

Reaping the Future

Though supposedly embarked only in an anti-drug campaign, U.S. military presence has generated an internal conflict in Bolivia.

In the midst of the worst economic crisis in its history, Bolivia today faces a seemingly invulnerable enemy: drug traffic. The magnitude of the

crisis confronting this scarcely inhabited country (6.5 million people) is expressed in the spiraling fall of its income from exports and the persistent decline of its exportable production, and in an increasingly high unemployment rate along with a loss in the real value of wages.

Hand in hand with the crisis,



Photo taken from Cultural Survival Quarterly

Armed transporter of cocaine paste to traffickers.

latin american issues

increasing drug trafficking appears as the major political and economic issue, one which came to the forefront last July 14 with the arrival in Bolivia of 170 U.S. soldiers. Their stated mission is to combat the flow of drugs coming out of this land-locked Andean country, but their presence unleashed an uproar among political parties, in Congress, the universities and the unions. The broad-based opposition to the presence of U.S. troops stems from the fact that they are regarded as violators of the nation's sovereignty and dignity.

The U.S. assigned 170 soldiers, 7 helicopters, 2 reconnaissance planes and 15 Drug Enforcement Agency advisors to provide logistical support for Bolivian authorities during 60 days in their struggle against drug traffic. Yet the real length of their tour of duty depends on the results obtained during ongoing operations.

The fact is that for most Bolivi-

ans, U.S. military presence only serves to further complicate the country's already critical situation. This is especially true following the decisive decline in the price of tin on the world market in October of 1985.

Bolivia's Finance Minister Flavio Machicaco recently stated that the base of the country's economy has shifted from tin to coca, the Spanish name for the poppy plant from which cocaine is produced. "We would face runaway unemployment, protests and violence if the narcotics trade were to suddenly disappear," stated Mr. Machicaco.

Drug-related activity currently generates nearly one third of the country's gross national product, and is rapidly displacing tin-mining and natural gas extraction, formerly Bolivia's main economic activities. Cultivation and trafficking of drugs currently provide some kind of income for close to 400,000

people. The drug industry's activity is also complemented by the existence of 80,000 cocaine addicts in the country, according to official figures.

Over the years Bolivia's economy has become progressively addicted to the rising drug industry, now firmly rooted in most of the country's political and economic life. One of the more recent contributing factors has been the displacement of labor from shut-down tin mines to the poppy fields. For example, during 1986 the government has fired 8,000 miners, out of a total of 24,000 employed by this state-owned industry. These measures respond to the official logic concerning what needs to be done in order to gain international financial support, but many are bitterly opposed to them. Such is the case of the Bolivian Workers' Central, COB, which recently polled public opinion concerning the country's problems. Their findings revealed that 97.35% of

those consulted opposed servicing the country's foreign debt and were in favor of a new tax law.

The presence of U.S. troops and agents is deemed undesirable by many social and political groups in the country. Last August 1st, 21 political parties and 27 labor organizations formed the Council for the Defense of National Sovereignty in order to demand that U.S. military presence be removed. The Council's appearance coincided with a 24-hour shut-down in the city of Oruro and with a 20,000 strong peasant demonstration in Cochabamba. Their declaration stated that repression of delinquent activity should be aimed at drug processing and trafficking and not against producers of coca leaves. Many other massive demonstrations against U.S. military presence in Bolivia also took place during early August.



Photo taken from Cultural Survival Quarterly

Peasants arrested at cocaine processing laboratory in Cochabamba Valley.

Yet despite opposition to its policy, the Bolivian government continues to seek whatever kind of help it can get. On August 18, Minister of the Interior Guillermo Bedregal announced a new drug-fighting agreement between the United States and Bolivia which calls for the investment of \$360 million to support joint operations to eradicate the narcotics trade. Nonetheless, the wave of strikes and demonstrations called by the COB and the Federations of Bolivian Mine Workers to protest government policy against the mining industry and the resulting unemployment, have now taken up the central demand that U.S. military and logistical personnel leave the country immediately. This was a front-line demand during the 48-hour work-stoppage called by the COB in support of striking miners and during the March for Life undertaken by 5,000 miners, and it has been taken up by mine-workers on hunger strikes throughout the ailing industry.

Faced with mounting internal pressure, President Paz Estenssoro imposed a state of siege on August 28, and was immediately backed by Washington. The measure was widely adversed in Bolivia, and on September 14, two days after the 60-day limit for the stay of U.S. troops had expired, the Council for the Defense of National Sovereignty issued a communiqué stating their belief that current U.S. military presence is a pretext to set up a permanent military base in the country. On the very same day, Under-secretary of Defense Chapman Cox declared that given the success of the joint drug-fighting campaign, the Bolivian government "asked us to stay and we have accepted..." Cox added that conversations were underway with other countries interested in U.S. logistical and military support in the fight against drugs. One day later it was confirmed that U.S. troops would remain in Bolivia for another 60 days.

Thus, the problem seems to be projected on into the indefinite future. U.S. military presence

is regarded by most of the population as a form of meddling in "family affairs" and anything that seems to go against national sovereignty continues to provoke indignation and rejection.

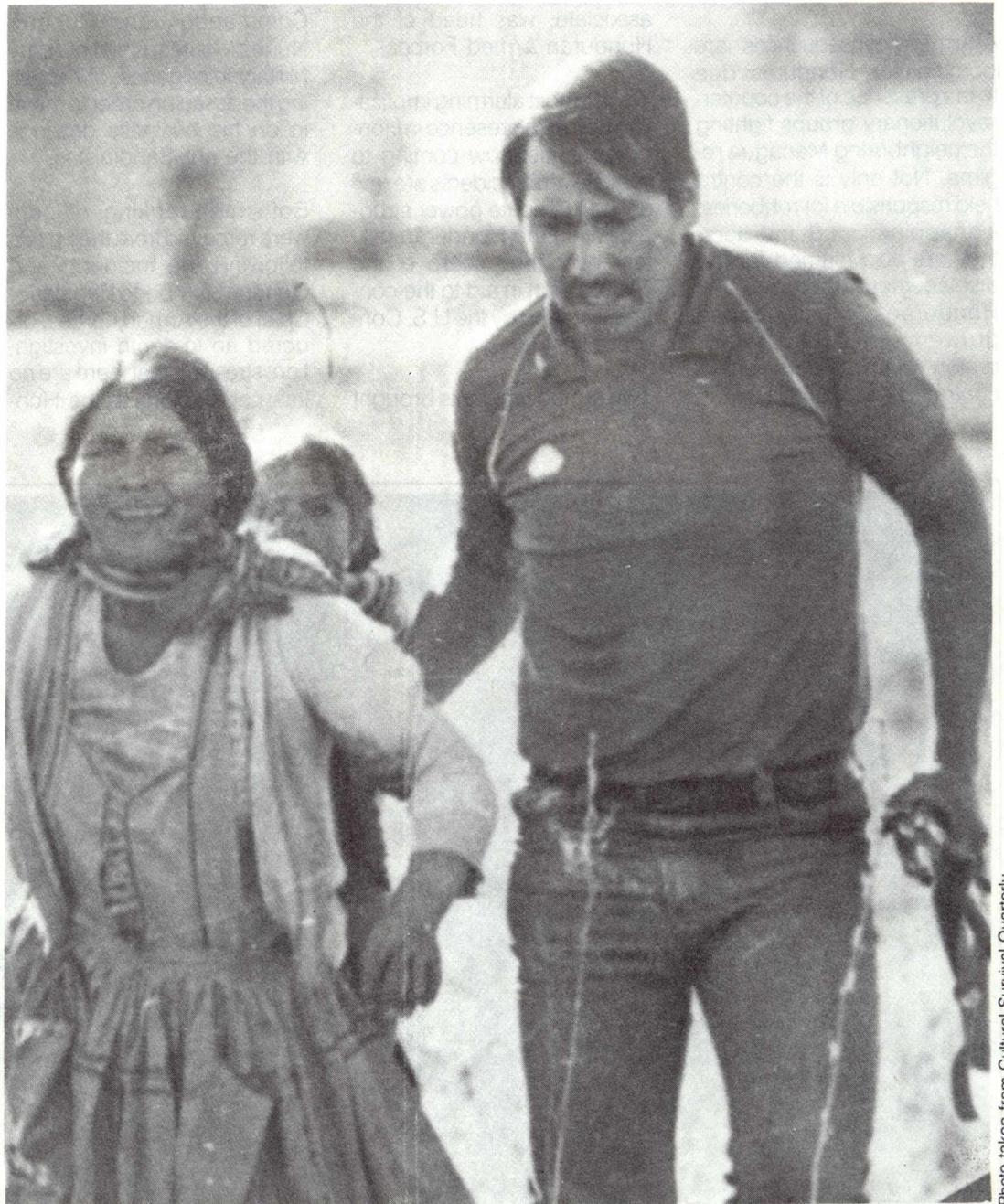
Bolivian fabric-salesman Mario Guzmán visited Mexico recently and gave us his point of view. "Bolivia is confronting a new situation in which we must deal with a drug-traffic industry which is part of society itself. This has given rise to a diversity of economic, sociopolitical and crime-related problems. Drug-related income is now four times as large as the rest of our nation-

al income, and this means a parallel economy in which the dollar is sovereign and in which the rate of exchange of our currency to the dollar is destabilized. These facts, along with our geographical enclosure (Bolivia has no coastline), our extreme poverty, the deteriorating price of tin and a lack of alternative economic activities, are some of the factors that explain the measures enacted by President Estenssoro. Yet truly, U.S. military presence does not contribute to solving Bolivia's overall problem..."

With little over a year in power, President Paz Estenssoro

is faced with increasing internal and foreign pressure, most of it related to the drug-traffic issue. The situation is particularly complex at a time when Bolivian authorities themselves have accepted that the eradication of cocaine processing and smuggling would seriously undermine the country's economy. Following 18 years of military regimes, the democratic process re-established in 1982 must now cope with both the economic crisis and political upheaval. The issues are drugs, national sovereignty and Bolivia's right to self-determination.★

Ernesto Rojas



Peasant woman arrested for involvement in coca paste making activities, the upper Cochabamba Valley.

Photo taken from Cultural Survival Quarterly