

Bush 'big stick' doctrine falls flat in Ibero-America

by Valerie Rush

Bush administration sponsorship of a multinational intervention force to prop up Ibero-America's failing "free market democracies" miscarried at the late March meeting in Buenos Aires of 11 foreign ministers of the so-called Rio Group. The proposed multilateral force, presented by the stooge government of Argentine President Carlos Menem, was vehemently rejected by the Rio Group despite a personal appeal for foreign military backing issued the same week by Venezuela's beleaguered Carlos Andrés Pérez.

According to the final communiqué of the Rio Group, which made no explicit reference to the Menem proposal, "In no case can political, economic, or social difficulties developing in countries as a consequence of internal or external factors be turned into a pretext that can be used to transgress the institutional juridical order." Particularly strong were the comments of Mexican Foreign Minister Fernando Solana, who said that "democracy must conform to the soul of each country, and can never arrive through the agency of a foreign army." Uruguayan Foreign Minister Héctor Gros Espiel emphasized the same point, insisting that "democracy cannot be carried at the point of a bayonet, but only by the will of the people. . . . One must be inflexible with respect to the principle of non-intervention."

The Venezuelan President's desperation to sway the ministers in his favor was reflected in his comments to the Mexican daily *El Nacional*, published March 28, in which he insisted on the concept of "supranational rights which should be defended by the entire Latin American region." One of those rights, he argued, was to "multilaterally defend" the popular will, "as expressed at the ballot box." Pérez insisted that "in defending the principle of non-intervention, Latin America has lamentably fallen into indirect support of dictatorship."

The drive for a multinational deployment force was not only roundly defeated by the foreign ministers in Buenos Aires, but was nearly universally denounced inside Venezuela as well. Leading opposition congressman José Rodríguez Iturbe issued a statement to the press saying that "no military presence, not even in the event of a coup, would be admissible" in Venezuela, and that "our law and order, or disorder, are our business. . . . We don't want a superpolice, or a

superjudge, to tell us how to behave."

Former President Luis Herrera Campins penned a March 29 newspaper column, entitled "Don't Help Us, Mr. Danger," which asked bluntly if the United States "has lost its marbles, and all sense on how to treat its friends?" Even Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich, a staunch supporter of Carlos Andrés Pérez, and Venezuelan Ambassador to the Organization of American States Guido Grooscors, thoroughly opposed the idea of "an inter-American military force."

A 'second independence'

The unified stance of most of the Americas against a renewed "big stick" doctrine on the part of the Bush administration and its stooges leaves Washington with few options in the face of Ibero-America's spreading "second independence" movement. Any attempted military intervention in the name of preserving rotten "International Monetary Fund [IMF] democracies"—with or without the fig leaf of multilateral backing—would trigger civil-military explosions across the continent.

It comes as no surprise, for example, that a recent poll of the Brazilian military delivered to President Fernando Collor de Mello revealed that the majority of the Armed Forces consider the Feb. 4 military uprising in Venezuela to have been an example of "laudable nationalism." Most of those polled expressed "alarm" at the degree of corruption afflicting Collor's own administration.

Indeed, the extensive cabinet shuffle which President Collor ordered the last weekend in March was viewed by many as a "last-ditch" effort to preserve his government. According to one prominent Brazilian analyst, "Collor was either going to clean up his government, or fall with it." The April 1 *Washington Post* reported, "Many observers had begun to fear that Brazil's democracy. . . might go the way of Venezuela, where President Carlos Andrés Pérez recently faced a coup attempt from military officers dissatisfied with government corruption."

In Peru, military outrage at corruption in the upper ranks and impossibly low wages is creating "severe tensions," according to *Sí* magazine. Another weekly magazine, *Oiga*,

concluded an article on the spreading unrest within the Peruvian Army with the comment that “the winds from Venezuela are kicking up dust in the Peruvian barracks.”

Unrest in Argentine military circles is apparently widespread enough to trigger rumors that some military action would be attempted on April 2, the 10th anniversary of Argentina’s retaking of the Malvinas Islands from Great Britain. Rumor or not, President Menem was reportedly sufficiently nervous that he refused to leave the city to travel south to Rio Gallegos where an anniversary celebration had been planned. According to the daily *Clarín*, the presidential palace, the Casa Rosada, was transformed into a rumor-monitoring center in anticipation of a possible nationalist military action on April 2. Menem’s repeated, if transparent, attempts to involve the nationalist *carapintada* military movement in last month’s terrorist bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, is one more symptom of the President’s worsening case of nerves.

The “pots and pans” demonstrations, known as *cacerolazos*, which were employed in citizens’ protests against the government in Venezuela, are now being adopted in Bolivia and Colombia as well. On March 26, some 20,000 teachers, workers, students, and housewives took to the streets in La Paz, Bolivia to attack the pro-IMF economic policies of the social democratic Jaime Paz Zamora government. Mass opposition to the government’s policies, coupled with growing rumors of military rebellion in that country, forced Paz Zamora to reshuffle his cabinet two weeks earlier.

That President Paz, like his Venezuelan colleague, is feeling less than confident in the longevity of his administration was suggested by his April 1 deployment of the special GES police unit against several thousand rural and urban teachers, who were peacefully marching in downtown La Paz for better wages. In what was described as an unprecedented brutal assault, the GES forces used rubber hoses against teachers and journalists alike. A state of siege is now feared, while the teachers and other workers are pledging to return to the streets in force.

In Colombia, workers and housewives from several different federations organized a *cacerolazo* on March 28 against the César Gaviria government’s free market austerity program, in explicit imitation of the Venezuelan example. SEAP, a political association linked to former President Carlos Lleras Restrepo, published a statement April 1 pointing to the half-million unemployed resulting from Gaviria’s radical free market “opening,” and warning that the “enormous cost” of such policies “could have unpredictable results, seen in the experience of other countries in which there have been breaks in the democratic form of government and the emergence of populist movements.”

Repression, and more repression

Inside Venezuela, the temperature continues to rise daily. The government’s refusal to lift its ban on such

constitutional rights as the freedom to assemble is being repeatedly challenged by growing numbers of Venezuelans, despite the Pérez government’s determination to hold on to power through brute force and repression. On April 2, in the face of warnings by Interior Minister Luis Piñerua that the action would be considered illegal, citizens assembled in Caracas for a silent march of protest. They were met by billy clubs, water cannons, tear gas, and mass arrests. On April 8, a “civic strike” against the government is being planned nationwide, to test the government’s alleged restoration of the right to strike.

Amid official reports that 45% of all Venezuelan households live on less than the minimum wage, and that 80% of the population lives in a situation of relative or critical poverty, a mission from the despised International Monetary Fund dared to make an appearance in Caracas, where it announced that the government’s budget deficit was unacceptable. The IMF “technicians” proposed either more budget cuts or imposition of a new sales tax, similar to that being imposed—and fiercely resisted—in several other Ibero-American countries. According to the March 31 *El Nacional*, the IMF crew is “optimistic” because the Pérez government has indicated its willingness to impose the tax, even if not in the “short term.”

Col. Hugo Chávez, the leader of the rebel military forces known as “the Bolivarianos,” has been issuing a stream of communiqués and appeals to the nation to take on the task of rebuilding their nation—morally, politically, and economically. In a letter addressed to “the Venezuelan people” and published in *El Nuevo Diario* of April 1, Chávez urged Venezuelans to “escalate the fight against this corrupt government.” He asked, “How long are you going to accept such insult, such offense? Is there no way of making the dictator Carlos Andrés Pérez resign?”

And, in a direct challenge to the high military command which has remained loyal to the Pérez government, the *Bolivarianos* scored the army generals for their distance from the people: “Our generals never imagined that while they were out making political contacts for their next post and enjoying sumptuous parties with funds from the budget, the lower ranking officers were meeting to discuss the rise in unemployment, interest rates, the collapse of agro-industry, and expanding poverty.”

Addressing a public forum at the Central University of Venezuela on March 30, Gen. Carlos Santiago Ramírez (ret.) summed up the rebels’ challenge in comments covered extensively in the press of Venezuela and in numerous other Ibero-American countries: “There is no democracy here. . . . We have a dictatorship of the party elites, of corruption, and of injustice. . . . No one can conceive of a people participating in its own destruction. We must not lose sight of the fact that what is known as democracy in this country is linked to the great centers of power; a ‘democracy’ connected from its inception to foreign capitalism.”