent of Bolivian households at that time had a family member abroad, which would suggest a total of at least 350,000 people. Of these, 51 per cent were living in Argentina, 10 per cent in Brazil and 9 per cent in the United States.<sup>122</sup> Figures from Argentina indicate that the totals are even higher, as more than 233,000 Bolivians were officially registered in the 2001 Argentinean census, and estimates that include illegal immigrants suggest a total of 560,000.<sup>123</sup> Recently talks have taken place between the Brazilian and Bolivian governments, aiming to find a solution for the thousands of Bolivians who live and work across the border illegally, mainly in the São Paulo region.<sup>124</sup> President Carlos Mesa has proposed granting mutual working permits to inhabitants of the common frontier area, and reciprocally abolishing passport controls for visitors.<sup>125</sup> At least 60,000

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<sup>118</sup> Bolivia, Defensor del Pueblo, *III Informe Anual de la Defensora del Pueblo al Congreso Nacional: 1° de Abril 2000 a 31 de Marzo 2001*, La Paz, 2001, pp. 189-96

<sup>119</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *2003 Global Refugee Trends*, Geneva, 2004, Table 3

<sup>120</sup> *Idem*, Table 7

<sup>121</sup> Fitzpatrick, J. and Bonoan, R., Cessation of Refugee Protection, in, Feller, Türk and Nicholson (Eds), p. 500

<sup>122</sup> Federación Iberoamericana de Ombudsmán, *Primer Informe sobre Derechos Humanos: Migraciones*, Madrid: Editorial Dykinson, 2003, p. 82

<sup>123</sup> OIM anuncia acuerdo para ayuda a inmigrantes bolivianos, *Bolivianos en el Mundo*, [7 February 2004], <http://www.bolivia.com/noticias/autonoticias/DetalleNoticia21290.asp> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>124</sup> Brasil deve regularizar situação de bolivianos, *Notícias Terra* [São Paulo], 16 February 2005, <http://noticias.terra.com.br/brasil/interna/0,,OI473120-EI306.00.html> [accessed March 2005]

<sup>125</sup> Acaba exigência do passaporte para brasileiros e bolivianos, *Dourados News* [Mato Grosso do Sul], 9 July 2004

Bolivians live in Spain, up to 90 per cent illegally.<sup>126</sup> Another indication that emigration, especially to Europe, is increasing is that the number of new passports issued has been growing dramatically, reaching a total of 63,273 during the first six months of 2004.

### 7.5 Detainees and Prisoners

Prisons are overcrowded and conditions fail to meet international standards; most prisons lack even basic facilities. According to official figures, as of October 2003 there were 5,587 prisoners in facilities designed to hold 4,700.<sup>127</sup> Violence and corruption are rampant. Bolivia's social hierarchy is reproduced inside its jails. A prisoner's money can determine cell size, access to health care, food quality, visiting privileges, eligibility for temporary day-time release, and place or length of confinement. The poorest inmates occupy tiny cells with no ventilation, lighting, or beds. There are approximately 800 children, some as old as 12 years, who live with a parent in prison, as an alternative to being left on the streets.<sup>128</sup> There is no adequate health care, and it is difficult to obtain permission for outside medical treatment. Convicted juvenile offenders are not segregated from adult prisoners. Rehabilitation programmes hardly exist. Torture is forbidden under the Bolivian Penal Code, but there have been reports of prisoners being subjected to beatings and cruel and inhumane punishments both by other inmates and by prison guards.<sup>129</sup>

Denial of justice is a serious problem, especially through prolonged detention. The maximum detention period of 18 months, while waiting for trial and sentencing, is routinely exceeded, as corruption, a shortage of public defenders, inadequate case-tracking mechanisms, and complex criminal justice procedures keep individuals incarcerated for months, or even years, before trial.<sup>130</sup>

The judiciary has long been the weakest of the three branches of the State and is widely viewed as a tool that the executive, the political parties and the military freely employ to achieve their private or partisan goals.<sup>131</sup> Both lower and upper court justices are regarded as corrupt and lacking independence in the face of political and financial pressures. Litigation costs are prohibitive, and generally viewed as necessarily including bribes. Many judges lack minimum qualifications to exercise their duties, and access to the courts remains out of reach for most Bolivians.<sup>132</sup>

### 7.6 Journalists

The Constitution provides for freedom of expression, but the political and social turmoil of 2003 led to a reduction in press freedom. Low literacy levels mean that for many people the main source of news is the radio, and there are both state-owned and privately run stations.

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<sup>126</sup> La Torre de Babel se halla en el corazón de Madrid, Lavapiés, *La Razón* [La Paz], 7 February 2005

<sup>127</sup> United States, Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003: Bolivia*, Washington, 25 February 2004

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Amnesty International, *Report 2004*, London, 2004

<sup>130</sup> United States, Department of State, *Country Reports...*

<sup>131</sup> Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, *Advancing Judicial Reform: An Environmental Case Study in Bolivia*, Washington, April 2000

<sup>132</sup> Gamarra, E. A., *The System of Justice in Bolivia: An Institutional Analysis*, San José: Center for the Administration of Justice, 1991

The political confrontation in 2003 fuelled increasing polarization of the media. Both the opposition and the government attempted to influence public opinion through media reports, creating an increasingly difficult environment for journalists. The number of journalists attacked and threatened by both government agents and civilian protesters increased significantly. Two radio stations were bombed, and there were attempts to censor newspaper coverage of the uprising. Privately owned media outlets that were critical of the government were accused of inciting violence and acts of treason but were not prosecuted. Journalists at a state-owned television station resigned in protest after being pressured not to show images of violence.<sup>133</sup>

## 8 The Role of NGOs and IGOs

### 8.1 National NGOs

The Bolivian State, as we have already seen, is characterized by structural weakness, which does not only express itself in the inability to control the national territory or effectively collect taxes, but is even more manifest in the lack of capacity to provide essential services and infrastructure to its citizens. To compensate for this chronic deficit, at least partially and incompletely, the society is increasingly coming together to form voluntary associations. This development was further encouraged by the State with the passage of the Popular Participation Law of 1994, which mandated the decentralization of certain State functions.<sup>134</sup> This created many additional opportunities for NGOs, which began to be frequently contracted by municipal bureaucracies to carry out specific development projects. Accordingly, the number of neighbourhood committees, church groups, lobbying institutes, alternative clubs, health clinics etc. started to grow and multiply. These organizations cover a wide variety of fields and work in areas such as health care, environmental protection, education, counselling, community service and work with children.

Their overall impact is difficult to assess but partial evidence suggests that especially in low-income and marginal communities like the El Alto on the outskirts of La Paz, subsistence and survival of the citizens would be much more difficult without such forms of association and self-help structures.<sup>135</sup> The Catholic Church, but also evangelical churches which have been growing significantly over the last couple of years, play an especially important role in this regard. Social mobilization and grass-roots activism also find a vehicle in the constitution of broadly based NGOs, e.g. the “Coalition in Defence of Water and Life”, which became instrumental in coordinating the eventually successful “water war” against Bechtel in Cochabamba<sup>136</sup> or the “Federation of El Alto Neighbourhood Juntas” under their leader Abel Mamani, which defeated the water concession contract with the multinational Aguas del Illimani. Different goals, but with many of the same tactics, are pursued by the pro-business Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, which is a main promoter of decentralization and regional autonomy. Until now, these organizations have functioned mainly as pressure groups which can mobilize thousands of people at short notice, but their long-term viability or contribution to positive development remains to be seen.

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<sup>133</sup> Karlekar, K.D. (ed.), *Freedom of the Press 2004: A Global Survey of Media Independence*, New York: Freedom House, 2004, pp. 65-6

<sup>134</sup> Kohl, B., Democratizing Decentralization in Bolivia: The Law of Popular Participation, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 153-64, 2003

<sup>135</sup> Gill, L., *Teetering on the Rim: Global Restructuring, Daily Life, and the Armed Retreat of the Bolivian State*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000

<sup>136</sup> Olivera, O. and Lewis, T., *Cochabamba! ...*

Apart from the aforementioned self-help and lobbying groups, national NGOs also play a significant role in other fields, not least human rights. Bolivia's most important human rights NGO is the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights in Bolivia (APDHB - Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos de Bolivia), which was founded in 1978. It works as a civilian, non-partisan, non-confessional and democratic platform for individuals and organizations dedicated to the advancement of human rights. Its three main lines of work are legal assistance, human rights education and training, and advocacy.<sup>137</sup> Although not an NGO, but a State institution, the Bolivian Ombudsman (Defensor del Pueblo) also needs to be named in this context.<sup>138</sup> This institution is a very important channel for voicing citizen complaints and one of the few State institutions that still seem to receive substantial levels of trust from ordinary Bolivians. An illustration of this is that in the latest political crisis, surrounding the resignation of President Mesa, current Ombudsman Waldo Albarracín, together with NGO and Catholic Church representatives, mediated between the different camps to find a way out of the crisis.

## 8.2 International NGOs

Motivated by Bolivia's low level of socioeconomic development, a large number of foreign activists and NGOs have been drawn into the country, aiming to make a difference and contribute to development. Most large international NGOs are present in Bolivia, e.g. Oxfam (since 1988, opened an office in 1993), CARE (since 1971), Doctors without Borders and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which recently opened a branch office in the *alteño* city of El Alto.<sup>139</sup> The main fields of activity for these international NGOs are agriculture, health care, water supply and environmental protection, alternative education and the fostering of small and medium enterprises. In some cases, these international NGOs have collaborated closely in the execution of projects with local project partners as implementers.

## 8.3 Inter-Governmental Organizations

Equally, a large number of international governmental organizations are present in Bolivia, working to raise the average standard of living, provide most needed services and enhance local livelihoods. Especially important are the international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the International Monetary Fund, which provide Bolivia with crucial financial support. Practically the whole range of United Nations specialized organizations have a seat in La Paz, among them UNDP, UNICEF, OCHA and UNDCP. Finally, there are quite number of bilateral donors and development agencies present in the country, the biggest among them USAID, followed by representatives of several EU countries.

Again it is difficult to make an overall assessment of the efficiency and impact these development aid activities are having on the social fabric, but it appears at least that they have not been as successful as intended, because results have not advanced much beyond the

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<sup>137</sup> Vilela, G., *'El silencio de los inocentes': Cien años de Derechos Humanos en Bolivia*, La Paz: APDHB, 2000

<sup>138</sup> See Bolivia, Defensor del Pueblo, *VI Informe Anual del Defensor del Pueblo al Honorable Congreso Nacional: Gestión 2003*, La Paz, 2004

<sup>139</sup> Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja, Bolivia: inauguran filial de la Cruz Roja en la ciudad de El Alto, La Paz: CICR, 13 December 2004, <http://www.icrc.org/Web/spa/sitespa0.nsf/html/67MPAT!OpenDocument> [accessed March 2005]

alleviation of the worst symptoms of underdevelopment and poverty. There are some joint initiatives of various donors, like the Education Reform Programme co-financed by the Netherlands, Sweden, the World Bank and the IDB, but in general overall coordination is poor. Some – especially smaller scale – initiatives have been quite successful, other, larger projects have been a failure.<sup>140</sup> The transparency of international aid and the problem of controlling corruption are important concerns.

The marked increase in international development cooperation funds has offered some Bolivian individuals and organizations the opportunity to find work with an NGO or found a new one, which “became an increasingly attractive employment option for many middle class professionals”.<sup>141</sup> This NGO boom has not always been positive, since it has raised doubts about the representativity and accountability of some of these organizations.

## 9 Key Issues and Possible International Interventions

Bolivia at present clearly is in crisis and the international community has a manifest interest in preventing the breakdown of the government. This overriding concern should not be motivated by a desire to take sides in the domestic political debate, but by the aim of preserving the institutions of democracy and prevent a slide into violence, anarchy or state collapse.

Concrete measures on the part of international actors could include the following:

- the setting up of an independent, international monitoring mechanism, which closely follows developments in Bolivia and gives early warning about crisis escalation on the ground;
- development of a contingency plan in case of further escalation, government collapse or violent conflict, identifying potential crisis areas and reaction strategies in case of possible population displacement following large scale political violence;
- a concerted effort to stabilize the external environment and avoid measures that further constrain the manoeuvring space of the government; this would in particular involve refraining from putting additional pressure on the President, e.g. through binding conditionality or stabilization targets;
- maximum transparency and effectiveness in all aspects of international agencies’ programmes, and exploration of additional ways to explain their activities to the often sceptical Bolivian population;
- greater efforts to promote human development, poverty reduction and increased equality as steps to improving the living conditions of the most disadvantaged;
- strengthening of local capacities for crisis management, rule of law and public administration in order to contribute to reversal of the deterioration of State authority;
- training of law enforcement officials in non-violent methods of crowd control, de-escalation of public confrontations and community policing;
- development and transfer of the necessary expertise to Bolivian decision-makers to enable them to better understand the impact on the rural poor of proposed policies.

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<sup>140</sup> United Kingdom, Department for International Development, *Evaluation of DFID Country Programmes: Country Study: Bolivia 2000-2004*, Evaluation Report EV656, London, January 2005

<sup>141</sup> Gill, L., *Teetering on the Rim...*

## 10 Conclusions and Outlook

Bolivia currently finds itself in a prolonged structural crisis, which simultaneously affects the political system, the economic structure and all social sectors. The events of the last few years have shown a pattern of chronic instability punctuated with the eruption of major crises in February and October 2003 and March 2005. These crises have not resolved the underlying problems but have merely led to temporary realignment of the contending factions, in which some have been strengthened, others weakened.

At the heart of the structural crisis lies the viability of Bolivia as a coherent nation and State. The country's social, ethnic and cultural fragmentation has never been overcome, and its political elite has never been willing or able to define a sustainable national consensus on the integration of Bolivia's multiple elements. This has led to a profound sense of exclusion among large sections of the population, which has hardened into a tradition of resistance, hardly accessible to the deliberations of liberal democracy. In this sense it hardly matters what happens in Congress, because many Bolivians do not see themselves represented there. The attempt to break the deadlock via the introduction of more plebiscitary elements (such as the gas referendum and the planned referendum on regional autonomy) and the writing of a new constitution may be a way to start closing the breach between population and decision-makers, but this does not solve the problem that the "will of the people" will always be subject to interpretation. It can fairly be assumed that the confrontation will continue at least in the medium term, the question is whether it can be mitigated or will escalate further.

The Mesa government, which has barely managed to retain power so far, appears overwhelmed by its tasks. Developing policies on the different contentious issues, such as drug eradication, regional autonomy movements, natural gas exports and external debt, which will satisfy the divergent interests seems impossible. As the current year advances, there will be several crisis points, where the latent conflicts can again break out into the open. Apart from the continuing turmoil on the streets, which is bound to continue at the current levels for the foreseeable future, confrontation and possibly violence will certainly build up around the most conflict-laden proposal for 2005: the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, which will be tasked with drawing up a new constitution for Bolivia. All contenders will try to have maximum representation and influence in the Assembly, and intense conflict and possibly a major crisis in the run-up to and during the convention will be guaranteed.

With spiralling external debt and no room for manoeuvre on natural gas exports, Bolivia has little possibility of economic recovery. Therefore, the State will have no funds available to alleviate poverty, improve social services or provide infrastructure. The policy of forced eradication of coca plantations is also certain to continue. This means that the structural conditions of inequality and marginalization, against which many protesters rebel, are also certain to continue for the time being. Therefore the incentives for further mobilization and anti-government protest will continue in place, and as Evo Morales has in the past not hesitated to exploit that discontent, they are sure to lead to further violent protests, some in the Chapare, where the issue is coca, and others in the *altiplano* where the whole country's political future is at stake. The question remains how the government will react to these protests, whether it will resort to the use of force, and whether MAS can exploit any casualties of security force action to coalesce a national mass mobilization against the government and use it to unseat the President. While not highly likely, this outcome is certainly possible and the political and economic consequences of such a scenario are completely open.

Should Bolivia go through a new period of presidential or even constitutional crisis, the possible outcome could fall anywhere from military intervention and assumption of – at least transitory – authority by the armed forces, to Evo Morales assuming the presidency. If he were to do so he would probably start to implement the MAS and COB agenda of economic nationalism, coupled with strong resistance to the autonomy tendencies promoted by a couple of civic committees in western Bolivia. A presidency of Morales, who also has a great number of detractors, again might quite possibly lead to further violence because the affected parties will put up resistance against the implementation of a strategy which is clearly directed against their interests.

So far the chain of events of one crisis following on the heels of another has been inconclusive, in so far as not one of the showdowns has led to the permanent resolution of an outstanding issue or problem. As the same conflicts are recycled, the confrontations get more acrimonious, and the pressure decision-makers receive from their impatient constituents is forcing them to adopt more uncompromising positions. If these recurrent problems are not resolved through the common effort of all involved actors, there is a real risk that what is left of the precarious institutional framework of the Bolivian State will collapse and with it the underlying minimum compromise which still holds the multiple identities and groups together in this fragile nation.

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