

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A 'cricket with a thousand voices'

Anti-government protests escalate in Venezuela, as the desperate CAP regime abandons its democratic facade.

Yet another protest against the Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP) government rocked Caracas April 8, when a "whistle protest," known as the *pitazo*, made the capital city sound like "a cricket with a thousand voices," according to one newspaper account.

Despite brutal repression, media censorship, and the government's characterization as "subversive" of all involved in the action, there was massive participation. The demands, as always, were for CAP's immediate resignation, the freeing from prison of the Bolivarian rebel military leaders, and against implementation of International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates. The *pitazo* coincided with a national civic strike which had the backing of the head of the Caracas city council, the Caracas electricity workers, teachers, the Society of Journalists, judicial workers, and the Federation of University Centers, among other groups.

According to *El Nuevo Diario*, "For the first time in the democratic history of Venezuela, the country experienced scenes of violence and tension characteristic of a civil war. . . . Gas bombs were thrown from helicopters into western portions of the city. The metropolitan police and national guard were raiding homes and abducting people." Numerous incidents of violence broke out throughout the day as police attempted to confiscate whistles being distributed on street-corners.

While protests in some areas were limited to whistle-blowing, banging pots and pans, and fireworks, in others, stone- and bottle-throwing led to

sometimes bloody confrontations with the National Guard. In the city of San Juan de los Morros, effigies of President Pérez were burned in the streets "in anticipation of the burning of Judas during Holy Week," according to one newspaper. In the city of Mérida, the headquarters of the ruling AD party was assaulted and burned. Demonstrators in Maracay, Barquisimeto, Los Teques, and Valera clashed with the police and National Guardsmen repeatedly.

"Infantile and ridiculous," was the way Interior Minister Luis Piñerua described the *pitazo*. "Noisy protests don't bother us at all. Government changes in Venezuela can only come about through direct elections, whereby the people's sovereign will is expressed."

It would appear, however, that President Pérez is not willing to trust the people's "sovereign will." In a desperate effort to maintain his grip on power, Pérez met on April 8—to the sound of whistles ringing in his ears—with a group of businessmen, and with the secretary general of the opposition COPEI party Eduardo Fernández, to sign a political agreement by which, among other things, CAP would arrogate extraordinary powers through a special enabling law. Called the "Emergency Plan," the agreement is reportedly intended "to reaffirm the government of unity of AD and Copei" and to carry out a number of reforms such as "stabilizing the system."

The centerpiece of the plan is an explicit commitment to enforcing IMF policy, including accelerated pri-

vatization of state sector companies, "punishing and preventing any strike," and "establishing the Value-Added Tax," the latter the latest demand of the IMF.

When word leaked out about the existence of the plan, AD party president Gonzalo Barrios stated that he disagreed entirely, "since this is the road to arbitrary power and dictatorship." COPEI president Hilarión Cardozo told the daily *El Universal* that his party's executive committee had authorized Eduardo Fernández only to seek an understanding with CAP on four general areas, but by no means approved the 15 points of the emergency plan. Several other politicians, all trying in one form or another to control the volatile situation in the country, attacked the plan as well. Typical were the remarks of former President Rafael Caldera, who warned that if "change through the democratic route" were not carried out, then the country would be hit by some non-democratic change "which for some weeks has been threatening us."

CAP rushed to issue a communiqué through his press office, denying that any such "emergency plan" had been formulated. But apparently no one believes him, not even his own party. AD congressman Henry Ramos warned CAP not to forget that "his primary political support, perhaps his only one, is his party." The secretary general of the MAS opposition party warned that the pact would "accentuate the dangerous situation in which we are living."

On April 13, the *Diario de Caracas* reported in its gossip column that CAP's "emergency pact" has as its primary supporter former Central Bank president Pedro Tinoco (a Rockefeller front man) and "a powerful financial group," universally recognized as the Cisneros family.