Peru's Guerrilla Justice

If there is one country I am optimistic about, it is Peru,” drug policy chief Gen. Barry McCaffrey declared during an October visit to Lima during which he lauded the country’s human rights record, shook hands with its security chief and lavished millions in new aid on the government of President Alberto Fujimori.

Not everyone shares McCaffrey’s enthusiasm for the notoriously corrupt and authoritarian Fujimori regime. Shortly before McCaffrey’s visit, novelist Mario Vargas Llosa charged in a speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair that “the international community is not paying attention to the dark, sinister aspects of this dictatorship.” Amnesty International reported in October that U.S. drug-enforcement aid to Peru is directly involved in human rights abuses.

And among those less “optimistic” about Peru are the family and friends of Lori Berenson. A year ago, on November 30, Berenson, a freelance journalist and human rights activist, was arrested under Peru’s sweeping antisubversion laws; Fujimori branded her a “North American terrorist” and member of the Tupac Amaru guerrilla movement. Although she denied the charge, Berenson was sentenced—after trial by a secret military tribunal with no opportunity to confront her accusers—to life in prison.

Since January Berenson has been confined twenty-three and a half hours a day to a cell in Yanamayo Prison, high in the Andes. The unheated prison’s temperatures rarely rise above 40 degrees. The 26-year-old Berenson suffers from purple, swollen fingers, digestive problems and chronic respiratory illness. On behalf of all Yanamayo prisoners she recently lodged complaints of “abuse of authority” with the International Red Cross, claiming that conditions violate more than forty United Nations standards for the minimum treatment of prisoners.

In August, eighty-seven representatives and twenty senators (ranging from Christopher Dodd to Alfonse D’Amato) wrote to Fujimori calling for a new, open civilian trial for Berenson. “The lack of due process at her trial leaves the question of her involvement in illegal activity unanswered,” the Senate letter said, pointing out that more than two years ago the Fujimori government promised the State Department that its secret military tribunals would come to an end.

Perhaps because of confidence in the Clinton Administration’s drug-war alliance, Fujimori has so far made no gesture toward reopening the Berenson case. This fall, his government acknowledged for the first time that numerous innocent civilians were imprisoned by the secret courts—human rights officials estimate their numbers at between 700 and 1,200. On October 1, Fujimori pardoned three journalists imprisoned since 1972, and has promised to review the cases of others. But at the same time the Peruvian legislature renewed the antisubversion decree and military courts for another year.

On the first anniversary of Lori Berenson’s arrest, her family and friends are requesting that letters be written to President Clinton, as well as Ricardo Luna, Peruvian Ambassador to the United States, at 1700 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, DC 20036. In addition, Berenson’s supporters are calling attention to U.S. sales of clothing and other items made in Peru under
Is the Pope Catholic?

Last week the organization I head sent a $2,000 check to UNICEF, the United Nations children’s charity. We don’t usually give to charities—we’re a nonprofit organization—but we’re giving to UNICEF because the Vatican has suspended its $2,000 annual contribution, charging that UNICEF has become involved in contraceptive distribution and abortion advocacy. The church recommends that Catholics review their support for UNICEF as well. It’s a new low in Vatican behavior.

The church can’t help but know that UNICEF is the best friend of the world’s children—Catholic agencies and UNICEF often work together where children are in need. But the Vatican is prepared to hold every good thing hostage to its dirty little war against family planning and abortion. And it believes that if its $2,000 check is refused, this demonstration of support will be acknowledged by addressing, stamped envelopes. Unsubscribed faxes will not be acknowledged unless accepted.

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slave-labor conditions. Information can also be found at a Lori Berenson Web site: www.tiac.net/users/salem/loriberenson.

A final irony: A year after Berenson’s conviction by a secret Peruvian court, the Clinton Administration and the federal judiciary are busy setting up a secret courtroom in Washington. Under the Administration’s new anti-terrorism law, foreign nationals accused of terrorist crimes can be tried behind closed doors, in secret, with no opportunity to confront their accusers. Small wonder that Fujimori isn’t sweating.
instead to “accept the enemy” and make him “flesh of their flesh.”

Unfortunately, this kind of pressure is the rule, not the exception. The Vatican is increasingly involved in policy-making arenas like the U.N., where it uses its nonmember permanent observer status and its clout as a provider of humanitarian assistance to extract conformity to its anti-family-planning agenda.

The Vatican is counting on UNICEF’s fear of the church’s immense power. And in fact, UNICEF is scared. One of the first things a spokeswoman said in reaction to the Vatican’s announcement was that UNICEF’s policies are “consistent with that of the Holy See”—as if that were a criterion for U.N. policy. Both UNICEF and the Catholic Church should understand that public policies must be established on the basis of public need and the common good, not sectarian religious teachings.

Like the Vatican’s withheld donation, our contribution is also symbolic. It stands for our support of UNICEF’s work. It has no strings attached. We hope it encourages others—particularly Catholics—to write checks to UNICEF to demonstrate that the public can carry the weight of caring for the needy, on its own terms. UNICEF deserves to be supported, regardless of its policy on reproductive health services, because of its work on behalf of the neediest of the world’s children.

Frances Kissling is president of Catholics for a Free Choice.

Student Union

Graduate student organizing may never be the same in the wake of a recent announcement by lawyers for the National Labor Relations Board. The N.L.R.B. will charge Yale University with illegal retaliation against the graduate students whose grade strike for union recognition ended last January. Past N.L.R.B. rulings allowed universities to refuse to recognize graduate student unions on the grounds that their members were students, not employees. The current move suggests a change in approach that will make it easier for teaching assistants to unionize.

Recognition is also an issue for graduate students at the University of California. Student instructors on the Los Angeles, San Diego and Berkeley campuses—with a total enrollment of about 85,000—carried out a rolling strike in late November. In September a state board ordered U.C.L.A. to recognize its graduate student instructors’ union, but administrators claim that a 1992 state court ruling exempts graduate students from collective bargaining.

The grade strike organized by Graduate Employees and Students Organization at Yale—and its aftermath—drew media attention last winter, but Eastern reporters weren’t aware that halfway across the country, the labor movement in higher education was on the brink of success. On April 16, graduate student employees of the University of Iowa voted overwhelmingly to unionize, certifying the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (U.E.) Local 896/Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS) as their collective bargaining agent. That the election represented the largest union victory in Iowa in sixteen years may come as no surprise; but it was also one of the ten largest labor elections in the United States in 1996.

Graduate employee unions began not in the Ivy League but at the state universities of the Midwest, and graduate employees at Iowa relied heavily on the experience of the Teaching Assistant Association at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the Graduate Employee Organization at the University of Michigan, both of which won recognition strikes in the early seventies. At Iowa, graduate employees teach more than 40 percent of the undergraduate classes, research assistants work long hours in labs and libraries, and graduate assistants help the university function. Graduate employees pursue their degrees and carry out the basic work of the university with the understanding that, at best, only one in three will end up with a tenure-track job. More still will struggle in adjunct positions with pay and conditions similar to—or worse than—those they faced in graduate school.

The three-year struggle to unionize at U.I. began when teaching, research and graduate assistants realized collectively that they were no longer willing to tolerate inadequate wages and substandard benefits. The health care plan offered to graduate students, unlike the more generous plan for faculty and staff, excludes coverage for preventive and dental care and prescription drugs. During the campaign, COGS meetings were filled with members who recounted health care horror stories. Many take out loans to make ends meet, and the majority return 25 percent of their paycheck to their employer for tuition. Despite the rhetoric of collegiality and professionalism, the University of Iowa had become a company store.

Hundreds of COGS activists spent evenings and weekends, even in 20-below-zero weather, visiting with fellow graduate employees in their homes and discovered common concerns: a single mother with two small children struggling to find affordable child care so she can finish her degree; a graduate employee from China working fifty hours in a science lab for twenty hours’ pay who can’t complain because his supervisor is also his thesis adviser; another graduate student pulling out unpaid hospital bills for thousands of dollars when asked about her experience with the health care plan. Graduate assistants held meetings in departments; lobbied the legislature; researched the budget of the university; produced a monthly newsletter; organized dances, parties and rallies; and planned a massive get-out-the-vote drive. COGS built a membership of 1,250.

The organization has already realized impressive gains. During bargaining this summer, U.E./COGS was able to persuade the university administration to raise the base salary 19 percent, an increase of $2,000. Average increases totaled 8 percent for teaching assistants and 14 percent for research assistants. COGS began negotiating its first contract on September 19, and defined adequate and affordable health care as the first priority. Tuition waiver, subsidized child care and clearly defined conditions of employment—timely notification of appointments, a grievance procedure and protections against overwork—are also in the proposed contract. In recent negotiations, the Administration shocked the U.I. campus when it refused even to discuss including a nondiscrimination clause.

This academic year promises to be full of graduate employee activism. California union members plan a longer strike next
 semester. And the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions has called for a National Day of Action in February.

Leslie Taylor, Doug Anderson and David Colman

Leslie Taylor, Doug Anderson and David Colman are graduate employees at the University of Iowa and members of U.E. Local 896, the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students.

Airwaves in Croatia

would like to believe that what happened in Zagreb, Croatia, on November 21 was the beginning of the end. The end of the undemocratic, corrupt government, the end of silence for the Croatian citizens, the end of fear...

On that Thursday evening, more than 100,000 people gathered on the main square and in surrounding streets, holding candles and banners that said "We Want Information—Not Manipulation." What were they protesting? Formally, a decision of political parties, in an already overpoliticized atmosphere. Neinbut was blocked from taking power by the H.D.Z. The attempt to control the electronic media, and everyone knew it. But no one expected the resistance of a hundred employees, much less a demonstration involving a thousand times as many.

Of course, even the fate of the most popular radio station was not the sole cause of the single biggest spontaneous gathering in independent Croatia. Several factors coincided: People gathered in such numbers because of such accumulating social and political problems as rapid impoverishment, growing unemployment and the obvious corruption of the government. There was also the culminating crisis in local government in Zagreb: It has been more than a year since the opposition won the local elections and the obvious corruption of the government. There was also the atmosphere in the country has suddenly changed. As a taxi driver put it, "Now that I know I can go out and protest injustice, I'll do it again!" Of course, one wonders if euphoria will be short-lived. The next day there were 10,000 retirees protesting in the same square against being starved by tiny pensions. In a country without a democratic tradition, it is a profound change to discover that you, an individual, a citizen, can make a difference. This feeling can hardly be forgotten, making change irreversible.

Tudjman's government is in many ways only the continuation of the Communist regime in its one-party rule and use of fear. War made it even easier for him to exercise dictatorial power, the reason a 1989-style Velvet Revolution has a chance to start only now in Croatia. Perhaps November 21 was the beginning.

Slavenka Drakulić

Slavenka Drakulić, a Nation contributing editor, is the author of Cafe Europa: Life After Communism, to be published in February by Norton.

Nuclear Roulette

On November 17 a Russian Mars space probe malfunctioned, hurtling to Earth with a half-pound of plutonium—the most toxic substance known—aboard. The plutonium may finally have landed off the coast of Chile, where it will remain hotly radioactive for 2,000 years, or it may have dispersed in the atmosphere to become airborne poison (no one knows for sure). The crash of the nuclear probe is another siren in the night warning of the folly of using nuclear power in space, or anywhere.

So far, six Russian nuclear missions have failed—including the Cosmos 954 satellite, which scattered hundreds of pounds of radioactive debris over northwest Canada—and three U.S. nuclear missions have had accidents, including the crash of a SNAP-9A satellite carrying 2.1 pounds of plutonium, which, according to European nuclear agencies, "vaporized" and "dispersed widely" over the planet. (Medical physicist Dr. John Gofman connects this crash with elevated levels of lung cancer worldwide.)

But despite these warnings, the push to deploy nuclear technology in space continues. On September 19, the White House unveiled its new national space policy, under which the Pentagon and NASA will be working on "multiple nuclear propulsion concepts" with the Defense Special Weapons Agency. In other words, Son of Star Wars is on the drawing board.
What next? October 1997 brings the Cassini mission to Saturn (with the largest plutonium payload—72.3 pounds—ever) atop a Titan rocket, known to blow up on launch. “Inadvertent reentry” to Earth’s atmosphere would mean “approximately 5 billion of the estimated 7 to 8 billion world population...could receive 99 percent or more of the radiation exposure,” says NASA’s environmental impact statement.

What else? “Bi-modal” nuclear spacecraft to provide power and propulsion to military satellites; nuclear-powered satellites to transmit high-definition TV signals; two plutonium-fueled probes for a 1999 mission to Pluto; nuclear-powered rockets to Mars and colonies there. On the program for the Fourteenth Symposium on Space Nuclear Power and Propulsion at the Energy Department’s Brookhaven National Laboratory in January is its plan to rocket “long-lived fission products [nuclear waste] into outer space.”

The failed Russian mission has had one success. “The danger of a disaster involving a plutonium space project is now real and imaginable to people,” says Bruce Gagnon of Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, which will convene an international meeting in Europe in March (Box 90035, Gainesville, FL 32607; 352-468-3295; fcipj@afn.org). “It’s sheer and utter madness,” he adds. At the very least, it’s Russian roulette.

Karl Grossman and Judith Long

Karl Grossman’s video, Nukes in Space, the Nuclearization and Weaponization of the Heavens, is available from EnviroVideo (800-ECO-TV46). Judith Long is The Nation’s copy editor.

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In Fact...

**WHY POOR NATIONS GET POORER**

Amid all the admonitory free-market rhetoric emanating from industrial nations at the World Food Summit in Rome, the views of the poorer nations got lost. Here is a telling thought from Guyana’s Prime Minister, Cheddi Jagan: “A stop must be put to an unjust global economic order...which robs the South of about $500 billion annually in unjust, non-equivalent international trade, an order where the poor South finances the rich North with South to North capital outflows of $418 billion in the 1982-90 period as debt payments”—a sum “equal to six Marshall Plans,” which did not even include outflows from royalties, dividends, repatriated profits and underpaid raw material. Guyana shelled out $308 million in interest payments in 1992-95, Jagan said, money needed for housing, food and health for its own people.

**MURDER ONE**

Recently, on a routine fact-checking assignment, Nation intern Matt Woods called the National Center for Health Statistics to learn the number of murders committed in 1995. Homicides and suicides or just homicides, he was asked. Homicides, he said, and was told 21,577. Out of curiosity he asked how many suicides there had been. Answer: 30,893. Out of curiosity he asked how many murders committed in 1995. Homicides, he said, and was told 21,577. Out of curiosity he asked how many suicides there had been. Answer: 30,893.

**STOPPING GENDER VIOLENCE**

November 25 through December 10 marks 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, a campaign sponsored by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. Information: (908) 932-1180. Relevant here is the drive for U.S. ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The United States is the only industrialized nation that hasn’t signed the treaty. Further information: Women in the Law Project, (202) 232-8500.

**TAIWAN DISCONNECT (CONT.)**

Last week we reported on a Taiwanese government-backed libel suit against two reporters, one American, who had exposed a $15 million campaign contribution offer. Investigative Reporters and Editors has sent a protest letter to Taiwan’s President Lee Teng-hui, saying, “The motive of such a strongly backed criminal libel suit...is blatantly not about justice or getting at the truth. It is really about putting an end to all tough reporting.”

**OIL AND HOLY WATER**

Speaking at the annual prayer breakfast of the American Petroleum Institute in Washington, Senator Don Nickles, sometimes known as Oklahoma Cruude, told the good and faithful corporate servants that it was “more than appropriate” that they hold a prayer breakfast, for “God has blessed us with leaders in your industry.” Next was Exxon bigwig Ansel Condray, who thanked Jesus for “this great industry that You’ve given us this great opportunity to work in.” He asked the Lord to “make us good stewards.” No prayers were said for the beleaguered brethren at Texaco.

**GUN TALK**

This summer a U.S. District Court in Northern California overturned Santa Clara County’s ban on gun sales at gun shows. Such sales are often used to evade federal and state laws regulating the traffic in guns. The court upset the ban on the bizarre ground that it was an interference with free speech. The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence has filed an amicus brief, arguing conduct, not speech, is involved. Amelia Hennighausen, who sent us the item, asks, By the court’s reasoning wouldn’t soliciting for prostitution and drug sales also trigger free speech protections?

**NEWS OF THE WEEK IN REVIEW**

As a protest against consumerism, the Media Foundation has for the past four years sponsored Buy Nothing Day on the day after Thanksgiving. This year the group wanted to run a thirty-second spot promoting its buy-out but was turned down by all three major networks. ABC said the ad violated its policy on “advertising of controversial issues”; CBS said it was an “advocacy ad”; NBC was more honest, saying that the ad was “inimical to our legitimate business interests.”
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