

***PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD***

**Report on Europe and Americas**

**First Quarterly Report on Europe and Americas**

**January to March 2008**

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**Department of Politics and International Relations  
International Islamic University Islamabad**

# **BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**

## **Report on Europe, Americas, and rest of the world**

First Quarterly Report 2008

Reports for the period **January to March 2008**

Table of contents

Reports for the month of February

Week-1 February 19, 2008 04

Reports for the month of March

Week-1 March 18, 2008 14

Week-2 March 25, 2008 33

Sources 45

# **BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**

Weekly Presentation: February 19, 2008

## **Europe, America and the rest of the World**

By: Bakare Najimdeen

Period: From 10-16 February 2008

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### Headlines for 10-16 February 2008

#### **Europe (North & West)**

Anglican group backs leader

Algerian '9/11' accused should be given damages: British court

UK leaders spotlight Muslim divide

Plan to fingerprint all EU visitors

The Return of the Prophet's Cartoons

Danish papers reprint Muhammad cartoon

France, Brazil forge military pact

#### **Southern Europe**

Two strong earthquakes hit southern Greece

Italian Election and Abortion Issue

#### **East & Central Europe**

Serbia calls Kosovo independence bid 'invalid'

#### **Russia & Neighbour**

Russia warns West on Kosovo independence

Putin: Russia could aim nukes at Ukraine

Russia, China challenge US space arms

#### **USA & Canada**

The US Election

Black lawmakers rethink Clinton support

#### **South & Central America**

Gitmo has makeover to reduce hostilities

Executions may be carried out at Gitmo

## **Australia & Oceania**

Australia apologizes to Aborigines

Australian aborigines to claim compensation after apology: report

## **Details of the Headlines**

### **Europe (North & West)**

In London, Rowan Williams the archbishop of Canterbury delivered speech at the Anglican Church House, near the British Parliament and Westminster Abbey which was geared at dampening the uproar over his misinterpreted view on Shariah. Williams strongly denied media reports that he was advocating a dual system of justice for Britain. "We are not talking about parallel jurisdictions," He said he might be responsible for the misunderstanding held to his words. "I must, of course, take responsibility for any unclarity in either that text or in the radio interview, and for any misleading choice of words that has helped to cause distress or misunderstanding among the public at large and especially among my fellow Christians," he said. Britain's media took the statement as broadly backing Shariah law, which delighted some British Muslims and outraged almost everyone else.

In London, the Court of Appeal reversed a lower court ruling last February that had barred Lotfi Raissi from seeking damages from the British government for his wrongful arrest and imprisonment on accusation that he trained the September 11, 2001 hijackers. judge Anthony Hooper in the panel's ruling said "The public labelling of the appellant as a terrorist by the authorities in this country, and particularly by the CPS, over a period of many months has had and continues to have, so it is said, a devastating effect on his life and on his health,"....."He considers that, unless he receives a public acknowledgement that he is not a terrorist, he will be unable to get his life back together again." The court considered there was a "considerable body of evidence" to suggest that the police and the CPS were responsible for "serious defaults" in procedure, particularly in the use of provisional extradition warrants. Admitting he considered throwing in the towel at one point, he told the broadcaster that his grandfather had encouraged him to restore his family's name. Raissi's brother, Mohamed, 35, last November won an appeal for damages against London police but the pilot's French-born wife, Sonia, 31, had her claim turned down. Both were arrested in the same operation but later released. The Ministry of Justice said in a statement: "We are considering its (the ruling's) implications and whether or not to appeal." The department has 28 days to lodge an appeal, a spokeswoman told AFP

Still in the UK, two lawmakers Phil Woolas and Ann Cryer, citing high rates of birth defects, said Britons must question the practice of arranging marriages between first cousins. Both warned of grave public health consequences if the custom continues. This

came up amidst the uproar over Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan William last week comment which suggested that the adoption of some form of Islamic law was "unavoidable" a remark that sparked protests from commentators and politicians who said Muslims must abide by British law. Catherine Heseltine of the Muslim Public Affair Committee UK said "Our biggest concern is the drip, drip effect slowly eroding the view of British Muslims as British citizens but seeing them as an alien threat," she said, urging Prime Minister Gordon Brown to "hold the minister responsible" for his inflammatory statements. However the government does not want to inflame the issue as Brown spokesman Michael Ellam said "We believe these matters are best addressed locally by local members of the community," Meanwhile Steve Jones, a professor of genetics at University College London, said the increased risk of genetic disorders can be managed by prenatal screening. He said the politicians addressing the issue were spreading misinformation and unfairly targeting Muslims."I would advise that government ministers make sure their brains are engaged before opening their mouths," he said, adding that smoking or drinking alcohol during pregnancy is far more risky for offspring than the marriage of cousins. Yet there are other medical findings that suggest the danger in such close relative marriage. But the experience of researchers at Bradford Teaching Hospital suggests a more serious situation. The hospital, which serves a community with a large Pakistani population, reports an unusually high rate of inherited gene disorders. Researchers estimate the rate of birth defects is 10 times higher than in the general population, spokeswoman Leanne Wilson said in a statement. High rates of deafness, degenerative nerve disorders and children born with small heads and learning disabilities have been found, she said. The statement said marriage patterns among Pakistanis are "likely to be a major factor" in the rate. Alastair Kent, director of the Genetic Interest Group in London, said the study was important because it quantified the elevated risk. "The research is quite robust and it was peer reviewed," he said. Pakistani-born novelist Mohsin Hamid, who moved to Britain six years ago, said most urban, educated Pakistanis are well aware that cousin marriage, particularly over several generations, carries a medical risk.

From Belgium, the European Union's top justice official on Wednesday called for a massive shake-up of the bloc's border security, recommending that all visitors be screened and fingerprinted and a satellite surveillance system be set up to keep illegal migrants out. EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini said EU nations had to use "the most advanced technology to reach the highest level of security" to prevent visitors from overstaying their welcome in Europe and to prevent terrorists from entering. Frattini's proposals, if approved by all 27 EU governments, would represent one of the largest security overhauls in the EU and could cost billions of euros. Civil liberties and human rights advocates have already criticized the plans as an attempt to keep out unwanted foreigners from Africa and other poor regions under the veiled excuse of fighting crime and terrorism. They also decry the plans as an attempt to move to a surveillance society, trampling on the right to privacy. The sweeping measures would replicate many of the border checks already being rolled out in the United States, but would go further in demanding EU citizens also submit fingerprints to participate in computerized fast-track

entry-exit customs controls. Frattini said the proposals would safeguard the union's passport-free travel zone, which includes 24 countries. The proposals are also designed to prevent visitors from entering Europe illegally or overstaying their visas.

In Denmark, 17 newspapers republished controversial caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed to protest an alleged plot to murder a cartoonist. Three persons were apprehended although one was later discharged due to lack of evidence allegedly plotting to kill a cartoonist over the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. The apprehended persons will be administratively extradited without trial in Denmark. According to Danish anti-terror law, devised after the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., foreign nationals can be extradited administratively if they are suspected of planning acts of terror. The plans to extradite the two Tunisians, however, met with strong criticism in Danish media and among legal and political experts. "It is very unfortunate that there will be no trial in a Danish court. This means that all evidence against them is kept secret by PET. That is against the most fundamental principles of a community governed by law," Moller told TIME. He argued that extradition in itself is a punishment and must be imposed by a court of law. The decision to try and have the two suspects extradited without a trial was also criticized by the Organisation of Islamic Faith in Denmark. In a statement, the community said it feared protests by Muslims in Denmark if the two men were sent back to Tunisia. "We have been able to exert a certain form of control [during the last crisis]. We are afraid we will lose this control if this form of oppressive acts does not stop," the release said.

Certain Denmark's leading newspapers reprinted a drawing of the Prophet Muhammad on Wednesday, a day after three men were arrested on suspicion of plotting to kill the cartoonist whose work had spurred deadly protests in the Muslim world. The papers said they wanted to show their firm commitment to freedom of speech after Tuesday's arrests in western Denmark. "We are doing this to document what is at stake in this case, and to unambiguously back and support the freedom of speech that we as a newspaper will always defend," said the Copenhagen-based Berlingske Tidende. The police intelligence agency, PET, said two Tunisians and a Danish citizen of Moroccan origin were arrested Tuesday in pre-dawn raids in Aarhus, western Denmark. PET chief Jakob Scharf said the purpose of the operation was "to prevent a terror-related assassination of one of the cartoonists behind the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad."

Scharf said the Danish suspect would likely be released after questioning, but could still face charges of violating a Danish terror law. The two Tunisians would be expelled from Denmark because they were considered threats to national security, he said.

Speaking from Saint-Georges de L'oyapock, French Guiana, French President Nicolas Sarkozy showed his interest to help Brazil in its military structures. This appears to be part of the French internationalism project which the new administration intends to project. Sarkozy met with his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, in Saint-

Georges de Oyapock, on the border with Brazil on the second and last day of his trip to France's largest overseas territory. Sarkozy also said France was willing to transfer technology to allow a French attack submarine and fighter planes to be built in Brazil, but he stopped short of any nuclear technology transfer. "I said to the Brazilian president that we were ready for the Scorpene submarine to be built in Brazil, that on the question of combat aircraft like helicopters and fighter planes I'm thinking of the Rafale to be built in Brazil," the French president said. The Scorpene class submarine is a conventional attack submarine, but Brazilian officials have said they want the diesel-powered sub to serve as a model for the development of a Brazilian nuclear submarine that would be the first in Latin America.

### **Southern Europe**

In Greece, two strong earthquakes hit southern Greece on Thursday one of them felt as far away as Italy and Egypt. No injuries were reported. The first quake, with a preliminary magnitude of 6.5, hit just after noon the Athens Geodynamic Institute said. It was felt in Cairo and in the southern Italian regions of Puglia and Calabria. The second struck about two hours later and had a slightly lower preliminary magnitude of 6.4. Both had epicenters beneath the seabed 140 miles south-southwest of Athens, the institute said. The initial quake "was incredibly strong and lasted a long time," said Theodoros Salantis, mayor of Koroni, a seaside town near Kalamata, the closest city to the epicenter. Schools were evacuated and people fled from their homes and offices in towns of southern Greece, but nobody was hurt. Authorities said there were reports of only minor damage such as cracks in walls and plaster falling off building exteriors, including at some schools.

In Italy the campaign over the legality and choice of abortion has become part of the electioneering campaigning tools. The street of Rome and Naples witnessed the protest of women protesting their right to abort. Government wants to clamp down on those violating the existing law on abortion. Abortion after three months is allowed in Italy when a pregnancy is deemed a grave danger to a woman's mental or physical health. Abortion through the end of the third month of any pregnancy was legalized in 1978, and three years later Italians voted to keep the law despite opposition from the Vatican. But abortion has become an issue in the campaign for parliamentary elections April 13-14. Conservative former premier Silvio Berlusconi says he wants the United Nations to approve a worldwide moratorium on abortions. Newspaper editor Giuliano Ferrara sharpened the debate by announcing he will run for Parliament on an anti-abortion platform. Berlusconi's opponent for the premiership, center-left candidate Walter Veltroni, was quoted by the Italian news agency Apcom on Thursday as defending Italy's abortion law. He cited statistics showing a drop in abortions since 1978 and said the law also "wiped out the plague of clandestine abortions which caused so many deaths among women."

## **East & Central Europe**

The trouble over Kosovo unilateral independence declaration continues as the Serbia government called such move invalid and void "represent a flagrant and unilateral act of secession of a part of the territory of the Republic of Serbia, and is therefore invalid and void." With a Kosovo declaration imminent, Serbia already has endorsed a secret "Action Plan" to be implemented when the province declares independence. The plan is believed to include retaliatory steps to keep Serb-populated areas under Belgrade's control a move that would result in a de facto partitioning of the province. The 100,000 Serbs living in Kosovo will remain "citizens of Serbia and have the full right not to recognize any illegal declarations of unilateral independence" by Kosovo's Albanians, the Serbian resolution said. The plan contains no provisions for military action against Kosovo, now policed by 16,000 NATO troops.

What angers Serbia the most is that cutting away of Kosovo would be considered as the secession of its medieval cradle statehood and religion. Similarly the anticipated support shown by the US and EU as the latter has planned to dispatch a 1,800-member police and judiciary mission to help Kosovo establish statehood. The EU finally final approval on Saturday (16-2-08) for the deployment a 1,800-strong policing and administration mission for Kosovo. No EU nations objected to the mission, which will take four months to put in place, and is designed to help build a police, justice and customs system for Kosovo free of political interference. Cyprus lifted its threat to block the mission last week but along with other EU nations like Spain, Romania, Greece, remains opposed to recognizing the independence of Kosovo. EU Foreign ministers will hold talks on Monday to try to forge a common stance on Kosovo. Bigger states like Britain, France and Germany are expected to move quickly alongside the United States to recognize Pristina's sovereignty. In a legal text published Saturday, the EU said the mission, EU-LEX, will "assist the Kosovo institutions, judicial authorities and law enforcement agencies in their progress toward sustainability and accountability."

## **Russia & Neighbour**

Russia remains adamant on its Kosovo view and strong support for its Slavic Serbia brothers. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov did not mention any of the planet's hot spots by name, including Russia's troubled southern republic of Chechnya, but said recognition of Kosovo independence without it being approved by the U.N. would bode ill for global security. "We are talking here of the disruption of all the basic fundamentals of international law in Europe, which is a result of years of suffering and wars and strife," Lavrov told reporters at the U.N. in Geneva. "It would undermine the basics of security in Europe. ... It would inevitably result in a chain reaction in many parts of the world, including Europe and elsewhere." The U.S. and most EU nations support

statehood for the U.N.-run province, where 90 percent of the population of 2 million is ethnic Albanian. However, traditional Serbian ally Russia opposes statehood for Kosovo.

Lavrov asked how minority Serbs and the majority ethnic Albanians would live side-by-side in an independent Kosovo when they cannot do so now, while Kosovo formally remains a province of Serbia. "What do we do with Serbs living in Kosovo?" he asked. "There are no answers to this question."

Russia contentious feeling over NATO expansion in its supposedly sphere became heighten as Ukraine urge to join the western military alliance. Russia outgoing President Putin made it clear that if such happens Russia has no other option than to target Ukraine.

"That of course is Ukraine's internal process ... and we don't have the right, and we won't, interfere in this process," Putin said. But, he added, "that raises the question for Russia of the need for retaliatory actions."..... "It's frightening not just to talk about, but even to think about, that in response to such deployment, the possibility of such deployments — and one can't theoretically exclude these deployments — that Russia will have to point its warheads at Ukrainian territory," The Ukrainian President Yushchenko responded at the same news conference by saying Ukraine has the right to form its own foreign and defense policies, and noted that the Ukrainian constitution does not allow for the deployment of foreign bases on its territory. "You understand well that everything that Ukraine does in this direction is not in any way directed at any third country, including Russia," Yushchenko said. Last month, Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Ukraine's parliament speaker signed a formal request asking NATO to consider Ukraine's bid for a Membership Action Plan at its meeting in Romania in early April. Meanwhile former Defense Minister Anatoly Grytsenko, who is a senior member of Yushchenko's party said "We are an independent state and will make our decisions regardless of what others say,"

Both Russia and China sees US monopoly of the space as non guarantee to their security.

But Washington has labeled the proposal a diplomatic ploy by Russia and China to gain a military advantage because it would prohibit an American missile interceptor system from being installed in the Czech Republic and Poland. In addition, the U.S. says, Chinese and Russian ground-based missiles that can fire into space would not be covered in the plan, which also says nothing of normal satellites that can be used as weapons against other satellites. The U.S. is trying to rally support for a ban on the production of all fissile material for the making of nuclear weapons. Such material is controlled under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, but nonmembers like India and Pakistan are not covered and China opted out of that part of the pact. The American proposal would still

allow the U.S. to recycle fissile material from old warheads it is dismantling and to produce new and better nuclear weapons.

## **USA & Canada**

As the primaries continues with two contestants on both sides of the democrat and republican parties, bid to get more votes across the nation and secure the nomination card of the party remains tight. The American civil society is playing a great role in the whole electioneering process as presidential candidates urge for unions endorsement. Barack Obama is expected to be endorsed Friday by the Service Employees International Union, one of the nation's most powerful. Obama was endorsed in January by UNITE HERE, which along with SEIU and the United Food and Commercial Workers, would give him three of the seven member unions. The Teamsters, the Laborers' International Union of North America, and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America have yet to endorse a candidate. Obama also was endorsed earlier this month by the Transport Workers Union and the National Weather Service Employees Organization. The seventh union, the United Farm Workers, endorsed Clinton in January.

Meanwhile Hilary Clinton made a move over her rival as she won the primary in New Mexico. The final statewide count gave her a 1,709-vote edge over rival Sen. Barack Obama, 73,105 or 48.8 percent of the total vote to 71,396 or 47.6 percent. The former first lady's victory in the popular vote swung the final unallocated New Mexico delegate into her column, which gave Clinton 14 delegates in the state to 12 for Obama. With the addition of New Mexico's delegate, the national delegate count stood at 1,276 for Obama and 1,220 for Clinton on Thursday.

## **South & Central America**

In Guantanamo bay naval base, the US military officials sought to ease conditions for angry and frustrated Guantanamo detainees, the commander of the prison camps has instituted language classes, a literacy program and wants to open communal areas for men held in isolation 22 hours a day. In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, Army Col. Bruce Vargo, commander of the military's Joint Detention Group at Guantanamo, said he hopes the changes at Guantanamo, where 275 men suspected of links to al-Qaida and the Taliban are held, will lead to fewer attacks on guards.

Language courses have begun in English, Arabic and Pashto, Vargo said in the interview last week. He intends to soon offer classes on diverse subjects, perhaps including oceanography. "If we can get them to focus on humanities programs, if we can get them to focus on recreation, then their sole focus is not going to be on the guard force," Vargo said. "It is my thought that if they are focused on those things, then the level of assaults and things of that nature will go down." There is now TV night for some of the best-behaved detainees, with DVDs of movies and TV shows shown on a high-definition Sony

TV. A classroom in Camp 4, designated for the most compliant detainees, has metal desks and plastic chairs. Detainees are leg-shackled to the classroom floor.

David Remes, a Washington attorney who represents 16 Guantanamo detainees, said the military should recognize it must improve its treatment of detainees and not justify these changes by saying they are aimed at reducing assaults. He said most detainees are in virtual solitary confinement, reportedly leading to mental problems. Attorneys for detainees say the assaults are partly triggered by frustration among men who, more often than not, were captured far from any battlefield and have been locked up for as many as six years with no real chance to confront accusations that they are enemy combatants.

The military officials in Guantanamo might have planned an outing period for the inmates yet there are others the officials are arranging for their trials which could lead to death sentences. In the prison are six dangerous suspected terrorists if sentenced to death at Guantanamo Bay for the Sept. 11 attacks, U.S. Army regulations that were quietly amended two years ago open the possibility of execution by lethal injection at the military base in Cuba, experts said Tuesday. Any executions would probably add to international outrage over Guantanamo, since capital punishment is banned in 130 countries, including the 27-nation European Union. Conducting the executions on U.S. soil could open the way for the detainees' lawyers to go to U.S. courts to fight the death sentences. But the updated regulations make it possible for the executions to be carried out at Guantanamo. Similarly the view is being held that the military officials could institute a death chamber for the terrorist suspects and ultimately bury them at the camp as a separate Muslim cemetery is created within the camp. Consequently, many human rights activists and inmates lawyers are suggesting that the trial would be difficult in view of the interrogation techniques employed in the camp. These activists believed the Bush administration would find it difficult to substantiate his position on the interrogation techniques and having such trial on the camp would further raise eyebrows against the military prison.

### **Australia & Oceania**

In Australia, the parliament under the new Labour government passed a historic parliamentary vote that supporters said would open a new chapter in race relations, lawmakers unanimously adopted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's motion on behalf of all Australians. "We apologize for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians," ..... "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry," the motion said. "And for

the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry."

The apology is directed at tens of thousands of Aborigines who were forcibly taken from their families as children under now abandoned assimilation policies. Aborigines remain the country's poorest and most disadvantaged group, and Rudd has made improving their lives one of his government's top priorities. "This is a historic day," said Tom Calma, who gave the Stolen Generations formal response. "Today our leaders across the political spectrum have chosen dignity, hope and respect as the guiding principles for the relationship with our nation's first people."

The new Australian government might have uttered an apology to the aborigines over the era of 'Stolen Generation' when aborigines' children were taken away from their parents for sake of giving them better life over the low economic status of their parents. PM Kevin Rudd government seems not ready to compensate the aborigines for the era; however aborigines are ready to drag their case to the court. In August last year an Aboriginal man removed from his family as a baby in 1958 won 525,000 dollars (448,717 US dollars) compensation in the South Australia Supreme Court in the first successful case of its kind. The island state of Tasmania last month approved five million dollars in compensation for 106 members of the "Stolen Generations". Up to 50,000 mainly mixed-race children were taken from their families until 1970 in a bid to assimilate them into white society while full-blooded Aborigines were expected to die out

Still in Australia, twelve Muslim men accused of preparing to launch attacks in Australia pleaded not guilty to a string of terrorism-related charges amid tight security in the Supreme Court here Wednesday. It remained arguable that the ring leader Abdul Nacer Benbrika, 47 was accused of teaching others to inflict terror and legitimizing what Islam disapprove of even during war. Benbrika was said to have taught the group that it was "permissible to kill women, children and the aged" in the cause of violent jihad or holy war, said prosecutor Richard Maidment. They terror suspects were equally accused during taped telephone calls that a bombing where the maximum loss of life could be inflicted, such as at a football ground, could be suitable, the court heard.

## **BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**

Weekly Presentation: March 18, 2008

### **South, Central America and the Caribbean**

By: Bakare Najimdeen

Period: From 9-15 March 2008

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#### **Headlines**

##### **South America**

US Secretary of State Rice to focus on Chavez, FARC during Brazil visit  
Argentine minister Anibal Fernandez says no legalization of drugs planned  
Argentine air force commander stresses ties with neighbour countries

Venezuela reopening embassy in Colombia  
Chavez says US can 'shove' terror list

Colombian leader's raid gamble pays off  
Colombian ex-guerrilla claims Venezuela's Chavez offered arms, money to FARC  
Colombian ex- M-19 guerrilla says Uribe ready to start dialogue with FARC  
UN calls for probe in Colombia deaths

Letters: Ecuador leader got rebel funds  
Ecuador rules out short-term fix for diplomatic relations with Colombia

Mexican Cabinet secretary investigated  
Mexico Congress probes Cabinet secretary  
Mexico unaware of ties between FARC, drug traffickers  
Mexican students condemn Colombia raid  
Indians gather to save the planet

Chile revamps famed pension system

Bolivian ruling party denies FARC presence in country  
Bolivia funds push for legal coca market

Guyana human rights group calls for withdrawal of sedition charges  
Guyana opposition party calls for "restraint" over massacres

##### **Central America**

Colombian foreign minister says maritime border with Nicaragua unchanged  
Veto keeps Guatemala executions on hold

## **Caribbean Islands**

Mexico, Cuba restores normal relations  
Cuba wives call for prisoners' release  
Gitmo detainees allowed phone calls  
Abuse claims complicating Gitmo trials  
St Lucia premier concerned about mass migration from Guyana  
Caribbean leaders describe summit as success

## **South America**

US Secretary of State Rice visit to Brazil was intended to discuss energy related issue. "A year after the signing of a memorandum of technological cooperation between Brazil and the United States for the production of biofuels, the issue of a bilateral meeting is returning to the agenda. According to the political deputy secretary general of the Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Everton Vargas, the countries have invested in projects for the production of ethanol, as well as seeking private investments for the manufacture of biofuel in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Vargas emphasized: "We have obtained concrete results so far, and in 2008 we hope to have an ethanol production in those countries. However certain reports also have it that Rice tends to discuss the issue of FARC and Venezuela a view Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim contradicted. He said the story that the imbroglio between Venezuela, Ecuador, and the Colombian guerrillas would be the main topic in the talks with Rice. Upon leaving a hearing in the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, Amorim commented: "If anyone made that claim, it was the Americans, but it is not our position. We have many important issues to discuss, such as the Brazilian view on the Middle East, and the taxes collected by the United States on the Brazilian biofuels, which I consider extortionary." The minister reaffirmed that Brazil does not categorize the FARC as terrorists, but rejected the political dialogue with the Colombian guerrillas. He maintained: "We only accept the humanitarian dialogue. There is no possible neutrality between the FARC and the government of Colombia." Hugo Chavez was also reported to have telephoned his Brazilian counterpart asking him to resist the US attempt to include Venezuela on the list of countries supporting terrorism. Chavez also wanted to know what Lula thinks about the possible sending of United Nations observers to the border between Ecuador and Colombia. That mission is being defended by Correa, in order to guarantee a security device.

Argentine Minister of Justice Anibal Fernandez was referring to his speech at the 51st special session held in Vienna on Drug Consumption and Drug Trafficking in relation to

the drug law in his country. According to him drug legislation that has been in effect in Argentina since 1989 "has treated the addict - who is a victim - in the same way as the trafficker." And the trafficker, he said, "is the person who must be punished with the full weight of the law."

Speaking on Radio America, Anibal Fernandez said that the policies that have been used "have failed" because "the state has squandered fortunes on arrests and cases that never result in a conviction" instead of "going after the people who bring the drugs in and poison our children."

The minister of justice, security, and human rights pointed out that in his speech yesterday he called for "defining a strong damage-reduction policy." By doing so the state would concentrate its efforts on "treatment, extending a helping hand, and taking care of other people, which is not what has been done." The minister of justice explained that "I would not say such a thing at an international forum if it were not the government's position" and he felt that his speech yesterday "represents a proposal for change, for it is obvious that this law has been a failure." He was referring to Law 23.737 on the criminalization of drugs.

Speaking in defence of his damage-reduction proposal, he said as an example that "if someone wants to take an addicted youngster to a hospital, with a union-run health care plan or with private health care insurance, and cannot obtain treatment for that youngster, than we are doing something badly." He felt that "the problem must be resolved by decriminalizing it [drug use]."

"It is not the Federal Judicial System or the police that have to solve this problem; it needs to be handled in another way," he said as he explained that "we, the Judiciary and the police, should be going after the people who bring in the drugs to poison our children." He compared the anti-drug policy in nearby countries like Brazil, where he said that decriminalization exists "and there has been no sort of upturn" [in drug use] and in Uruguay, which even though it still uses the same classification of drug use as is used in Argentina, "has not opposed decriminalizing" drug use. He pointed out that in Argentina there are numerous private clinics and programmes for the treatment of addicts and he criticized "those who continue to defend a law that has been a catastrophe" and who "display their extreme toughness because their addiction to state subsidies is so great."

The head of the Argentine Air Force, Brigadier Normando Costantino, today highlighted the "perfect" relationship existing with neighbouring countries and stressed that "an intense collaboration" has been created with the border regions. The brigadier assured Telam that "there is no problem" with the neighbour countries and that "we find ourselves in a perfect position to integrate ourselves, as we are already doing with the sister republic of Chile, with which we are working to set up a joint command to take part in peacekeeping operations."

In this regard, he added that "this clearly demonstrates that our hypotheses are no longer hypotheses of conflict but instead they are hypotheses of confluence."

On another note, he assured that the Air Force "is in a process of recovery of operational capability, and we are working hard with the support of the national authorities to recover the operational capability of our equipment." The military man pointed out that "the Air Force is the armed branch defending the airspace, the basis for its existence, and in that direction we are carrying out our mission and what our laws say." "We are also complying with what the national authorities have set for us as a mission for the institution," Brigadier Costantino specified. The Chief of the Air Force today presided over the ceremony at the Argentine Polo Grounds, in the Buenos Aires district of Palermo, where homage was paid to Jorge Newbery for the recent 94th anniversary of his death. Also present at the event were the president of the Newbery National Institute, Salvador Martinez, and Carlos Newbery, grandnephew of the "Father of Argentine Aeronautics," among others.

The rift among the Latin America countries during the last week might have taken a mellow tune after the Rio Group submit yet they still find its hard to trust the supposedly aggressor (Colombia). However Venezuela that was not directly attacked but mantled support for Ecuador whose border was infiltrated by the Colombian force has reopen its embassy in Colombia and intends to return to normal relation with Bogotá. On Saturday, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa said he would "take a little time" before restoring diplomatic relations with Colombia. He added it would be "difficult to recover trust" in Colombia's government, but "we will converse and move forward."

In Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez angrily responded to the demand of US lawmakers to enlist Caracas among states sponsoring terrorists. U.S. lawmakers including Reps. Connie Mack and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both Florida Republicans, have called for the

State Department to add Venezuela to its list of terror sponsors, which includes North Korea, Iran, Syria, Sudan and Cuba. They have expressed concerns about what they call Chavez's close ties to Colombia's leftist rebels. Chavez was reported to have said "Let them make that list and shove it in their pocket,"..... "We shouldn't forget for an instant that we're in a battle against North American imperialism," Chavez said. "On this continent, they have us as enemy No. 1." He further sees the visit of Secretary of State Rice to Brazil and Chile as a pressure meeting to foment trouble in the region. Chavez said U.S wants us to fight a reference to last week brawl and recent visit to the Latino countries. Similarly, Ecuadorean leader Rafael Correa delivered an angry response to Bush's strong support for Colombia in the wake of the raid, challenging the U.S. president to send troops to Ecuador's border with Colombia. "Bring your soldiers Mr. Bush," Correa said in the speech. "Let it be your soldiers who die along the southern border with Colombia. We'll see if the Americans, the citizens of the United States, will accept tremendous atrocity. "If not, shut your mouth and understand what is happening in Latin America." Ecuadorean authorities are still angry over the Colombian raid and have delayed restoring diplomatic relations until at least the end of the month.

## **Colombia**

The brawl might have mellow down but unfolding information coming out from the materials seized from the rebel showed the likelihood that more tensions lay ahead for the three countries involved in the last week clash. Colombia government believed the strike on Ecuador was a risky but positive effort which has helped them lay hands on information showing the links between Venezuela, Ecuador and the rebel groups. The government sees a weakened FARC in view of the lost the latter incurred but former Sen. Luis Eladio Perez, who spent 6 1/2 years as a FARC hostage until his release last week, doubts the rebels are seriously weakened. He said their movement provides the only economic opportunities for people in Colombia's miserable, forgotten backwaters. "The FARC doesn't have trouble recruiting," Perez told AP. "It provides (its troops) with food, assures them clothing, gives them a little something, like a watch."

Consequently according to Rojas a Colombian ex-guerrilla claims Venezuela's Chavez offered arms, money to FARC. He said "The matter with the weapons is correct. Chavez offered some weapons to ' Manuel Marulanda,' he said that they were not really good but for a guerrilla war they would suffice," maintained the demobilized guerrilla. Rojas stated that according to information from "Ivan Rios," the Venezuelan president still has not provided the money, but he advised that "Manuel Marulanda" [Pedro Antonio Marin] is very pleased with the promise. He said that "it is a fact" that they are going to pay him the

5 billion pesos reward money [over \$2.5 million] for having taken out "Ivan Rios," and indicated that it is impossible that they will try him for the murder of the FARC leader because, according to him, he is "working together with Colombia."

It appears that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has hit his target and became satiable of last week attack that killed top members of FARC, a group responsible for the death of his father. Premised on this the President Alvaro Uribe sent a message to the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] through former M-19 guerrilla Rosember Pabon, stating that this is the best moment to sit down at the table to create peace. The former M-19 militant and now director of the National Administrative Department of Supportive Economy [Departamento Administrativo Nacional de la Economia Solidaria] (Dansocial) said this after a meeting he held with the head of state in the Casa de Narino, where the peace issue was discussed. The former guerrilla said that "President Uribe told me: I have the best disposition. Talk to the FARC and tell the world that I am willing to sit down at the table now, so we can have peace for Colombia." Pabon met with the head of state after a tour through Europe to discuss the social issue. The topic, however, arose during the conversation. Journalists did not ask any questions after Rosember Pabon's statement. In the end he said that was the only thing he had to say on the meeting with President Uribe

The U.N. on Friday called for an investigation into the deaths of six organizers of a march protesting the Colombian government and paramilitary death squads. The victims included union workers and human rights activists. They were killed around the time of the March 6 protest that drew tens of thousands of people. "This office asks state authorities to guarantee prompt and efficient protection for those human rights defenders and the leaders of social organizations," the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement. Activists accuse President Alvaro Uribe's administration of lumping human rights workers together with rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country's largest leftist guerrilla group, supposedly giving the death squads a green light to attack the activists. Many Colombians refused to join the March 6 protest, calling it a campaign to smear the government and the armed forces. President Alvaro Uribe's closest adviser, Jose Obdulio Gaviria, alleged the march was organized by the FARC. A human rights organization called Movement of Victims of State Crimes said one paramilitary group sent a threat Wednesday by e-mail to organizations connected with the protest.

Similarly, the Rio Group summit resolution was expected to extinguish the flame of enmity among Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela but unfolding events seem not geared at such direction of expectation. The Colombia government recently published a letter that could be further used as evidence to support its border strike into Ecuador and why the FARC should be stopped. According to the letter Colombian rebel commanders discussed contributing to the election campaign of Ecuador's president and wrote Libya's Moammar Gadhafi asking for \$100 million to buy surface-to-air missiles. The letters also describe rebel ties to drug traffickers, meetings with senior Venezuelan police officials and an apparent effort by U.S. Democrats to have celebrated Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez mediate talks with the insurgents possibly with the involvement of former President Clinton. The letters signed by rebel leaders including Raul Reyes, the public face of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, were published Sunday by the news magazine Semana. Two senior Colombian officials told The Associated Press they were found on Reyes' computer after he was slain by Colombian forces in a cross-border raid into Ecuador. They spoke on condition of anonymity because of the documents' political sensitivity. It was not clear if the letters were sent to their intended recipients.

Ecuador's leftist president, Rafael Correa, vehemently denies accepting funds from the insurgents. There is no evidence that the FARC ever obtained surface-to-air missiles. And Clinton and Garcia Marquez could not be reached for comment. The letters could complicate efforts to calm a regional crisis sparked by the raid that killed Reyes.

## **Ecuador**

In the same vein, Ecuadoran Foreign Minister Maria Isabel Salvador said that there has been "a serious offence by one State against another State", an indication that a near-term reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Ecuador and Colombia is out of the question. According to her in our neighbouring country's view, "trust has been absolutely shattered between the two countries, and we cannot expect diplomatic relations to return to normal from one week to the next." The Ecuadoran foreign minister, who will fly to Washington on Sunday to attend the meeting of the Organization of American States on Monday, again rejected allegations that Ecuadoran Government officials have ties to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). She added that this Thursday she would send a formal note to Colombia requesting information about the alleged relations between the government and the guerrillas, information that President Alvaro Uribe

offered to give Ecuador during the Rio Group summit. In this same connection, the Ecuadoran foreign minister said that she hopes the OAS sets up a "commission with moral force" after the operation on 1 March in which Colombian military forces went after Raul Reyes. The purpose of the commission would be to ensure that territorial violations such as the one that enabled the Colombian army to take down the head of the guerrilla secretariat do not happen again in the region. Ecuador has announced that at the meeting of OAS foreign ministers it would insist on a "condemnation" of Colombia's violation of Ecuadoran territory. The Ecuadoran foreign minister recalled that Quito and Bogota have differing opinions about the site from which the Colombian guerrilla camp was bombarded on Ecuadoran soil.

## **Mexico**

In what could be surmised as part of the overall reforms taking shape among the Latin Americans. In Mexico, the federal attorney general's office on Tuesday announced an investigation into allegations of corruption against Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino, a confidant of the president who holds the government's second highest profile job. Mourino faces allegations of using his political clout while previously serving as a federal congressman and top energy official to benefit a family business. The announcement came after a prominent opposition politician produced a series of contracts dated from 2000 to 2004 between state oil monopoly Petroleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, and the Mourino family business, Transportes Especializados Ivancar SA. "Various public officials have accused Juan Camilo Mourino Terrazo of allegedly benefiting private companies through his role as a public servant," the attorney general's office said in a statement. Mourino "has requested that the charges be clarified because he feels they lack substance." A federal congressman and top energy official Mexico's lower house of Congress on Thursday created a special committee to investigate allegations of corruption against Mourino, a move that is welcomed by majority of the Congress.

The Colombian rebel related issue appears to be infiltrating into domestic affairs of countries within the neighbourhood. There has been allegation and counter allegation that governments and bodies within the region have things doing with the Colombian rebel. The Mexican Government has no information on the existence of direct ties between drug traffickers from the country and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), agreed officials from the Foreign Ministry and the PGR [Office of the Attorney General

of the Republic]. In the 2007 Mexican presentation to the UN office of the International Narcotics Control Board, Guillermo Hernandez Salmeron, adjunct director of global affairs for the SRE [Foreign Secretariat], said that there is no official information [on the matter]. "There is insufficient evidence to affirm that such ties exist," stated the SRE official, who stressed that the foreign ministries of both countries have engaged in "very intense" exchange of information. He added that coordination work is under way with the OAS and with other international institutions to exchange information on criminal activities.

Along the same lines, PGR Coordinator of International Affairs and Attaches Adrian Franco Zevada agreed that so far no direct ties between the FARC and Mexican drug traffickers have been detected. He described the coordination between the PGR and Colombia's General Prosecutor's Office as agile, fluid, and effective. The information is sufficient and the results of the joint fight against crime have been positive, but at any rate they have not learned of any direct ties between Mexican drug traffickers and Colombian guerrillas, he said. Regarding the fact that the US Government directly ties the Arellano Felix criminal organization with the Colombian armed forces [institution as published], the official affirmed that "we are not aware of the FARC having direct ties with Mexican drug traffickers."

In the same way about 100 university students demonstrated outside the Colombian Embassy in Mexico City on Wednesday to demand their government formally condemn Colombia's attack on a rebel camp in Ecuador, which apparently killed four Mexican students. With chants of "Your death will be avenged!" students demanded Mexico break off diplomatic ties with Colombia, launch a criminal case against the South American nation for the students' disappearance and ask for compensation for their families. Relatives tentatively identified the body of one of the students but are awaiting DNA and other tests on the badly decomposed remains found at the camp. The Ecuadorean government said the four were in the area and have not been heard from since and are feared dead. Fellow students described the missing and one wounded Mexican as activists who sympathized with the region's radical left, which has gained some backing on college campuses in Mexico. Protester Alberto Pacheco said they were activists and not guerrillas. "They would sell coffee and magazines, release statements, denounce things, but they weren't guerrillas," said Pacheco, a graduate of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, or UNAM, which all but one of the missing students attended.

Concern for the world's ecosystem is merely not the serious concern of academicians or specialists, but the Mexican Indians and other Indian groups in the region have also tried to show their sense of understanding of the environment. Indians from Mexico, the United States and Canada gathered before dawn Monday to light incense, pray and sing in the shadow of ancient Mayan pyramids, asking the contaminated earth for forgiveness. More than 200 leaders from 71 American Indian nations were joining in this jungle town to offer indigenous wisdom about ways to save the polluted planet. "Our Mother Earth is being polluted at an alarming rate, and our elders say that she is dying," said Raymond Sensmeier, a Tlingit leader from Yakutat, Alaska. "The way the weather is around the world ... a cleansing is needed." The pre-dawn ceremony that launched the conference included fire, copal incense, chants in Lacandon Maya and blasts from a conch shell to the four cardinal points. Mexico's environment secretary, Juan Elvira Quesada, said the gathering is meant "to present the teachings of the original peoples of North America.'....."In

this way, the indigenous communities can become the natural guides to restoring balance and harmony in the world," The lessons they have to teach are simple based on reviving Indian notions about ownership, use, compensation and respect. "I sometimes talk to scientists," said Sensmeier, "and they compartmentalize things, put things in boxes and disconnect them, and doing so promotes disharmony and imbalance."

## **Chile**

Chileans are also getting the sensation of a new dawn in the region as regard the development of pension scheme law signed by the president. Some 600,000 poor Chileans will receive monthly pensions starting in July under a law signed Tuesday by President Michelle Bachelet that plugs gaps in Chile's widely copied private pension system. Bachelet, who signed the legislation on her second anniversary as president, called the measure "one of the most important social reforms in decades." The \$2 billion a year program covers groups left out by private pensions the poor and self-employed, housewives, street vendors and farmers who saved little for retirement granting about a quarter of the nation's work force public pensions by 2012.

Monthly pensions will start at about \$125 and will rise next year to \$158. That will boost pensioners above the urban poverty level of \$95. Dictator Augusto Pinochet established Chile's private pension scheme in 1981 as part of a push to privatize the economy. The system required salaried workers to deposit at least 10 percent of their wages into

personal accounts managed by private pension funds. That created a huge pool of capital that spurred investment and helped produce Chile's economic "miracle."

## **Bolivia**

Bolivia government is also caught in the mist of talks alleging certain Latino governments having relation with Colombian FARC. Whereas opposition political leaders are saying that there is evidence that Colombian guerrillas are operating in the country, representatives of the ruling Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) have denied it. Ernesto Justianino, a deputy with Social Democratic Power (Podemos), brought up the "relations that the administration of Evo Morales maintains with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)" and demanded that the government explain the alleged ties. A letter dated 6 November 2007 revealed that President Morales told his French colleague Nicolas Sarkozy that he was going to approach the FARC with a view towards bringing about a humanitarian solution to the hostage crisis in Colombia. The letters reveal that Morales is regarded by the FARC as an important ally. On Wednesday, the spokesman for the Office of President, Alex Contreras, had denied that Evo Morales and the FARC were strengthening their ties. "There is no strengthening of ties, but rather a response to the humanitarian request that Nicolas Sarkozy made to several presidents who are interested in achieving social peace in Colombia," Contreras explained. Deputy Oscar Urenda, also of Podemos, accused President Evo Morales of having ties with the FARC, on the basis of news stories published in Peru. Senator Roger Pinto (Podemos) brought up the ties that are said to exist between the FARC and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa, and Bolivian President Evo Morales.

In Bolivia, the government appears to be adamant against the international law that bans the chew of coca which is traditionally loved by the indigenous people of the country. The obstinacy tallies with the plan of strengthening the position of the indigenous people which President Evo Morales is championing. The president is planning to spend \$300,000 to develop legal markets for coca, defying a U.N.-affiliated drug watchdog's call to abolish traditional uses of the leaf long revered in the Andes. Morales, a former coca growers' union leader, first announced the funding last month during a trip to the Chapare, a coca-growing region in central Bolivia, Vice Ministry of Social Defense spokesman Ilder Cejas said Tuesday.

The investment is part of a Bolivian government plan to promote the "industrialization" of coca leaf the main ingredient in cocaine into legal products such as tea, flour and herbal medicines Morales hopes will rescue the crop from the drug trade, Cejas said. But the 1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs lists the leaf alongside cocaine, heroin and opium as a Schedule I narcotic, and declared that coca chewing, a custom that predates the Inca empire to be "abolished" worldwide by 1987. The International Narcotics Control Board, charged with enforcing the 47-year-old treaty, released an annual report last week chiding Bolivia for not having followed the convention guidelines.

## **Guyana**

In Georgetown, Guyana the Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA) has expressed "deep dismay" at the institution of a sedition charge against ex-army officer Oliver Hinckson and called for its withdrawal. "The sedition charge is mean-spirited and runs contrary to the spirit of efforts to heal the nation," GHRA said in a statement, adding that the government should withdraw the charge "so that the country can move forward in a cooperative spirit". The human rights body also appealed especially to President Bharrat Jagdeo "to play the role of leader and healer of the nation rather than the leader of a partisan faction". The association said while it was not taking a position on the prosecutorial or legal issue involved nor in any way commenting on the legal process, "Guyana is perilously poised on the edge of a precipice and it is the role of government and of the President, in particular, to act in a statesmanlike manner and to help heal the nation and take it forward on consensual paths towards nation-building for the benefit of all its people". Responding to the GHRA's statement, Home Affairs Minister Clement Rohee said he was deeply disappointed with the views expressed by the human rights body, noting that the organization's statements were "grossly unfair and misinformed". Rohee emphasized that Hinckson's arrest, detention and subsequent charge was initiated purely as a result of police investigations.

Still in Guyana, the country minority opposition Alliance For Change (AFC) party has also called on all stakeholders to help reduce tension in the country. AFC said that the tension has been caused by the recently massacres that left 23 people dead, political statements as well as the sedition charges against a former army officer. It said these developments were "threatening the peace and stability that we so desperately need". The party said that the situation had also been inflamed by statements attributed to President Bharrat Jagdeo at the anniversary of the death of former president Cheddie Jagan. It said that Jagdeo had suggested that crime had to be tackled in a ham-fisted and vicious manner and that "those advocating shared governance wanted power through the back door". Former Guyana Defence Force (GDF) army officers Oliver Hinckson and Dorian

Massay with sedition, advocacy of terrorism and possessing military materials. In addition, it said the police then sought to question former prime minister and Mayor of Georgetown Hamilton Greene and the slaying of Marcyn King, the sister of the country's most wanted man, Rondell 'Fineman' Rawlins.

## **Central America**

### **Nicaragua**

Last week was a week of showdown involving the governments of Colombia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Ecuador, a fracas that was later resolved. In an attempt to avoid repetition of the last week's episode, both Colombia and Nicaragua see the necessity of diplomacy in solving their water-border issue. The Colombian Government affirmed today that it will ensure respect for its national territory by diplomatic means "and without resorting to extreme measures," this in response to the Nicaraguan decree establishing a special fishing zone in the Caribbean Sea. Fernando Araujo, Colombian minister of foreign relations, said in statements made on Caracol Radio that the boundary between Colombia and Nicaragua in the Caribbean Sea continues to be Meridian 82, and that the special zone created by an order issued by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega on Wednesday [12 March] goes beyond it. "With respect to Colombia, we all know that meridian 82 is the maritime boundary that both of our countries have recognized for many years," Araujo pointed out. Nevertheless, if Nicaragua fails to recognize it, then "we shall have recourse to diplomacy, as we have always done," and "we shall continue to exercise our sovereignty as we have done all our lives, without resorting to extreme measures, naturally, but while indeed ensuring respect for our territory," he emphasized.

According to the order signed the previous evening by Ortega, the zone extends out 200 nautical miles, which implies that it goes beyond Meridian 82, the maritime boundary with Colombia established by the 1928 Esguerra-Barcenas Treaty. The government of Nicaragua has not recognized the treaty and, in 2001, appealed to the International Court of Justice in The Hague (ICJ) requesting recognition of its sovereignty over some 50,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the Caribbean, including the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, which is one of the 32 departments of Colombia. In a previous ruling handed down three months ago, the ICJ declared that it had no jurisdiction to revise sovereignty over the high-seas territory, but it did have competency to establish a new maritime boundary.

### **Guatemala**

In Guatemala President Alvaro Colom struggles to make the country understand the unconstitutionality of capital punishment. On Friday the president vetoed a bill that would have reinstated capital punishment and given the president the power to commute death penalty sentences. There are 34 prisoners in limbo on death row after a high court

in 2002 suspended executions, ruling that presidential reprieves on death penalty cases were unconstitutional.

Guatemala is a signatory to the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, which requires that those sentenced to capital punishment be given the right to appeal for a pardon from the president or other authority. President Alvaro Colom said "strengthening security institutions" is the best way to fight crime in Central America's most violent country, where gangs are rampant and as few as 2 percent of more than 5,000 homicides a year are solved....."If (the death penalty) were a disincentive, we would reinstate it," Colom said. "But we have studied cases in various states in the United States, and it doesn't dissuade" crime. But various newspaper polls indicated more than 90 percent of Guatemalans favor capital punishment, and the measure was backed by 140 of the legislature's 158 members in February. Otto Perez Molina of the conservative Patriotic Party, who was the runner-up to Colom in November elections, criticized the veto. "He's taking things backward even though his own party supported the measure in Congress," Perez said.

## **Caribbean**

### **Cuba**

In what appears historic moment in the region was the renewal of friendship between Cuba and Mexico. Cuba and Mexico declared their once-chilly relations fully restored on Thursday, and Cuba's foreign minister said he will soon deliver a formal invitation for Mexico's president to visit the island. "Relations between Mexico and Cuba are fully normalized," Cuban Foreign Minister Perez Roque said after meeting with his Mexican counterpart, Patricia Espinosa. Mexican President Felipe Calderon has said he wants warmer ties with Cuba which historically have been good but soured under his predecessor, Vicente Fox, who feuded publicly with Fidel Castro.

Under Fox, Mexico also backed a 2002 U.N. Human Rights Commission resolution condemning Cuba. The two nations temporarily withdrew their ambassadors in May 2004. Fox left office in December 2006, and Fidel Castro stepped down last month after nearly 50 years as Cuba's No. 1 official. Perez Roque said he will visit Mexico in September with an invitation for Calderon from new Cuban President Raul Castro. Several top foreign dignitaries have visited Cuba since Raul Castro assumed the presidency last month, replacing his ailing 81-year-old brother Fidel. Most of the visits, including Espinosa's, were planned before the leadership change

As the wave of democratic principle among which is the respect for human right continues to blow across the western hemisphere. In Cuba, about two dozen women marched in Havana on Friday to demand the release of their husbands and other political prisoners ahead of the fifth anniversary of a crackdown on dissent. Of the 75 government critics arrested March 18-19, 2003, and given long prison terms, 55 remain imprisoned.

Sixteen were released early on medical parole and another four were freed into forced exile in Spain last month. Next week's anniversary "is very painful for us," said Laura Pollan of the Ladies in White, a support group for wives of political prisoners. Pollan's husband, Hector Maseda, was arrested and sentenced to 20 years. Cuba accused the independent journalists, rights activists and other opposition members of being U.S. mercenaries working to undermine the communist government. The dissidents and American officials reject that charge.

The U.S military officials made known their new initiative for inmates of Gitmo prison; the inmates would be chanced to talk with their families. A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Jeffrey Gordon, said the telephone policy reflects a commitment to maintaining the health and well-being of Guantanamo detainees. No start date has been set for the programme. Detainees' attorneys welcomed the phone calls but said reconnecting with family could make life more painful for those at Guantanamo, where the U.S. military holds about 275 men on suspicion of links to terrorism, al-Qaida or the Taliban. However there exists scepticism over the new plan in view of the fact there is likelihood of it never to happen based on the fact that the talk would only be for one hour within six months. Chicago lawyer H. Candace Gorman, who represents a Guantanamo detainee, said she learned on a recent visit with her client that prisoners will be allowed to speak with their families for one hour every six months.

Abuse of prisoners by U.S. military interrogators in Afghanistan became an issue this week during separate pretrial hearings for three detainees at Guantanamo Bay. The military revealed the interrogator of one defendant had been convicted of assaulting an Afghan detainee who later died; a lawyer for the second charged his client was abused by a soldier known as "The King of Torture;" and the third boycotted his hearing after complaining of abuse in Afghanistan. All three defendants facing war-crimes tribunals were previously held by U.S. forces at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, which became a way station for hundreds of suspected Taliban and al-Qaida fighters who were later shipped to Guantanamo. While no proof has emerged the three were mistreated themselves, a military investigation confirmed abuses occurred at Bagram, paving the way for defense lawyers to challenge statements their clients made there. Observers expect that once trials get under way at this U.S. military base in southeastern Cuba, much of the focus will be on allegations that defendants were abused in custody in Afghanistan. "Whatever issues may arise, torture is going to be at the heart of this process," said Ben Wizner, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union who attended the hearings.

## **St Lucia**

In Castries, St Lucia: Prime Minister Stephenson King has expressed concern that continued unrest in Guyana, caused by the recent murders of innocent people may result in the mass migration of Guyanese to St Lucia and other neighbouring Caribbean states.

King's expression of concern came Tuesday amid reports of another murder in Guyana, which could trigger a new wave of killings in the country. There was news Tuesday that the sister of Guyana's most wanted man Rondell Rawlins was shot and killed. Rawlins has been identified by police as the leader of a gang that shot and killed 23 people, including five children and three police officers, in two incidents at the East Coast Demerara village of Lusignan and the small mining town of Bartica a few weeks ago. The Prime Minister said that while it was his hope that peace will prevail in Guyana, as continued strife and criminal activity could spell trouble and instability for other territories in the region. He said that it his hope that the Guyana Government brings the situation under control as failure to do that could result in problems for neighbouring territories including mass migration. "We would hate that these violent attacks on innocent people by warring gangs would get out of hand, as it could trigger migration whether to neighbouring territories or to islands of the Eastern Caribbean. There is also the concern the country's social environment if racial tension escalates," King said.

However Guyana's Honorary Council to St Lucia Lokish Singh says his fears are unfounded, noting that while some of his compatriots may seek to migrate, this was hardly expected to occur in large numbers. He said that while there were a lot of Guyanese who were "fed up" with the situation in his country there was hardly a chance that it would result in Guyanese leaving their country in droves. "Clearly the current situation will result in some measure of stimulated migration, as lots of Guyanese have family and relatives outside of Guyana and further a field, but I don't see them moving en-mass," he said. The problem in Guyana although might be political but having economic implication which might contribute to the anticipated exodus of people from the island. Singh says it may be a case of history repeating itself in reverse as in the 1960's and 70's St Lucians left their island in droves to work in Guyana, with descendants of those people were now choosing to leave for St Lucia. The Guyanese population here is estimated at 10,000.

In Nassau, The Bahamas, CMC - Regional leaders wrapped up their 19th Inter-sessional meeting suggesting the two-day conference was a success. Crime and security and the rising cost of living took centre stage at the conference, forcing leaders to contemplate numerous strategies to meet the challenges facing the region. The leaders agreed that they will hold a special summit on crime in Trinidad next month where they will have more time to flesh out a common response to the problem which has had a major impact on Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica, in particular. "Looking at what is happening in the various territories we thought that the time had also come for a wider discussion on security in the region," Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister Patrick Manning told journalists on the weekend. "The Heads agreed and they accepted the invitation of Trinidad and Tobago to come to Port of Spain early next month to have a fuller discussion on this matter, crime and security in the region, and to complete the rest of our

deliberations on the legacy of Cricket World Cup 2007". Another critical issue dealt with by the leaders was the rising cost of basic food items in the region. Prime Minister of St Kitts/Nevis Denzil Douglas said the summit helped to flesh out some of the approaches that could be taken in addressing the issue. "I want to emphasise that this has been a critically important meeting. I think to a large extent a number of issues that are of great importance to the Caribbean people were discussed, chief among them was the specific strategy that the Heads of Government wanted to discuss on the cost of living issues in the Caribbean today," he told reporters at the end of the two-day summit. "You would have recognised that we have taken a decision to temporarily withdraw the CET (Common External Tariff) and other national governments have been advised that they should take appropriate action so as to safeguard the interest of their citizens with regards to the price of goods and services.

"So, it's really up to the different governments to apply what I believe would be the right thing after consultations with the private sector and their representatives at the national level," he added. Leaders met in Guyana last December in an emergency meeting to look at possible ways to deal with the issue. The removal of the CET was one of the solutions contemplated. On the matter of tourism, the leaders agreed to have a special one-day session to discuss the industry at their annual conference in Antigua in July.

### **US Congress, House Hearing on South, Central America and Caribbean**

The impact of deportation from United States to the Caribbean Island and Central America is having a greater consequence to the receiving countries than expected. The primary reasons for deportation include drug offences, illegal custody of firearms and murder cases. It is believed that these deportees further heighten the insecurity tension in the receiving country and they are more likely to commit crime even beyond the notice of the receiving government. The effects of deportation are multidimensional. The socio-psychological effect on the deportees is high, psychologically tortured for being deported from a developed nation to an impoverish country. Similarly is the issue of family separation borne out of deportation, many of the deportee children languish in poverty back in the states and have no contact with their parents. Suggesting a solution to the problem Annemarie Barnes, Ph.D. Chief Technical Director, Ministry of National Security Jamaica said The US Congress should understand that security is a global challenge and it would be unwise that a developed nation shifts the burden of maintaining security to countries least equipped to do so. Barnes further requested the US to help countries in the region (Caribbean Island and Central America) in consolidating their security institution and to provide adequate information and financial assistance that could help in relocating the deportees and eluding them from venturing in more crime.

**(Congressional Hearing: Sub Committee on the Western Hemisphere, “Deportees in Latin America and the Caribbean” July 24, 2007 by Annemarie Barnes, Ph.D. Chief Technical Director Ministry of National Security Jamaica)**

In its one hundred ninth session, the US House of Representatives (Congress) dissected Democracy in Latin America with special emphasis on its successes, challenges and its future. The House assert that through the diligent efforts of visionary leaders in Latin America and their steadfast supporters in the United States and other democratic nations, worldwide democracy has now taken root in 34 of the 35 nations in our hemisphere. Although political freedom in many of these countries is often precarious, only the regime in Cuba continues to tightly shackle its people

Democracy as a structure of change as dawned a new beginning for hemisphere who were once excluded from the political process are now enjoying the basic human and civil rights that democracy guarantees. While applauding the great strides that most of these neighbouring countries have taken in developing and protecting their political freedoms, the acknowledgeable fact is that democratization is a long and difficult road. In Latin America, a region without a long history of democracy, armed insurgencies, drug trafficking, the presence of foreign terrorist organizations, poverty, corruption, weak political institutions and unwelcome interference from other countries threaten to destabilize societies and governments. To bolster the young democracies, leaders throughout Latin America must focus not only on winning elections and writing Constitutions, they must also commit to building strong democratic institutions and practices within their governmental framework. Only strong democratic institutions can protect the rights and liberties of a nation and insulate them from being taken away by a simple change of government. Often, these are weak and unable to meet even the basic demands placed upon them, such as establishing and enforcing a fair tax code, instituting an effective judicial system, providing reliable police services and other needs which we in this country take for granted. The House hearing particularly singled out Cuba and Venezuela as countries that still have a long way in projecting themselves as democratic societies. Though Venezuela might be different from Cuba yet masked socialist autocratic system prevalent in Venezuela must be challenged and a truly political system must come to stay. It is the right of the US to ensure that democracy entrench itself in the region doing that is not only good for the Latinos but also for the American interest.

(Democracy in Latin America: successes, challenges and the future, Hearing before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives: one hundred ninth Congress, Second session, JUNE 21, 2006, Serial No. 109–215,

<http://www.house.gov/international—relations>)

The US government felt there must be a change in the region by promoting democratic structure and economic prosperity. The Caribbean and Central America should not be addressed with laissez-faire attitude. Democracy in the region appears no more an elusive phenomenon though democratic institutions are still on shaky platform, this the United States must help to strengthen. Cuba has recently changed the personality of its leadership though still lacking when it comes to democracy. The US House of Congress see the need to improve the economic and political life in the Island. According to the House hearing report FY 2009 foreign assistance request of \$20 million for Cuba is consistent with recommendations in the second Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC) report. Since the formation of CAFC, Economic Support Funds to Cuba jumped to over \$21 million in FY 2004 and an estimated \$45 million in FY 2008. This assistance is key to helping the democratic opposition and civil society promote the dialogue needed for a successful transition to democracy. The United States reaffirms the belief that the Cuban people have an inalienable right to participate in an open and comprehensive dialogue about their country's future, free of fear and repression, and to choose their leaders in democratic elections. We reiterate Secretary Rice's February 24, 2008 message regarding our support of the Cuban people in their efforts to obtain "the fundamental rights and liberties expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Inter-American Democratic Charter." We continue to urge the Cuban Government to begin a peaceful transition to democracy and encourage international partners to help the Cuban people bring about positive change.

(With Castro Stepping Down, What's Next for Cuba and the Western Hemisphere? By **Thomas A. Shannon, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs**, Statement Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere of House of Representatives Washington, DC March 5, 2008)

Weekly Presentation: March 25, 2008

## **South, Central America and the Caribbean**

By: Bakare Najimdeen

Period: From 16-22 March 2008

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### **Headlines**

#### **South America**

Argentine government reiterates recognition of single China  
Ecuadoran government awaits Colombian goodwill "signals"

Peru says Chavez backs domestic revolt  
Japan, Peru set to mend ties at first summit in nine years

British judge rules against Exxon Mobil  
Bolivian minister says no border conflict with Paraguay

#### **Central America**

#### **Caribbean Islands**

Cuba releases informal economy numbers  
Groups call for prisoner releases  
Castro: 'stupid' to link Cuba to rebels  
Cuba, Venezuela rap US in terrorism case

St Vincent opposition leader backs down on support for **Caribbean** court  
St Lucia opposition leader visiting Cuba

Crime a monster challenge for the **Caribbean** countries - agency feature  
Antigua to benefit from agreement with Italian city

Venezuela proposes gas pipeline to Surinam  
Chinese trade delegation visits Surinam

Surinam to host international forest conference  
US diplomat welcomes assurances from Dominica

#### **South America**

From Buenos Aires, the Argentine Foreign Ministry today reiterated that it recognizes a single China and stated that it observes "with concern" that Taiwan insists in its plan to join the United Nations under the name of "Taiwan." In an official communique, the Foreign Ministry also deplored Taiwan's proposal because "it creates a tense atmosphere in the region which does not contribute to a peaceful solution to the issue." The communique goes on to point out that "the Argentine government views with concern" that Taiwan continues with its plan to hold a referendum on 22 March regarding its aspiration to become a UN member under the name of "Taiwan."

Upon returning from Washington, Ecuador Foreign Minister Maria Isabel Salvador discussed her efforts at the OAS and said that the Ecuadoran Government is waiting for Colombia to send signals of good will before reestablishing diplomatic relations. She reaffirmed, however, that she also hopes the Colombian Government will stop citing as yet uncorroborated evidence to implicate Ecuador with the FARC. "I do not want to set a date. This is a process, and we will do so at the opportune moment. I will have to meet with President Rafael Correa to determine the next steps we will take on this issue, but what we are hoping is that the Colombian Government will stop citing as yet uncorroborated evidence to implicate Ecuador with the FARC," she said.

Salvador said that OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza, with the involvement of the countries in the hemisphere, would be in charge of finding the best way to prevent future incidents such as the one on 1 March, in Angostura, when the Colombian Army bombed Ecuadoran territory and killed Raul Reyes, the number two leader of the FARC guerrillas. The minister did not rule out a request to Colombia to redress the damages caused by the attack, and she confirmed that the Colombian Government has not yet sent over the evidence that it allegedly found in the zone of attack. "We are waiting for the information. But if it does not arrive, we will keep asking." She also said that the Ecuadoran Consulate in Bogota has been asked to conduct an investigation to determine whether the body found alongside Raul Reyes is that of Ecuadoran citizen Franklin Aizalia Molina. The body was later taken to Bogota after the illegal operation by Colombian troops on 1 March in which 25 people died. The unidentified body, which remains at a morgue in the Colombian capital, was initially misidentified as that of the guerrilla known as Julian Conrado. An Ecuadoran family is claiming the body, however, saying that it is Aizalia, a locksmith who worked in a Quito neighbourhood. "We are going to do everything necessary to eventually determine whether the body is that of Julian Conrado or Mr Aizalia," the foreign minister said. "We would be looking at a really serious matter, because they murdered an Ecuadoran citizen," Prosecutor General Washington Pesantez said.

Ecuadoran Security Minister Gustavo Larrea affirmed that since December he "actively" participated in negotiations to release the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] hostages and pointed out that following President Rafael Correa's orders, he "deepened" this task of which Colombian President Alvaro Uribe was aware of. Larrea said that the Colombian president "thanked" this work even though early this month he accused him of backing that guerrilla organization. Larrea was the person that the Colombian Government has accused over the alleged links of the Ecuadoran Government

with the FARC, launched by Colombia when Ecuador did not accept Colombia's excuses for the attack to a guerrilla camp on Ecuadoran soil. "I actively participated in December's humanitarian agreement," Larrea affirmed in an interview with Telam. "Following orders by my president (Rafael Correa), I proposed continuing all sorts of negotiations that would allow, if possible, the release of all the FARC hostages and the willingness to offer our territory as a possible area for the delivery of the hostages," he added. "Larrea said that on 31 December he explained the position to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe who "thanked this work" despite many unfavourable "commentaries." "I advanced on this path to establish a relationship because obviously, to gain the release of the hostages it is necessary to speak to the kidnappers," he said. The minister said that he contacted the second in command of the FARC, Raul Reyes - killed on 1 March during an attack by Colombian troops to the FARC camp - and affirmed that he, Larrea, specifically requested the release of former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, held in captivity since six years ago, and the three US citizens. Larrea said that his talk with Reyes "was centred on the release of the hostages" and that "in no case" was there any talk of "any other type of agreement." "This was simply a political and humanitarian action focused on understanding that the release of Ingrid and the three US citizens would have been a clear sign to the international community of the FARC's willingness to begin a process of talks towards a humanitarian agreement," he pointed out. Larrea said that "at no time did the conversation agenda" include the possibility of recognizing the FARC as a belligerent force or the removal of mid-level Ecuadoran commanders, such as Colombia denounced. "Reality shows this to be untrue, such as that accusation that the FARC cooperated economically with the electoral campaign" of Correa, he added. "The date mentioned for this alleged contribution was even after the presidential elections won by President Correa; it is a mistake by the person handling the computer, if the computer existed at all," concluded Larrea.

In Peru, President Hugo Chavez has been accused of using Venezuela's oil riches to meddle in Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Now, Peru's president says the Venezuelan leader may be doing it here by funding militants and anti-poverty centers that preach populist revolution. In recent weeks, Peruvian police have arrested nine people the government alleges are militants bankrolled by Venezuela. And the head of a Congressional investigatory committee accused Venezuela of supplying funds to outreach centers he says agitate against the government. President Alan Garcia supports the ongoing investigation into the centers. Venezuela and allies Bolivia and Ecuador "want to destabilize Peru so that our country adheres to their type of thinking, so that Peru fails," said the government's lead anti-terrorism prosecutor, Julio Galindo. Venezuela vehemently denies the allegations, and denies funding Peruvian militants or the anti-poverty centers. Venezuela's ambassador in Peru, Armando Laguna, said the government should "ask me to leave Peru" if it finds proof. The accusations come in the context of a regional showdown over alleged Venezuelan and Ecuadorean attempts to destabilize Colombia's U.S.-backed government. Colombian authorities claim a seized rebel laptop indicates that Venezuela planned to give \$300 million to rebels fighting to topple it. On the contrary a former Peruvian interior minister, Fernando Rospigliosi, said he believes the Garcia government is exaggerating the influence of the missions and the

Coordinadora. It wants "to make the public believe that social movements arising for other reasons can be attributed to external influence," he told The Associated Press. Meanwhile civil society groupings within the government believe the government is over exaggerating the situation in bid to water down the activities of the civil groups.

The long standing chilling relations between Peru and Japan will be subsiding as the two country bridge up their difference and hope for cooperation. Ahead of talks in Tokyo between Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and Peruvian President Alan Garcia, their foreign ministers agreed in the morning on 785m yen [7.9m dollars] in grant aid for rebuilding five schools and a water tower damaged by an earthquake last August in southern Peru, Foreign Ministry officials said. Garcia, who arrived Sunday for a three-day visit, and Fukuda are expected to sign a joint document on environmental cooperation, including Japanese financial support for Peruvian efforts to tackle climate change. Separately, Tokyo will provide yen loans to improve water and drainage pipelines and power grids, according to the officials. Relations between the two countries have chilled since Peru's former leader, Alberto Fujimori, fled to Japan as his decade-long government was crumbling under the pressure of a corruption scandal in November 2000, faxing his resignation as president to Lima from a Tokyo hotel. Fujimori faced various criminal charges in Peru, including authorizing a death squad to murder 25 people, paying his spy chief Vladimiro Montesinos 15m dollars, and embezzling public funds. Despite repeated requests from Peru and an Interpol notice for Fujimori's arrest, Japan refused to hand Fujimori over, citing his Japanese citizenship - which the government confirmed only after he fled to Japan and despite Japanese laws against dual nationality - and the lack of an extradition treaty between the two countries.

In Caracas Venezuela good news came before the government from a British judge who ruled against Exxon Mobil Corp. on Tuesday, tossing out an order to freeze \$12 billion in assets belonging to Venezuela's state oil company in a case that stemmed from the nationalization of a project last year. Judge Paul Walker noted that such freezing orders are rare and occur in cases where there is "usually compelling evidence of serious international fraud."....."In the present case there is no suggestion whatever of fraud on the part of (Petroleos de Venezuela SA) or any entity or person associated with it," Walker said in a summary of conclusions released by the court. During the court case, Walker also signaled that he agreed with PDVSA's argument that the case didn't fall under British jurisdiction since it isn't a British company and has no assets, businesses or bank accounts there. "Today we have a firm decision 100 percent in our favor," Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez told state television. "We've defeated Exxon Mobil." Irving, Texas-based Exxon Mobil had decided to go to international arbitration with PDVSA last year, after Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez nationalized a heavy oil project in the Orinoco River basin. The company subsequently secured court orders in Britain, among other countries, to freeze PDVSA's international assets, saying it needed to ensure that it would get paid for the loss of the project and future revenues if an international court ruled in its favor. Exxon Mobil spokesman Alan Jeffers said the company has no plans to appeal the ruling and that the judge based his decision on jurisdictional issues. "The important thing, from our perspective, is the court did not question the merits of our underlying claim," Venezuela, meanwhile, is now considering suing Exxon Mobil,

Ramirez said. "Exxon Mobil is going to have to answer now for the damage that has been caused to our company, to our country," he said. Ramirez said Exxon Mobil has been "very arrogant," while other companies including Chevron Corp., Total SA, BP PLC and StatoilHydro ASA have negotiated deals to continue as minority partners in the nationalized projects. "Exxon is isolated in its abusive position," Ramirez said.

Bolivian Defence Minister Walker San Miguel has argued that there is no border dispute with Paraguay. He said that the issue of the border marker on Chovoreca Hill was settled back in 1975 and that the charge published in the media came not from the government of Evo Morales but from a private citizen. The Bolivian defence minister explained yesterday that the complaint about the alleged shifting of a boundary post along the border with Paraguay did not come from the government of President Evo Morales. "This is not a charge by the country or by the government. It was a charge that I regard as anonymous. The Bolivian Foreign Ministry has already explained that this issue was put behind us several years ago," San Miguel said upon leaving the Government Palace after a meeting with President Nicanor Duarte Frutos. San Miguel said that according to the report that he received from his country's Ministry of Foreign Relations, the issue was settled back in 1975. "The problem arose under the Treaty of 1945 and wound up being resolved in 1975 when the border marker was placed where it belonged," the minister commented. He said that the location of the boundary post was never properly determined in the wake of the border agreements between Paraguay and Bolivia at the close of the Chaco War (1932-1935), adding that it was not until 1975 that it was. "Several provisional markers were placed during the time that there was no definitive location, but I repeat: the issue was settled many years ago," San Miguel stressed. He said that the charge was made anonymously, apparently by a forest ranger, and that they were not even any government-to-government talks because the border between the two countries is not an issue for them. "It no doubt came from someone who had an interest in wanting to spoil our relations. But we in the Defence Ministry, in the Foreign Ministry, in the government have put behind us any charge intended to tarnish this strengthening of relations," the senior Bolivian official replied when asked about the source of the stories that news agencies reported yesterday from his country. The news agencies reported that Minister San Miguel was on an "urgent visit" to ask the Paraguayan Government to clarify the allegation that the boundary post at the spot known as Chovoreca Hill, along the border between the Department of Santa Cruz and Paraguay, had been arbitrarily moved. San Miguel said yesterday that his visit had been scheduled some time ago so that he could discuss an expansion of military and defence relations between our two countries. Separately, Paraguay's defence minister, Nelson Mora, said that his colleague had come to discuss strengthening border controls and also to establish mechanisms for cooperation and reciprocity in the event of hardships arising from natural disasters. He said that this was San Miguel's third visit in 16 months.

## **Central America**

## **Caribbean Islands**

In Havana, Communist Cuba has issued what appears to be the first public report on prices and inflation in the private sector, in an unusually realistic acknowledgment of the key role the informal economy plays in island life. In its "Survey of Prices in the Informal Sector," the National Office of Statistics estimated that the cost of goods and services purchased from private sources rose 4 percent from February 2007 to the same month in 2008. The Island economy might be a subsidized one in order to alleviate the economic problem of the people yet the government has not been able to fully cater for the general needs of the people thus private sectors come into play as a helper. The report studied government-sanctioned markets where farmers may sell any excess agricultural goods after meeting production quotas, as well as commerce by licensed tradesmen and small business owners. It also considered illicit activities such as the surreptitious sale of food, medicine and other products stolen from state warehouses and factories. Under Raul the government has urged Cubans to work harder and increase economic productivity, and on Friday officials scolded Havana residents, saying nearly one in every five chooses not to work. According to the Communist Party daily Granma some 78 percent of the capital's work force is employed, another 3 percent cannot find jobs, while 19 percent prefer not to work. The report shows that "The repeated answer given to social workers who interview them," city labor chief Odalys Gonzalez Lopez was quoted as saying, "is 'I don't work because they don't pay me well,' 'My mom and dad support me' or 'The business (black market) provides for me.'" Granma said that only by boosting productivity will Cuba be able "to resolve the complex problem of the dual currency and the development of the country."

Similarly in Havana, the International human rights and journalism advocacy groups called Tuesday on President Raul Castro's government to free critics still serving long sentences five years after a broad crackdown that landed 75 people behind bars. "It is time for Cuba to release these prisoners immediately and without conditions," said Matt Easton, of the New York-based Human Rights First, in a news release. "The world is waiting to see whether Cuba is really ready for change, or only going through the motions." The Committee to Protect Journalists focused on the 20 independent journalists among the 55 still held. Carlos Lauria, committee representative for the Americas, called for the journalists' release during a news conference in Madrid, attended by Cuban writer Raul Rivero. Rivero who was among 16 people in the original group of 75 who were released early on medical parole. Another four in the group were released into forced exile in Spain last month.

Castro's health might not be that fine to continue his long struggle yet he has mustered the gut to challenge the Colombian government over the linkage of Cuba with FARC militant group. Fidel Castro said it is "stupid" to think Cubans were involved with Colombian rebels whose camp was bombed in a cross-border raid in Ecuador early this month. In a statement released Saturday, the 81-year-old dismissed allegations reportedly being investigated by Mexican authorities that Cubans were linked to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. "The stupid intention to mix Cubans in this matter is very clear," Castro said in the statement, which Foreign Ministry officials sent by e-mail to international journalists in Havana. Some Mexican and international media have

reported that officials were looking into whether Mario Dagoberto Diaz Orgaz, a naturalized Mexican citizen and engineering research professor in central Mexico, is a Cuban intelligence agent who helped Mexicans connect with FARC guerrillas. The reports suggested Diaz may have led the students to Ecuador. Diaz's attorney has denied his client has ties to the rebels. Some recent reports have also suggested that Cuban medical students were involved with the FARC, an idea that Castro called a "lie concerning the possible presence of our medical students in this distant Colombian jungle."

Topping it up, at the United Nations, both Cuba and Venezuela criticized the United States for failing to hand over or prosecute an alleged terrorist accused of masterminding the bombing of a Cuban jetliner in 1976. The United States insisted it is acting legally. Revisiting the issue is an attempt to shove back on the USA the accusation of terrorism with which the latter has always shouldered on both Cuba and Venezuela. Stressfully for Venezuela to tell the USA that it is not impeccable for the same crime she always been accused of in view of last week demand of the US congress that Venezuela should be enlisted among states sponsoring terrorism. The case of Luis Posada Carriles a Cuban-born Venezuelan citizen who has been a Venezuelan security officer, a soldier in the U.S. Army and a CIA operative was raised during a U.N. Security Council meeting on U.N. efforts to combat terrorism. Cuban Ambassador Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz called the 80-year-old Posada, a militant opponent of Fidel Castro's communist regime, "the most notorious terrorist of the Western hemisphere." He said there is sufficient evidence linking Posada to "some of the most infamous crimes of the 20th century" including the bombing of the Cubana de Aviacion jet over Barbados that killed 73 people, the Iran-Contra scandal and the bombings of Havana hotels in 1997. Deputy Venezuelan Ambassador Aura Rodriguez de Ortiz accused the United States of ignoring a request made nearly three years ago for Posada's extradition, calling him "a known international criminal and terrorist and fugitive of Venezuelan justice." The United States, she said, is bound not only by the 1922 U.S.-Venezuelan extradition treaty but by international treaties on terrorist bombings and the safety of civil aviation "to extradite or submit his case for prosecution without any exception." Carolyn Willson, a senior diplomat at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, countered that the United States has taken a number of steps on Posada "consistent with international law as well as our domestic legal framework, which provides for due process and various constitutional safeguards." Posada, who denies the terrorism accusations, was arrested in May 2005 on charges of sneaking into the United States illegally. An immigration judge in Texas ordered his deportation but not to Venezuela or Cuba "because it was more likely than not that he would be tortured if he were so transferred," Willson said.

In St Vincent, the Opposition Leader Armin Eustace says he does not support a move by St Vincent and the Grenadines to join the appellate jurisdiction of the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). Only Barbados and Guyana have joined the appellate jurisdiction of the Trinidad-based court that was established a few years ago to replace the London-based Privy Council as the region's final court. However, most of all of the Caribbean

Community (CARICOM) countries have signed on to the original jurisdiction of the court. Eustace told the Caribbean Media Corporation (CMC) that he is prepared to deal with the backlash of criticism which may come because of his position, because he is convinced that there is a core problem that needs to be addressed. "People are losing confidence more and more in the judicial system," Eustace said, adding "there seems to be one set of rules for some, and another set for others". Eustace said that his new position has been informed by the ongoing legal matter involving the Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves and the failure of the governments of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) to appoint Sir Brian Alleyne as the Chief Justice of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court. Eustace has called for the regional judicial system to be more insulated from political interference, adding "judges must not have to look over their backs when making decisions". Eustace said that evidence of this serious flaw in the regional justice system can be seen in the steps taken to ensure that the CCJ is free from political interference.

In St Lucia Opposition Leader visiting Cuba CASTRIES, St Lucia, CMC - Opposition Leader Dr Kenny Anthony is leading a four-member delegation to Cuba on what has been described as a "goodwill visit" to the Communist Caribbean state. Anthony, a former prime minister, said that the visit provides "a great opportunity" to thank former President Fidel Castro and the Cuban government for the tremendous assistance extended to St Lucia especially during the period that his St Lucia Labour Party (SLP) was in office. "I would certainly like to re-iterate the deep appreciation of the SLP for the scholarship granted to St Lucian students to study in Cuba, the ongoing eye care programme which has proven to be a tremendous success." Anthony said he was also pleased with Cuban assistance to the health sector and the light bulb project that is intended to assist the poor and that he would urge Havana to continue its programme of support to Castries.

In Bridgetown, Barbados, the rate of crime in the region is becoming alarming. Of the 15 countries with the highest murder rate in the world, 11 of them are from the Latin American region with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member state of Jamaica being one of the 11. So alarming is the situation that there is hardly anyone among the millions of Caribbean residents who has not been personally touched by crime, or who does not know someone who has been affected. Jamaica's Prime Minister Bruce Golding observed "It's something that we have to be concerned about," ..... "It needs to be tackled both from the point of view of domestic policies and action and from the point of view of regional collaboration. ...." "It is important, because if we are going to promote the region as a preferred destination for investment, we can't have investment constantly being intimidated by the level of crime and violence in the region, it's something that we have to address," Golding said. No one could disagree with the Jamaican leader that urgent action is needed. For several years now, this region has grappled with worrying crime levels with some of the most heinous crimes known to man being recorded in countries like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. However, if the people of the Caribbean were expecting their leaders to report on some kind of tangible solution to the crime menace following their recent summit in The Bahamas, they would have been left utterly disappointed.

The intensity of the crime has pushed many of the countries in the region to seek for external help in combating the menace. Only recently, Antigua and Barbuda announced a shake up in the hierarchy of its Police Force with Canadians being brought in assist. Jamaica, too, has hired Scotland Yard detectives one of whom fills the post of Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of crime. British officers have also been hired by St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago as the leaders of the various countries grapple with a monster which continues to overpower them every year. But their Barbados colleague does not believe calling for help from outside the region is the way to go. Prime Minister David Thompson said "I don't think that as a region we need to call on other people to solve our problems," ..... "I think there may be technologies and there may be resources that are available, some of which we can pay for, others which on a reciprocal basis we can ask other countries to assist us with. "What we need to do is to be ever vigilant and to recognise that issues of increasing crime or acts of terrorism or the widespread use of illegal drugs and drug trafficking as well as gangs and violence are all a threat to our economic development and therefore that collectively we have an interest in ensuring that they're stamped out," Thompson said. The Barbados Prime Minister also noted that crime in the Caribbean does not only affect the people who live here and it would be in the interest of other countries to help without being called on to do so. "We need to recognise that we are very close to the borders of the United States of America and therefore they have to have an interest in the stability of this region," Thompson said. "We also have relationships with other parts of South America and I assume they would be interested in the stability of the region. We play host to thousands of European and Canadian tourists and to that extent they would also be interested in stability and security within the Caribbean region ".

The Antigua and Barbuda government says it expects to benefit from an agreement with a major Italian city in environmental protection and a stream of social programmes. The Baldwin Spencer administration confirmed over the weekend that the City of Milan has agreed to provide financial support to a number of projects including the demarcation of reefs for the protection of coral habitat, anchor and no-fishing zones, as well as transit corridors for commercial shipping and sport boating. The arrangement also includes scholarships for students to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees at universities in Milan as well as a soccer facility to train young players throughout the Eastern Caribbean region. The agreement will also facilitate the enhancement of air and other transportation links between Milan and the twin-isle state, while fostering a bilateral investment climate for Milanese business concerns in Antigua and Barbuda. A government statement said the agreement follows a recent meeting between Spencer and Mrs Letizia Moratti, Mayor of the City of Milan. "During my bilateral discussions with Mayor Moratti in the margins of last week's inter-sessional meeting of CARICOM Heads in The Bahamas, I identified a number of areas in which the City of Milan could assist us," Spencer said. He added that the Moratti administration is fully prepared to begin immediate implementation of a number of initiatives in the areas of education, sports, marine and coastal resources, and the strengthening of air and other transportation links. A team from Milan will soon visit the country to meet with local officials, with a view to finalizing the modalities for the implementation of the proposed initiatives, officials said.

Venezuela says it wants to establish a gas pipeline to Surinam, Energy Minister Gregory Rusland confirmed Tuesday. He told reporters that the proposal from Caracas would include laying the pipeline on the seabed with a division leading to Guyana. Rusland said Venezuela president Hugo Chavez made the proposal after the Surinam government had informed Caracas of plans to increase energy production. Officials said experts from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Energy and officials from the state-owned oil company Staatsolie, are exploring whether the pipeline project is economically feasible. Venezuela experts are also collecting data on the project that would be further discussed at the next PetroCaribe summit later this year. "We will examine the possible benefits this proposal could have for the economic development of Surinam", Rusland said, adding that the country is currently implementing its own exploration activities offshore and "if lucky we won't need a gas pipe line from another country". The feasibility study to establish the pipeline is estimated at nearly 3million US dollars. Meanwhile, Rusland has downplayed whether or not his country will seek to be actively involved in the PetroCaribe oil initiative under which Caracas provides oil at a cheap rate to many Caribbean Community (CARICOM) states. Last week President Ronald Venetiaan hinted that his administration would opt out of the deal and Rusland said that importing fuel from Venezuela would be detrimental to Staatsolie which is already producing heavy fuel for local industries. "We have all the time maintained that Surinam is in a slightly different position than several other CARICOM nations since we have our own local oil industry," he said. "Since the costs in the energy sector worldwide are very high and increasing steadily we have to be very cautious not to get trapped in an uncontrollable situation, because before you know it you have an enormous energy bill to pay to another country."

Still in Suriname, delegation of Chinese businessmen and investors arrived at Suriname to explore possible cooperation with members of the local business community. The 14-member trade delegation from Dongguang in the Guang Dong province assisted by China's Ambassador to Suriname, Su Ge, had a brief meeting Friday with president Ronald Venetiaan in the Presidential Palace. The delegation is reportedly seeking information on the investment conditions and regulations in Suriname, as well as labour market conditions. According to officials from the Chinese embassy the entrepreneurs are here to discuss possible cooperation in the field of information technology and trade and investments. It is common practice for the Dongguang business community to send trade missions to several countries to establish business links. China is Suriname's fifth largest export partner behind the US, the Netherlands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Japan. Recently bilateral relations including economic and development cooperation between Suriname and China have been intensified with numerous Chinese department and hardware stores, supermarkets, roofing industries and logging companies being established all over the country. Currently, plans to establish a palm oil industry in the Patamacca region, in east Suriname are in the final stages of preparations. The China Zhong Heng Tai company is waiting for the go-ahead from the government since local communities had raised several issues which the authorities here had to address. Local villagers were especially concerned over reports that there would be an influx of thousands of Chinese workers in the area, leaving a minimum number of jobs at the palm oil operations for local workers.

Recently vice-president Ram Sardjoe disclosed that these issues had been resolved promising that Surinamese nationals will also be hired by the Chinese firm. Surinam, with co-financing from the World Bank, United States, the Netherlands and several other donors will host the next United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) in Paramaribo, officials here have announced. Over 200 experts from all over the world are expected to attend the UNFF8-conference scheduled for September 8-12. Participants will discuss the establishment of an international mechanism, a so-called 'portfolio approach' which eventually should result in sustainable forest conservation and development. On the international agenda regarding the environment, establishment of a financing mechanism for forest conservation is one of the most important issues. Suriname has been selected to host the conference due to its achievements and commitments towards sustainable forest management and preservation. Hans Hoogeveen, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture in the Netherlands, argued that there are several international agreements as to how to achieve the UN Millennium Goals by 2015 and how the international community could stop wide-scale deforestation. Extensive deforestation is rampant especially in developing countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa which clear large areas for agriculture purposes or export of timber. According to Hoogeveen over 13 million hectares of forests worldwide were destroyed since the 1990s.

A United States diplomat has welcomed Dominica's decision not to be a part of a military alliance against Washington and has said also Cuba's decision to allow citizens to purchase modern technology is a move towards greater openness in that Communist Caribbean country. Opposition parties in Dominica have been critical of the decision by the Roosevelt Skerrit administration to be part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) which is seen as an alternative to the US backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). They said that the accord calls for the establishment of a military alliance against Washington, a view that has been denied by National Security Minister Rayburn Blackmoore. "Dominica will never be part of any alliance, military or economic against the United States of America," Blackmoore said over the weekend.

United States Ambassador to Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean Mary Ourisman said she was pleased with the assurance given by Roseau. "I was very happy with the statements of the Minister. I think he hit the nail right on the head. You heard what he said, that he would let nothing come, whether economic or military between the United States and Dominica.

"That's good news and we are happy to hear that from him, of course it's always what we know in our heart but it's lovely to hear it from his voice," the US diplomat added. Mrs Ourisman admitted, however, that she was not paying much attention to the Venezuela backed ALBA adding "I don't know much about that because as you know the United States is not involved in ALBA. "I have heard just what you've heard but I don't have any first hand knowledge on that," she said. The diplomat also welcomed the move by Havana to allow citizens to purchase equipment such as computers. "Of course that's a positive step when people have the right to purchase goods that they might want. I do think that's a welcome change to see that the Cuban people would be allowed to buy DVD's or computers," she said. "They should also have the right to select their own

officials and have the right to have prosperity so that they may purchase those items which they are now being allowed to purchase. "The American government stands firm behind its position with Cuba," Ourisman said.