

# INTER PARES

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## LATIN AMERICA: *Renewing Solidarity*



M. Vanappetghem - UNHCR

The situation in Peru is complex and difficult. The grinding poverty of the majority of Peruvian peasants, and millions of urban poor, persists amongst the conspicuous affluence of the wealthy, and the richness and productivity of the country. The information we receive from our Peruvian friends is invaluable for deepening our understanding of this disparity.

The message we receive is not one of despair, but of determination. Like people throughout Central and South America, Peruvians know the wealth and potential of their country, though the majority have not yet won the opportunity to share in this potential. As we exchange ideas, our friends ask us about the experience in other countries where Inter Pares supports actions for justice and peace. They are especially interested in

Guatemala, and the actions we have supported there that parallel their own struggle in Peru – the activism among the displaced for a voice and protection from military repression, the struggle to regain and rebuild viable rural communities and revitalize local economies, and the cooperation and social solidarity necessary to make possible the organized return of refugee and displaced families.

The conversation is animated. The Peruvians see many lessons to be drawn from the Guatemalan experience, and are encouraged by the tremendous gains of the popular movement in Guatemala. We are surprised by how little our Peruvian friends know of the detail of the Central American experience, yet at the

same time impressed by how intensely interested and willing they are to learn from this experience. It is encouraging and inspiring to be able to draw links among the experiences in various countries, and to sense the tremendous potential stimulated and tapped by these connections.

This moment we shared in Peru is symbolic of our experience in Latin America, and the transformations that are going on there. As we approach the 21st century we are experiencing a new phase in the political and social development of Latin America. This is a new era for the Americas, an era where a vibrant popular sector, after two decades of vicious military repression, is regaining strength and mobilizing for change, reaching out beyond national borders to share resources and strategies to sustain the struggle for justice, democracy, and an end to political violence.

In the midst of this extended period of adjustment and social, political and economic restructuring, Latin Americans are seeking long-term commitments from the international community to support economic and political participation of the majority of the poor within national structures and institutions. Virtually all sectors are seeking alternatives that strengthen community and integrate local economies within the national and international economy. Their expectation is that their international friends and supporters will engage in this challenge and participate with them in the search for sustainable alternatives to the prevailing economic conditions.

This Bulletin explores some elements of how Inter Pares tries to respond to this challenge in our program in Latin America.

**P**eru. We are sitting in a tiny side-alley cafe in the town of Nasca, where the coastal desert laps at the foothills of the Andes. Our travelling companions are community leaders from among the hundreds of families displaced by the conflict between the army and Sendero Luminoso guerrillas in the highland departments of Ayacucho, Huancavelica, and Apurímac.

As we sit, the pale winter sunshine absorbs the chilly shadows of the cafe. We sip our early-morning maté and discuss the plight of the displaced, and their prospects for returning to their homes in peace. And we talk of the dream of rural Peruvians for a return of stability and prosperity to their communities and their frugal lives.

## EL SALVADOR: Long Journey, Small Steps

In late March, the long-awaited elections in El Salvador finally took place, the first democratic elections in peacetime with the full participation of all political parties.

It is well understood that elections alone do not mean democracy, nor does the return to electoral politics guarantee justice and an end to violence. But for the grass-roots movement, the unions and cooperative federations, the peasant organizations and the urban marginal communities, the very fact that the election was held was in itself a victory, in spite of impediments to voter registration that disenfranchised thousands of peasants, and death squad activity that left many of their leaders dead.

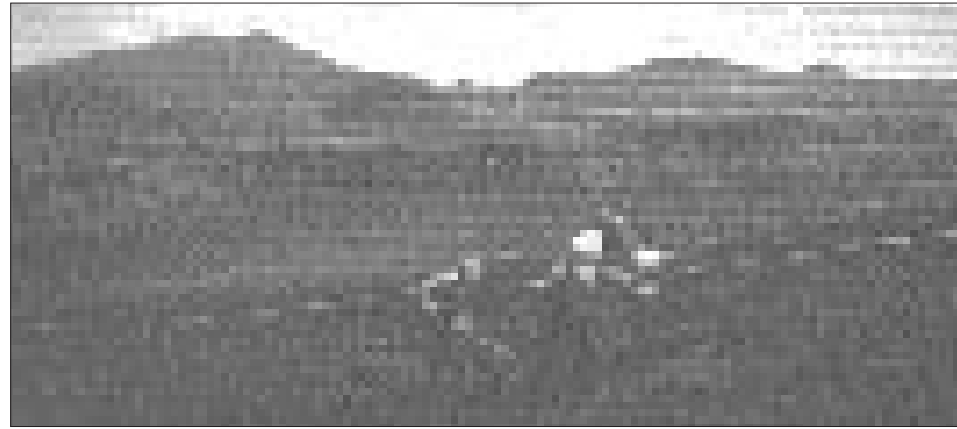
The people had mobilized to bring about peace, and won a peace that promised democratic reform and full participation of the popular sectors in determining the course of the nation. The elections were only one more small step in the long struggle for social and economic justice.

In this light, the expectations of the progressive political movement were quite subdued and realistic as they prepared to participate in this next step in the creation of a democratic state. As a result, the grass-roots movement made some modest gains in the election, winning important local control in some municipal and departmental jurisdictions, and gaining more effective representation at the national level. Now the longer struggle continues. The eyes of the world monitor institutional reform, while international solidarity accompanies grass-roots sectors in their attempt to transform their lives and the quality of their participation in the social and economic development of their country.



Henry Reid

## WORKING FOR CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA



Roch Tassé

In Latin America Inter Pares presently supports human rights and development action in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Peru.

In all of these countries our counterparts find themselves at the centre of dynamics of profound change. The peace process and the attempt to create a

broad-based electoral politics is radically changing the context in El Salvador. Extensive support within Mexico and internationally for the January uprising of the indigenous communities of southern Mexico has forced an unprecedented dialogue with the Mexican government. Similarly, the return of Guatemalan

refugees from Mexico to re-occupy the land from which they fled twelve years ago, along with internationally-supported activism in Guatemala for respect for human rights and an end to impunity for the police and military, signals a new phase in the struggle for social and economic justice in that country.

At the same time, in Nicaragua, in spite of severe economic conditions and political instability, there are efforts by many sectors to develop alternatives to the present poverty and economic chaos. And in Peru, the campaign for an end to political violence, respect for human rights, and full constitutional government, has set the stage for renewed development and community organization in rural areas isolated by twelve years of war.

In this context, Inter Pares' aim is to assist the poorest people, promoting their empowerment and self-sufficiency, and supporting their efforts to change their situation and become full participants in

society. We do this by nurturing the capacity of non-government organizations (NGOs) and popular movements to respond to the needs of their members and their society. Our strategic focus in this work is to respond to the needs of displaced families and returning refugees through financial support to integrated projects, and professional and financial assistance for organizational development. Our operational partner in this element of the program is the Project Counselling Service for Latin American Refugees.

Inter Pares' program in Latin America is financed by the donations we receive from thousands of individual Canadians, augmented by contributions from Canadian foundations, and by grants from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Fund of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC).

## GUATEMALAN WOMEN: *Expanding Horizons*

Isabel smiled and leaned forward. "And you, did your husbands give you permission to travel? Were they angry with you?" The discussion was lively, and she was direct in her curiosity about our lives. We were visiting a training session for village health promoters in a rural town in Guatemala. The women in the group had been telling us about the challenges they face in their work. One of the most difficult was the suspicion that falls on them when they travel outside their community, even when it is for training to benefit themselves, their children and their communities. Sometimes this pressure comes from their husbands, sometimes from other community members, sometimes even from military authorities.

Isabel and her family are among the hundreds of thousands of people who were forced off their land by the Guatemalan army during the last fifteen years. In the early 1980s, the army murdered thousands of people, accusing civilians of sympathy with the guerrilla forces. Many people fled for their lives. Thousands are now living as refugees in other countries, but there are many more thousands of displaced people living throughout Guatemala. Displaced people in general, and displaced

women in particular, suffer the vulnerability that arises out of their isolation from the extended family and social network that provided so much support in their original communities.

But now, displaced women have begun to organize, through their own women's organizations and through national organizations of the displaced. Isabel is participating in a program that provides women the opportunity to create a collective understanding of the problems faced by internally displaced women and their communities, and to take steps toward participation in the improvement of their own lives, and the life of the community. Many of the new health promoters started out by participating in the women's groups, acquiring the confidence and skills to begin the health promoter training. But first the women must overcome the oppressive value system that keeps them from asserting their right to participate in and benefit from community improvements.

When the women were first organizing, male community leaders sometimes insisted that they themselves should direct the groups, as so often happens in traditional "programs for women", in

which women are those that benefit least. And, as Isabel told us, many women found that their male partners became resentful once they realized that the women's training meant that they would be leaving the house once a month. The men began to put obstacles in the way, such as refusing to care for the children, or even threatening the women if they tried to leave.

These difficulties were considered by the women, and brought to the attention of the General Assemblies and Directing Councils of the communities. At these meetings, the entire community discussed the work they were doing, and began to appreciate that the purpose was not to have women "employed" in , or even manage, small marginal projects, but rather that women be able to incorporate themselves fully into the overall work of the community.

At the inauguration of the Inter Pares-funded health centre in Retalhuleu, several of the presentations dealt with the issue of domestic control and physical violence of men against women and children. Men stood beside their women colleagues and spoke of the dangers to the family and the community of "machismo" – men's desire

to control, and their fear of women becoming educated. Even with this support, the women recognized the challenge that faces them. As one woman told us, "Men say words in meetings, but the words are sometimes different when they are speaking to their wives at home." Still, they feel that analysis and action, not only by them but also by some of the men, has begun to make it possible for the community to develop with the participation, and to the benefit, of all their members.

Although some women are forced from time-to-time to be absent from the programs because of these difficulties, they are slowly negotiating greater opportunity and leadership within their families and their communities. Women are participating in increasing numbers as health promoters, in agricultural projects, and on community development committees.

This is still only the beginning, but from the terrible days of murder and flight, women like Isabel – and their communities – have travelled far and achieved much. And with each step, the landscape of their lives changes and their horizons expand.

In November 1993, Inter Pares staff, Jean Symes and Brian Murphy travelled extensively in Peru to meet with displaced people in the Andean Highlands. One place they visited was Huancavelica, accessible only by a six-hour trip through the mountains by rail. This is from a longer poem Brian wrote about this place and its people:

### Huancavelica

And...

It is just past noon when we reach Huancavelica  
Shrouded in mist  
and a light rain falling  
in the thin air.

As we walk to the plaza  
the blood tingles.

Huancavelica  
Cradled in a basin, hedged in by a giant's  
rock-garden

natural monuments  
The towering cliffs and vast stone walls defy us  
to disbelieve

That they have been built by a master's hand  
rather than by nature itself:

It is as though these rock faces have constructed themselves  
Are alive and watching the small movements  
below.

Huancavelica ~ *Gods of Stone*  
And it is aptly-named  
Some who have never been here  
say

It is not worth visiting –  
remote and ugly and violent

Violent it has been  
Rugged and wild it is  
and defiant, yes  
But beautiful beyond endurance  
It is only remote to those who are remote  
In capitals far away

Huancayo and Lima

For these rocks  
and these people  
unbending

It is the centre of the universe  
Where gods of stone hold sway  
timeless

Redefining space  
and humanity.

bkm, November 1993

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## NICARAGUA: *Solidarity and Social Transformation*

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Few events since the Spanish civil war have generated such enthusiastic international solidarity as has the Sandinista Revolution. Solidarity committees emerged in virtually every country in the world, and international brigades travelled to Nicaragua by the thousands to participate in this social project rooted in the people's aspiration for justice and dignity. In Canada alone, over 150 local solidarity committees flourished from coast to coast.

But the revolution, despite its many achievements, did not bring about the definitive transformation that many expected in July of 1979. The Sandinistas, inexperienced at governing, made their share of errors. The burden of external debt inherited from the Somoza era cancelled economic advances. But above all, because the development model promoted by Nicaragua had the potential to evolve into an alternative for other Third World nations, the prospect of success was intolerable for the dominant economic interests of the United States.

For an entire decade, Nicaraguans, supported and encouraged by international solidarity, resisted U.S. intervention

and endured the sufferings of the contra war and of economic strangulation. They were driven by the same pursuit of equity and a better world for their children that guided their struggle over many decades prior to the Sandinista victory. But in the face of the unrelenting war against these dreams, in the end many Nicaraguans were forced to choose options they hoped would lead at least to stability. The revolution lost its momentum, and then its power.

During the revolution, the Nicaraguan poor had often been forced to carry the symbolic weight of the expectations and aspirations of international solidarity, their lives romanticized, and the day-to-day endurance of real people forgotten. Today, in the post-revolution and post-war context of Nicaragua, the prospects of rapid social transformation in the short term have faded away. As a result, although some within the international solidarity movement remain actively engaged and some have moved on to other issues, many have dropped out from fatigue or disenchantment.

But for the poor in Nicaragua, determination still prevails in their continuing struggle for justice, and for lives of dignity

and hope. The challenge for international solidarity is to understand, as do the poor who have struggled for generations, that fundamental social transformation is rarely dramatic and complete in one revolutionary moment, but rather is a long and continuous historical process. Now as always, it is our responsibility as human beings on the same planet to accompany the poor in this process.

Inter Pares, with the assistance of Canadian solidarity – particularly the local committees of Tools for Peace – continues to support Nicaraguan organizations which, building on the strength that emerged during the revolution, work to bring about social improvements and nurture the emergence of economic alternatives at the community level. We also continue to be involved in the Municipality of El Castillo on the Rio San Juan where, since 1987, we have provided financial support and technical assistance to community associations and cooperatives to help them improve community services and infrastructure, as well as to implement small scale economic initiatives which form the basis of an emerging local economy.

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## MEXICO: *Resistance and Change*

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The “modernization” of Mexico and its integration within the North American economy is being achieved by massive foreign investment and unrestricted access to national resources and markets by transnational corporations. This process has generated an increase in wealth. The bitter reality, however, is that this wealth is concentrated in the hands of an elite with the economic means to take advantage of the new rules. For the rest, poverty deepens and the gap between the rich and the poor widens.

Among the victims have been the indigenous people of Chiapas, whose historical grievances such as the concentration of land ownership, the indifference of the government, and repression by local authorities, have only worsened. As elsewhere in Mexico, the viability of the small family farms of Chiapas peasants is being destroyed by cheap, capital-intensive agricultural imports from Canada and the

United States. As peasant debt increases, the banks are foreclosing on their land and selling it off to national and transnational corporations for large-scale agribusiness and the extraction of natural resources. The result is the dismantling of communities, the destruction of culture, and the undermining of local economies. The economic transformation of Mexico is completing the dispossession of the dispossessed, and in the process has spawned a peasant resistance movement whose influence is rapidly spreading throughout rural Mexico.

This process is neither new, nor unique to Mexico. It is a reality experienced by the indigenous communities of Guatemala and the peasants of El Salvador and Nicaragua, a reality confronted by a long struggle for justice that has sparked tremendous solidarity from Canadians over the past fifteen years. We have the opportunity and the responsibility to build

the same solidarity with the poor communities in Mexico that we have developed in other countries in Central America.

Especially important today is support for organizations within Mexican civil society which promote economic and social justice and advance the interests and rights of the Mexican poor. Links are being built between this strong and dynamic internal movement of Mexican social solidarity, and the Canadian social justice movement, itself engaged in challenging the negative effects in Canada of economic integration with the United States.

As part of this process, Inter Pares supports the Mexican Academy of Human Rights and the Mexican Convergence of Civil Organizations for Democracy, in their combined efforts to promote strong and effective participation by all sectors of Mexican civil society in the political and economic development of their country.

