

Andean Report by Cynthia Rush

Venezuelan human rights scandal

Why isn't Washington investigating the human rights abuses under Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela?

By any normal standards of decency, the government of Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez would have long ago been the subject of a major human rights scandal in Ibero-America. CAP, as Pérez is known inside Venezuela, has trampled on constitutional and civil rights to smash all political opposition; he relies on a CIA-linked parallel security apparatus to keep himself in power, many of whose members are under investigation for drug trafficking, money laundering, and other illicit activities.

Over the past two months, evidence has come to light on the tactics used by government troops, on CAP's orders, in the aftermath of the Nov. 27 coup attempt against him, including torture, murder, and "disappearances" of presumed participants in that action. Military personnel and other civilian eyewitnesses have given shocking accounts of soldiers and civilians massacred in cold blood, crushed under tanks, shot at point-blank range through the head, and murdered in the act of surrendering, which violate every code of military conduct. Many detained in relation to Nov. 27 have been denied access to lawyers and have been kept incommunicado.

But there has been no hue and cry from the Bush administration, which has made defense of human rights the trademark of its policy toward Ibero-America. The Organization of American States hasn't sent the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to Caracas to investigate these abuses as it has done in the cases of Haiti and Peru.

On the contrary, the Bush administration has threatened through its mouthpieces that there will be hell to pay if any attempt is made to remove CAP from power. Why?

Venezuela is the premier example of the type of "democracy" Washington is promoting for all of Ibero-America. CAP has imposed the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity policies and assaulted those national institutions, such as the Armed Forces, which might resist them. His subservience to this agenda, which has virtually destroyed national sovereignty, has earned him the hatred of most Venezuelans; there were two attempts by nationalist military last year to oust him. Countries such as Peru which have challenged Washington's policies have been labeled "undemocratic" and "dictatorial." Yet CAP remains in power.

This is the kind of backup Pérez has received from the Anglo-American establishment since he took power in February 1989. Only three weeks into his term, the world witnessed his troops' merciless repression of thousands of poor people who took to the streets to protest the harsh austerity measures he imposed at the IMF's behest.

Following the Feb. 5, 1992 coup attempt, a psychological warfare and terror apparatus, including several long-time CAP "security guards" from the Cuban exile community who were trained by the CIA, was set up precisely to crush or blackmail political opponents. The group is reportedly coordinated by Lázaro Rogelio Ugarte Bresslau and Orlando García

Ugarte. Ugarte Bresslau is the head of a Miami-based company, Celere, Inc., which on three separate occasions has been investigated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for suspected involvement in cocaine trafficking. He is also attached officially to the DISIP, the political police which largely performs dirty operations on CAP's behalf. García is currently a fugitive from Venezuelan justice for fraud and illegal weapons sales.

Venezuelan press reported some time ago that this squad was set up by joint U.S.-Venezuelan intelligence teams with input from the U.S. Southern Command in Panama and operates out of a highly sophisticated bunker in Caracas.

Civil rights in the country remain suspended. Military nationalists who had escaped the purges following last February's coup attempt have been rounded up along with opposition lawyers, politicians, and intellectuals of every political persuasion. The country has been scandalized by the arrests of such prominent figures as José Antonio Cova and former Development Minister Manuel Quijada, on trumped-up charges of involvement in plotting the Nov. 27 coup attempt.

By presidential decree, CAP has ordered the creation of an "Accidental War Council" to conduct summary military trials of several hundred accused participants in that coup attempt, despite the fact that such an "extraordinary tribunal," as well as the military trials of civilians, are explicitly banned by Venezuela's Constitution, except in times of war. Lawyers for the more than 200 people detained have brought a legal challenge to CAP's war council before the Supreme Court. They consider this the last opportunity to impose the rule of law in the lawless state which has existed since 1989.