

Some Good News, For a Change

By Laura Carlsen | January 24, 2007

Happy New Year to one and all! 2007 holds promise for the Americas, perhaps more than any other year in recent history.

Maybe it's because the year contains a seven, a sacred number in Mayan mythology.

Or maybe it's because social movements have matured and deepened throughout the continent, forcing governments to respond to the long-deferred demands of the poor and disenfranchised. Or that the U.S. Congress has been wrested from the control of conservative Republicans, or that progressive governments are clearing new paths across the continent.

Whatever the source of the optimism, mystical or material, the year will be filled with decisive events and challenges. Before launching in on those, we join with some of our partner organizations and collaborators in the IRC Americas Program to note the small and not-so-small victories of the year:

- 1. Building hope among the poor:** Evo Morales' blow to racist colonial rule in Bolivia, Rafael Correa's victory over banana magnate Alvaro Noboa, the success of worker-run factories against all odds, the Zapatista's grassroots challenge to corrupt political power and economic injustice—hope not only springs eternal, it sometimes wins elections and changes lives.
- 2. Release of Haitian political prisoners:** IRC partner organization the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti reports that their efforts in 2006 led to the release and hospitalization of Father Gerry, a political prisoner suffering from leukemia. Father Gerry writes today: "A year ago, I was dying in jail. At Heaven's gate, your marches, prayers, singing, e-mails, and phone calls were echoing so much, St. Peter received the order to send me back. Now, I am free, in fair health, and full of hope." The IJDH also reports the freeing of singer/activist Annette Auguste and former prime minister Yvon Neptune, all as a result of popular pressure.
- 3. Halt on genetically modified corn cultivation in Mexico:** Mexico's Defense of Corn movement, which

seeks to protect native corn from contamination by genetically modified varieties, scored a point when the Mexican government refused a petition to allow commercial planting of GM corn. The victory against the multi-million dollar campaign by Monsanto and other GM seed producers may be temporary, but at least it's a finger in the dike. With the recent rise in the price of tortillas, activists will have to be on the alert to make sure that genetically modified corn is not proffered as the solution to a problem that really has to do with free trade, monopolistic practices among processors, and the lack of integrated rural and food policies. (See upcoming article in our new section "Globalization and the Food We Eat").

- 4. Hazardous waste inventory:** Mexican environmental advocates won a long battle for a hazardous waste inventory when it finally became law on August 18. The law will still need citizen involvement to assure company compliance but it constitutes an important tool in the hands of communities seeking to protect their health and environment and a victory for the environmental right to know movement.
- 5. Freedom of expression—journalists vindicated:** 2006 was a terrible year for journalists in the region but Mexico—the most lethal nation for truth-seeking journalism—and Chile registered two small triumphs. Lydia Cacho—whose book on a pedophile ring stretching from Cancun to Arizona won her an international audience and the enmity of the men involved—was arrested and narrowly escaped a planned prison rape. Thanks in part to national and international coverage, she was recently acquitted of all charges of libel. In Chile, 20 years after the assassination of journalist José Carrasco and three others, a court sentenced the military men guilty of the crime and ordered compensation to the families.

These are just a sample of achievements over the year. No doubt, a similar list could be made of setbacks and defeats. It would include deaths, disappearances, torture,





Greenpeace emphasizes its strong opposition to genetically modified corn in Mexico using this crop formation in a field outside Mexico City. Photo: Greenpeace

corruption, repression. It would be dark and ominous and equally accurate.

But while we will continue to inform and warn of the dark side, our articles—and particularly the Citizen Action Profiles—also testify to our hopes by documenting progress in moving toward greater social and economic justice throughout the hemisphere.

At a time when good news is hard to come by, the Americas region has provided more than its share. The

IRC Americas Program has passed it on through the virtual pages of our website.

So at the dawn of the new year, we'll save the negative list for another day, and take the triumphs as an inspiration to redouble efforts, both North and South, for a more just and peaceful hemisphere.

In planning to do that though, we are forced to temper our optimism with realism. The IRC Americas Program can't make it through this year—offering analysis of the advances, challenges, and obstacles in the region—without more help from you: our readers. As you plan the year, consider a donation to the IRC Americas Program. We know how to make a little go a long way, but we need the little first, and it's important for the project that everyone involved—readers, writers, and activists—feel invested in the program.

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The Americas Program

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