

CounterPunch

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

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A Visit to Caracas

KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

By SAUL LANDAU

When Latin American leaders declare their intention to redistribute wealth downward in their countries, Pavlov's bell rings in Washington. The US national security gang responds with aggressive intervention, most recently with the attempts to evict Chavez in Venezuela.

The CIA knew about the planned April coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. An April 6, 2002 Agency document reports that "dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chavez, possibly as early as this month". The report placed the coup within the context of a strike by oil workers.

As I arrived on December 2, I scanned Caracas' Simon Bolivar International Airport for likely looking CIAniks. Apparent serenity prevailed, but exciting social change was taking place throughout the country.

On December 3, I traveled to Guarenas, a city of about 140,000 people, about 15 miles east of Caracas. As an invitee of the Venezuelan government, I had joined hundreds of Artists and Intellectuals in Defense of Humanity, among them actor Danny Glover, former Algerian Prime Minister Ben Bella and Nobel Prize laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel. We spent eight hours applauding grandmas showing off their newly acquired reading skills and pointing proudly to the North Pole on the map after taking a geography course. The education program ("Mision (Caracas continued on page 2)

Rev. Joseph's Last Trip

By DANIEL WOLFF

I don't see many dead bodies. And I don't spend much time thinking about my country's immigration laws. I live in a suburban town in the United States where such things are kept at a certain distance.

I saw Joseph Dantica's body at the altar of a Haitian-American church. It was small, black-skinned, wrinkled from 81 years of life, the face pinched into repose by some undertaker's skill, the hands crossed over the chest. It was laid out in a white coffin and surrounded by flower arrangements: "To Father", "In Loving Memory", "Peace".

The Reverend Dantica died in the United States. More accurately, he died trying to enter the United States.

He came from the Bel Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where he had lived for the last half century. Bel Air is a long way from suburban America, but during the past fifty years U.S. policy has played a major role in transforming the Reverend Dantica's neighborhood. Our taxes have helped support the Haitian presidents-for-life "Poppa Doc" Duvalier and his son, have contributed to the removal, replacement, and more recent removal of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, and have paid for the training of various military personnel who have led Haiti's anti-democratic coups. By the end of this process, Bel Air was no longer, by any definition, safe. Two thirds of the adults had no job, more than half the children malnourished. The school that the Reverend Dantica ran at the Church of the Redeemer in Bel Air was one of the few institutions remaining in a community ravaged by violence and extreme poverty.

On Sunday, October 24, 2004, U.N.-sponsored Brazilian troops and Haitian police launched "Operation Clean Sweep". According to Haiti's interim president, Bel Air had become a hotbed of "terrorists" and "bandits" who remained militantly loyal to President Aristide. According to residents of Bel Air, Haiti's interim government represented the latest U.S. supported coup. The Reverend Dantica found himself caught between those two definitions.

"Operation Clean Sweep" began early, the sound of helicopters interrupting morning services. U.N.-led troops killed a man as he left the Reverend Dantica's church, then commandeered the three-story building. From above, they could spot those members of the general population they called "armed gangs." For the next twenty minutes, the troops fired from the Church of the Redeemer down into the surrounding alleys.

When they left, members of a local "gang" known as RFK arrived. The Reverend Dantica had known many of these young men all their lives. The RFK accused the Reverend and his fifty-year old son, Maxo, of cooperating with the enemy by allowing them to use the church as a base. The Danticas said they had no choice. The RFK threatened to behead them, a tactic newly arrived to Haiti and based on the model seen in telecasts from Iraq. The Danticas went into hiding.

Five days later, on October 29th, the two men boarded American Airlines flight 822 for Miami. The Reverend had been traveling back and forth between Haiti and the U.S. on a regular basis for over thirty years. He had relatives who were U.S. citizens. (Haiti continued on page 3)

“This is my revolution” proclaims Asia, a young dark-skinned woman. “And it belongs to us because we voted for it several times.”

(Caracas continued from page 1)

Robinson,” named after Samuel Robinson, one of Simon Bolivar’s teachers) now extends into the most remote rural areas. Cuban teachers help Venezuelan educators bring literacy and more advanced learning to areas that were previously deprived.

We also met scores of Cuban doctors, nurses, X-ray and lab technicians. They appeared to have routine and friendly interaction with poor patients at primary health care clinics in Oropeza Castillo, a slum neighborhood of eroding high rise apartments.

The Cubans, indistinguishable from the Venezuelans by skin color - slightly different accents and wearing white lab coats - proudly described how their primary health care programs and diagnostic centers treat thousands daily in facilities that the residents previously lacked. A group of women bystanders agreed that the Cubans treated them with dignity and professionalism, from physical exams through x-ray and lab work.

Before the Cuban doctors came, I asked one middle-aged woman, “what

kind of medical attention did you receive?”

She laughed. “When students graduated from medical school, they would come and treat us, but without any support system. They did their best, but the public hospitals were filthy and often had inadequate staff, even when we came in with emergencies”, another said. “Look how many babies died in childbirth!” She named neighbors who lost their babies.

The next day President Hugo Chavez provided exact figures. “Before we began the new primary care programs”, Chavez said, “our infant mortality rate was 24 to every 1000 births. We’ve reduced it in the last year to 17, a major drop, but still too high.” Imagine an oil rich country with such mortality figures! The Cuban doctors are helping to bring the rate down further.

Chavez’s *barrio adentro* (inside the neighborhood) program also includes public dining rooms and markets where the government offers free or subsidized food to the poorest residents.

At the “Casa de Alimentacion Auricela Diaz” the residents served us rice, beans, shredded pork and fried bananas. Residents said they received meals like this on a regular basis, thanks to Hugo Chavez. In a school yard, Cuban physical education teachers had organized a potato sack race and other games involving parents and kids. Several neighbors commented on how the quality of life had improved since the arrival of the Cubans. “They’re very much like us”, a woman told me after her daughter had won a prize in a coordination contest. “You know, Caribbean people.”

A Cuban doctor from Santi Espiritu told me that his “grandparents were illiterate guajiros (peasants) and every time they see me my grandmother bursts out crying. She still can’t believe I’m a doctor. I’m repaying my debt to my country by helping people here in Guarenas. I feel good about it.”

“This is my revolution”, Asia, a young dark-skinned woman proudly tells me. “And it belongs to us because we voted for it several times.” She referred to both the 1998 election when Venezue-

lans overwhelmingly chose Hugo Chavez president and to the August 2004 referendum when almost 60 per cent opted for him. He vowed to end the Kleptocracy that had governed the country for decades and to spread the wealth to the poor. “I feel proud to be Venezuelan,” she said. “I really feel as if Bolivar’s spirit is alive with Hugo Chavez.”

Chavez spoke to the delegates at the Defense of Humanity Meeting about why he rejected the IMF model. “It brought us the ‘Carracazo’ [1989 anti-IMF riots].” Neo-liberal economic policies, Chavez told the assembled delegates, produced an oil-rich nation with 1 million plus illiterate adults. For decades, alternating Social Democratic and Christian Democratic governments looted the treasury.

Chavez sang the praises of the 10,000 Cuban doctors, plus nurses and technicians, in the more than 11,000 urban and rural clinics. Chavez has also invested in housing and agrarian reform for poor farmers - 117 thousand farm families have received almost 5 million acres by January.

“We’ve done very little,” Chavez said. “The big job is ahead.” He expected to win a larger majority in 2006, based on the performance of his government. He said that Venezuela can’t do it alone, that a block of Latin American nations must form to insure proper development. Chavez has taken steps, along with Cuba’s Castro and Brazil’s Lula to start such a process.

Chavez quoted Bolivar, Marti, O’Higgins and contemporary authors in his discourse, hardly the picture of the military hick that his enemies paint. He laid out a reasonable social democracy model as his goal.

On the road back to the airport, I passed elegant high rises and wealthy neighborhoods. The class struggle will undoubtedly intensify. The unanswered question: how to stop Bush from further intervention and defend humanity in Venezuela? CP

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(Haiti continued from page 1)

zens, and he carried a valid Haitian passport and visa.

At 3:30 p.m., when his flight arrived in Miami, a customs officer asked him the purpose of his visit. The Reverend Dantica answered through a voice box he had worn since a throat operation. In amplified, metallic Creole, the 81 year-old told the customs official that he was fleeing Haiti in fear for his life; he was seeking asylum.

Five-and-a-half hours later, the Reverend Dantica's brother in New York received a call. A Department of Homeland Security officer told him that the Reverend Dantica and his son were being held at the Miami airport. It was the first that the family knew of the Danticas' attempt to enter the country, and relatives began calling for more information.

Ten hours after the flight had arrived, a family member in Florida was told that the Danticas were still at the airport. No, she would not be allowed to speak with them.

Over twenty hours after landing in the United States, the Reverend Dantica and his son were taken twenty-five miles outside of Miami to the edge of the Everglades. There, they were placed under the custody at the Krome Detention Center: a group of low concrete buildings surrounded by barbed wire.

The case against the Reverend Dantica was simple: he was Haitian.

In the early 1980's, the United States instituted a policy of detaining all Haitians seeking asylum. Had the Reverend Dantica arrived here from France, or Cuba, or China, his valid passport and visa would most likely have allowed him to leave the Miami airport and await the ruling on his asylum request while in his family's care. But Haitians, according to the U.S. definition, are "excludable aliens." That means they either have to return immediately to Haiti or be jailed till authorities determine their status.

At Krome Detention Center, it was decided that the Reverend Dantica had to be separated a certain distance from his son. He was placed in a single room in the medical ward. The medications he'd arrived with (for high blood pressure and prostate inflammation) were taken from him.

As soon as the Reverend Dantica declared through his voice box that he was seeking asylum, his definition changed

from immigrant (or father, or reverend) to "excludable alien". That designation had been further refined after December 2001, when one hundred and sixty-seven Haitians had arrived on Florida's coast and created a televised spectacle by wading ashore and running for freedom. Fearing an influx of similar "boat people," the U.S. adopted a new and apparently secret policy: the status of Haitian immigrants was pre-determined. Whether they arrived by boat or plane, whether or not they could prove "credible fear" of persecution in Haiti, they were to be jailed.

This past February, President Bush took the policy another step. Haiti was in turmoil; within days, President Aristide would leave the country. Others would try to escape the chaos, and President Bush directed that they be intercepted and returned without hearings. The Department of Homeland Security launched "Operation Able Security." Now if you were Haitian and in a boat, the U.S. Coast Guard could and would order you back to shore.

There would be no televised scenes of Haitians landing in Florida during this presidential election year.

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Nor would there be Haitians released from Krome. Immigration law requires that the case of an asylum-seeker be determined within ninety days. But this past April, Attorney General Ashcroft announced that the U.S. had the right to detain Haitians indefinitely. Overruling both an immigration judge and the Board of Immigration Appeals, the attorney general declared that "future mass migrations" from Haiti could "create a drain on scarce assets" and pose a "national security concern." Therefore, Haitian "boat people" would be kept in jail indefinitely and without appeal. The United States, its attorney general said, needed to "make a statement:" if you tried to erase the distance between the two countries, you

would disappear.

At 9:00 am, November 2 – election day in the United States – the Reverend Dantica appeared before an asylum officer for a "credible fear" hearing. Given U.S. policy, it is not clear what such a hearing might have accomplished, but his relatives had gotten him a lawyer, and a hearing was held. During the meeting, the reverend began vomiting. He fell back against the wall and remained motionless, his eyes open, the hole in his throat blocked. Medics at Krome's health service examined him and suggested to both his lawyer and his son that the Reverend was faking it.

At four that afternoon, the Reverend Dantica was transferred to Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital. Relatives were still not allowed to see or speak with him; he was still an "excludable alien" under the jurisdiction of Homeland Security.

At 8:45 on Wednesday evening, November 3, the Reverend Dantica died. A U.S. government autopsy declared his death a result of "a preexisting and fatal" case of pancreatitis, though none of his relatives were aware he had such a disease.

The family demanded a copy of the autopsy. The Reverend's niece, writer Edwidge Danticat, published an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* denouncing U.S. immigration laws and the "prejudice" that led to her uncle's death. In reply to mounting criticism, a government spokesman declared that the Reverend Dantica was "treated fairly and according to policy".

At the funeral service, a minister declared that the Reverend Dantica had been a good man, a religious man, and that he had crossed over and was now with Jesus. Such a trip, the minister added in furious Creole, did not require a visa.

There were other testimonials and the singing of hymns. Then, we filed past the small body. Despite the efforts of the undertaker and the speeches, what I saw in the white coffin was, I thought, largely defined by death. Still. Empty. And distant.

Because of the violence in Haiti, the Reverend Dantica's body would not be returned there. It would be buried in the United States. CP

Daniel Wolff is the author of You Send Me: the Life and Times of Sam Cooke. He is also the executive producer of The Agronomist, Jonathan Demme's documentary on Haiti.

CounterPunch's Annual Round-Up

Ten Good Groups That Need Help

Here at CounterPunch we believe that the real work of social change is being done on the ground, in prisons and courtrooms, on reservations and in military communities, in factories and union halls, day after, regardless of the outcome of presidential elections.

What is to be done? Well, there's certainly a lot of work to be done by all of us to help end this war, fend off Bush's attacks on civil liberties and the environment and help the people survive in this disintegrating economy.

One of the easiest things CounterPunchers can do is to help out groups that are already doing much of the heavy-lifting. Each year we point you to the best of the grassroots groups. This year's list ranges from organizations fighting the war in Iraq to protecting the Rocky Mountains from toxic strip mines.

These organizations get maximum results on tight budget. Your support will be put to good use and not wasted on direct mail consultants or lavish perks for figurehead directors. They all deserve your support and gratitude. AC / JSC

Military Families Speak Out
P.O. Box 549
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
617.522.9323

Military Families Speak Out is an organization of people who are opposed to war in Iraq and who have relatives or loved ones in the military. They formed in November of 2002. Both CounterPunch editors have spoken at events along with members of Military Families (one of whom had lost a son) and the impact has always been intense.

This coming March 19, 2005 in Fayetteville, Military Families Speak Out will mark the anniversary of the 2003 invasion again with a far bigger demonstration than the last. If you are tired of pilgrimages to DC and NYC for mass mobilizations, and if you want to send a message from the belly of the beast, this year you need to visit North Carolina. Come to Rowan Park in

Fayetteville, and help undermine the legitimacy of this war.

Iraq Veterans Against the War
216 South Meramec Ave
St. Louis, MO 63105
314.725.6005

Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) is a group of veterans who have served since September 11, 2001. They have called for an immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces. They are also calling on the Bush administration to give their Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen the benefits that are owed to them upon their return home.

IVAW recently formed a working partnership with an organization called No More Victims. The mission of No More Victims, a non-profit, non-sectarian, humanitarian organization, is to restore health and well being to victims of war and to advocate and educate for peace.

GI Rights Hotline
405 14th St., Suite #205,
Oakland, CA 94612
800.394.9544

In these days of stop-loss orders and extended tours of duty, soldiers trying for a discharge often find themselves up against some tough obstacles. Soldiers who want to get out need practical support and someone to help keep their spirits up. There are many civilian counselors around the country to help who can be contacted through the GI Rights Hotline.

The GI Rights Hotline offers a 24 hour toll free number (1-800-394-9544) that is answered by a coalition of nonprofit, non-governmental organizations who provide information to members of the military about discharges, grievance and complaint procedures, and other civil rights.

The Hotline provides information on discharges, stop-loss orders, de-enlistment, being AWOL, conscientious objection and other kinds of grievances with the military.

Campaign to End the Death Penalty
PO Box 25730
Chicago, IL 60625
773.955.4841

For years, the Campaign has been holding regular meetings throughout Chicago and rallies to raise awareness of the wrongs of the death penalty. They have forged relationships with those on Death Row and helped to give their voices a place in this struggle. The Campaign was important in helping to build an activist front that played a role in persuading former Illinois Governor George Ryan to empty death row and pardon four members of the Death Row 10, three of whom are free and one of whom is still in prison on another charge.

Last year the Campaign sponsored a national tour, featuring Pardoned Death Row 10 members Madison Hobley and Leroy Orange, which made stops in Washington, D.C., Maryland, New York, California, Chicago and Texas. Hundreds of people came out to hear the stories of Death Row 10 members and other local speakers. The Campaign also publishes the New Abolitionist, the excellent bimonthly newsletter that serves as a forum for activists, death row prisoners, and others to discuss the issues and to raise questions about how to end the death penalty.

California Prison Focus
2940 16th Street #B-5
San Francisco, CA 94103
<http://www.prisons.org/>
415.252.9211

"California's Security Housing Unit (SHU) prisons are justified by the Department of Corrections as anti-violence and anti-gang measures that would protect staff and allow law-abiding prisoners to successfully participate in programs," writes Corey Weinstein, MD, of California Prison Focus. "Instead the SHUs and the prison yards are rife with fighting, gang activity and assaults on staff. California is among the most violent and punitive prison systems in the US. The US Bureau of Justice reports that while assault rates in US prisons declined nationwide during the 1990s,