

Military Resistance 17C2



**Algerians In Third Week Of
General Strike Against Corrupt
Scum Running Regime:
“Hundreds Of Thousands Of People
Took To The Streets Across Algeria
On Friday”
“Now Is The Time For All Free Workers
To Participate In This Movement”**

Algerians have begun five days of general strike as protests against the rule of the ailing president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, entered a new phase.

Shops across the country were closed and groups of workers gathered in the streets brandishing flags and signs objecting to Bouteflika's attempt to serve a fifth term in office. Social media posts implored citizens to enact civil disobedience and refuse to attend their jobs for the rest of the working week.

Algeria's angry youth ready to rise up to topple ailing president

"You have a date with history," said the national syndicate for electricity and gas workers, which represents employees of the national gas company Sonelgaz and has declared its allegiance to the strike.



The largest demonstrations in Algiers in a decade. Photograph: Mohamed Messara/EPA

"Now is the time for all free workers to participate in this movement," it said.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across Algeria on Friday, marking the third week of demonstrations against the rule of 82-year-old Bouteflika.

What began as protests against the his bid for a fifth term as president quickly expanded into opposition to the entire regime around the infirm leader, who has rarely been seen in public since a stroke in 2013.

On Sunday afternoon, an Algerian government aircraft believed to be transporting Bouteflika left Geneva, where he had been receiving medical treatment.

Bouteflika landed at a military airport south of the capital, and departed in a convoy, the Associated Press news agency reported.

He previously warned protesters of the risk of infiltration by "misleading parties" and offered to hold another election to choose his successor if re-elected in April.

Algeria's leaders attempted to maintain an image of control amid the growing protests. "The people and the army have a unified vision of the future," said Gaïd Salah, the head of the military. The education ministry combatted a mass student strike by bringing forward the spring holiday originally scheduled for 21 March and extending it until 4 April.

Despite the government's efforts to contain the protests, some workers in the energy sector, which accounts for an estimated 30% of the country's GDP, joined the strike on Sunday, the first day of the working week in Algeria.

Video posted to social media appeared to show employees of the state oil and gas giant Sonatrach protesting in the town of Béjaïa. The company employs an estimated 120,000 people and is considered the backbone of the industry.

It declined to comment on the strike when contacted by the Guardian. "Sonatrach has nothing to do with the strike," said an employee who answered a call to its offices.

Some private companies took a different approach. Cevital, the largest private conglomerate outside of Algeria's energy sector with 18,000 employees, tweeted a statement of support for the strike, saying it was "united with the movement for a general strike chosen by civil society to demand a change to the system."

iccardo Fabiani, a senior geopolitics analyst at Energy Aspect, told the Guardian the strike could rattle Algeria's leaders should oil and gas field engineers or those working on energy pipelines and transportation choose to participate, thereby affecting energy output in the third largest supplier of natural gas to Europe.

He said: "It's a direct existential threat to the regime, as energy production is effectively the lifeline of the country. If instability propagates and reaches the sector, the regime would be in panic mode. This is the kind of shock that can alter the balance of the current standoff."

MORE

Algeria: The Beginning Of The End?

1 March 2019 By Ahmed Rouaba, BBC News [Excerpts]

Tens of thousands of Algerians have been protesting against 81-year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term on 18 April.

It is a rare show of dissent in the North African country, where more than 30% of people aged under 30 are unemployed.

ARE THE DEMONSTRATIONS A SURPRISE?

Yes, they are the biggest protests against President Bouteflika since he came to power 20 years ago in elections that followed the country's bloody civil war.

People have taken to the streets in various cities 10 days after his candidacy for the presidential election was confirmed.

The demonstrations are being organised on social media - and while the trigger has been Mr Bouteflika's re-election bid, anger is also being expressed about perceived deep-rooted corruption among the ruling elite.

WHO IS PROTESTING?



A huge anti-government protest was held in the capital, Algiers. BBC Photo

In particular it is young people, who have not usually expressed an interest in Algeria's party politics.

Even journalists working at the public broadcaster took part in one protest. They denounced the censorship imposed by managers that has led to the protests not being covered on state TV and radio.

HOW HAVE THE AUTHORITIES RESPONDED?

Tear gas has been fired during some protests, but Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia has praised the generally peaceful demonstrations, highlighting the moment when protesters offered roses to police officers.

But he warned that the uprising in Syria in 2011, which later descended into a brutal conflict, "started with exchanges of roses".

The ruling coalition of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Democratic Rally (RND) clearly did not expect such resistance to Mr Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term.

WHY HASN'T THERE BEEN UNREST BEFORE?

For nearly two decades Mr Bouteflika's government managed to maintain social stability thanks to soaring oil prices.



Demonstrators defaced a sign taken to represent President Bouteflika, who uses a wheelchair.
BBC

This enabled it to invest in huge infrastructure projects, like big housing estates with affordable homes and tram networks across the country.

Thousands of young people also benefited from a generous loan scheme, organised by ANSEJ, a national agency supporting small businesses, and were not expected to repay the grants.

But the economy has been floundering since oil prices started to dive a few years ago.

The government no longer has the means to fund generous schemes and unemployment has become a big problem.

IS THE ECONOMY THE ONLY PROBLEM?

No, people are also upset by a drug-trafficking scandal that shook the establishment last year leading to the sackings of some top officials.

It involved the seizure from a container ship of more than 700kg (1,540lb) of cocaine reportedly destined for a prominent businessman.

There is also resentment about the power of a growing number of business magnates, who are close to the government.

An example of their influence came in 2017 when then-Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune tried to tackle Algeria's trade deficit.

He banned the import of some products, which the businessmen did not like, and he was sacked within two months.

Mr Bouteflika first took office when Algeria was embroiled in a brutal civil war with Islamist insurgents, and is credited with curbing the conflict and restoring economic stability.

He amended the constitution in 2008 to remove the two-term limit on the presidency, effectively giving himself the option of remaining head of state for life.

Mr Bouteflika won presidential elections in 2014 despite doing no personal campaigning.

The credibility of that election was questioned but no opposition figure has so far won enough popular support to take him on.

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

Latest Watchdog Report Paints Grim Picture Of Afghanistan: More Than 28,000 Regime Police And Soldiers Have Been Killed By Resistance Since November: “Senior Afghan Security Force Leaders And Civilian Provincial Authorities Often Controlling Narcotics Trafficking Networks”

February 1 By Geoff Ziezulewicz, Navy Times [Excerpts]

As President Trump considers pulling all U.S. forces out of Afghanistan, and with the Senate coming together this week to rebuke such a plan, a watchdog report released this week showcases the fragility of the reconstruction effort.

The U.S. government has spent at least \$132 billion on Afghanistan since 2002 to stabilize a country torn apart by four decades of war, according to the latest report by the Defense Department's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

The SIGAR findings released this week echo similarly dismal findings in past reports.

Despite all the money spent and lives lost there, only about half the total number of districts in Afghanistan are under the control of the government, with eight falling out of Kabul's control since 2017, according to the SIGAR report.

Billions have been spent to build a competent Afghan army and police force, with U.S. officials over the years promoting a message that "as they stand up, we will stand down."

But the SIGAR report finds that the Afghan security forces are at their lowest levels since 2015, when U.S. forces changed the Afghan mission's name to "Resolute Support."

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said in November that more than 28,000 Afghan police and soldiers have been killed since then.

Advocates for the war have stressed over the years that the Afghan government must prove itself trustworthy and capable in order to turn citizens away from the Taliban and other insurgent groups. But the SIGAR report states that "the Afghan government has made insufficient progress to investigate and prosecute corruption cases."

"The Afghan government has not yet demonstrated sufficient motivation or action to deter future corrupt actors, or to convince the Afghan people that the government is serious about combating corruption," the report states.

Drug trafficking remains endemic, the report found, and U.S. forces have observed "senior Afghan security force leaders and civilian provincial authorities often controlling narcotics trafficking networks in the western, southwestern, and northern regions."

"Successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of Coalition troops and civilians."

The report cites a U.S. plan to bolster Afghanistan's air force with UH-60 Black Hawk choppers but notes that there will likely not be enough pilots to fly all the helicopters that are delivered.

Afghanistan's mostly illiterate population has not produced enough maintenance personnel, which will limit Black Hawk operations because Pentagon policy prohibits U.S. contractors from working at maintenance sites where there are no NATO forces due to security concerns, according to the report.

MILITARY NEWS

Trump Told Lawmakers This Week He's "100%" On Board With Keeping Some U.S. Troops In Syria, Less Than Three Months After Announcing A Complete Withdrawal

Meanwhile Trump and Bolton Can't Agree Whether to Withdraw or Not



March 05, 2019 by Diana Stancy Correll, Washington Examiner [Excerpt]

President Trump told lawmakers this week he's "100%" on board with keeping some U.S. troops in Syria, less than three months after announcing a complete withdrawal.

Trump declared in December that the Islamic State was defeated and he was ordering all U.S. troops in Syria sent home.

That decision faced backlash from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and was a factor in James Mattis' resignation as secretary of defense.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers from both chambers of Congress sent the president a letter applauding his change of heart.

FORWARD OBSERVATIONS



“At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.

“For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.

“We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”

“The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppose.”

Frederick Douglass, 1852

But out of this complicated web of material and psychic forces one conclusion emerges with irrefutable clarity: the more the soldiers in their mass are convinced that the rebels are really rebelling – that this is not a demonstration after which they will have to go back to the barracks and report, that this is a struggle to the death, that the people may win if they join them, and that this winning will not only guarantee impunity, but alleviate the lot of all – the more they realize this, the

more willing they are to turn aside their bayonets, or go over with them to the people.

And the highest determination never can, or will, remain unarmed.
-- Leon Trotsky; The History of the Russian Revolution

**“The Crisis In Venezuela Is Real”
“In The Confrontation Between Two
Presidential Claimants, Guaidó And
Maduro, Neither Represents The
Interests Of The Mass Of
Venezuelans”
“A New Bureaucracy Claimed Socialist
Credentials And Used Revolutionary
Rhetoric, While In Reality Enriching
Itself”**

1 March 2019 By Mike Gonzalez, Revolutionary Socialism 21 [Excerpts]

The troops gathering on the borders between Venezuela and Brazil and Colombia are no less threatening to Venezuela because they claim to be protecting a “humanitarian convoy

The crisis in Venezuela is real — despite Nicolás Maduro’s hypocritical insistence that everyone in Venezuela has food and medicine to meet their needs. But the purpose of this military operation is not to address the crisis — beyond a few photo ops of lorries full of supplies.

It is to use the crisis to regain control of the country’s huge mineral resources.

Venezuela, we should remember, has the world’s largest untapped oil reserves, not to mention untold mineral, gas, water, diamond and other undeveloped resources.

Venezuela’s oil was taken back into state ownership by Hugo Chávez in 2005, seven years after he was elected to the presidency in 1998. Something like half a million barrels a day were and still are sold to the United States by the Venezuelan state oil corporation PDVSA via the U.S. subsidiary Citgo. Trump’s sanctions are now withholding that revenue.

The potential wealth that lies beneath Venezuela's surface is the prize that Trump and his special friends in the multinational energy sector are seeking. The weaknesses of the Venezuelan state offered an opportunity to recover that profitable investment — and the promise of Juan Guaidó is that he will deliver it.

The other objective, barely mentioned in the current reporting, is imperialist rivalry.

Once, in the nostalgic dream conjured up by Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric, Latin America was the U.S.'s "backyard," its wealth feeding the economic growth of the U.S. at the expense of the populations of the Southern republics. Today, the U.S. is not the only vulture hovering over those resources. Over the last 20 years, China has become a major investor and provider of loans to Latin America and especially the pink tide governments. Its total investment in Venezuela is worth \$60 billion; the loans, principally for the construction of public housing, are repaid in oil. Chinese multinationals are also investing in extractive industries, oil and mining under extremely favorable conditions.

Russia, too, has seen Venezuela as a staging post in its expansion plans in the region. It is not only heavily investing there; it is also providing arms to Venezuela through a recent Military Assistance Agreement.

Imperialism is the enemy of the Venezuelan people — but it speaks a number of languages. In addition to its other troubles, Venezuela is now also an arena for inter-imperialist competition.

What all the powers involved have in common is a strategy for the exploitation of Venezuela's resources and those of Latin America more generally; none of them have any humanitarian aims.

"In The Confrontation Between Two Presidential Claimants, Guaidó And Maduro, Neither Represents The Interests Of The Mass Of Venezuelans"

In the confrontation between two presidential claimants, Guaidó and Maduro, neither represents the interests of the mass of Venezuelans.

Juan Guaidó was a virtually unknown Venezuelan politician until January 23 this year. He is the president (or speaker) of the National Assembly — a post which, by mutual agreement, rotates between the various right-wing parties that together hold a majority in the Assembly.

It is not a directly elected post, though that is never mentioned in reports about him. He is also a member of Voluntad Popular (People's Will), the furthest right of the parties of the opposition coalition ill-named the Forum of Democratic Unity (MUD) — its members are unable to agree on anything beyond their opposition to Maduro.

Curiously, Voluntad Popular claims to belong to the Socialist International, which led some in the Labour Party to describe it as "a sister organization." In reality, it is not a social democratic organization, but a reactionary grouping that backed the violent street

barricades that erupted onto the streets of Venezuela between 2014 and 2018, leaving a toll of destruction and death.

It is also the party with the closest links to Washington. Its founder and leader Leopoldo López has been in detention for the last four years, but his wife was a frequent visitor to both Obama's and Trump's White House, as well as touring right-wing European parties. One consequence of Guaidó's sudden prominence will be to add weight to Voluntad Popular's claim to head an opposition in which it has been a minority force until now.

The current National Assembly was elected in December 2015 with 63 percent of the popular vote. The result was wholly unexpected by the Maduro regime. It was all the more significant because the result did not reflect a rightward shift, but the abstention of 2 million chavista supporters.

It was a protest against the gathering crisis and, as is now clear, a prelude to the devastating current situation. At that time there were already shortages of basic goods, a crisis in the health service and declining production, as well as huge price rises. Maduro had won the presidential election in April 2013 after Chávez's death, but with a majority of less than 1 percent over his right-wing opponent, Henrique Capriles. While the loyalty to Chávez was undeniable among the majority of the population, Maduro's relentless exploitation of his predecessor's popularity (he ran and reran Chávez's speeches throughout the campaign and claimed the dead president sat on his shoulders) did not enable him to repeat Chávez's 60 percent majority in the ballot. The Assembly vote came just two years later and marked a further decline in his support.

The explanation lay not only in the deepening economic crisis, about which he did nothing at all, but also in the character of his regime, which was becoming increasingly centralized, authoritarian and corrupt, and in which the military were playing an increasing role. The state political organization — the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) — acted as an instrument of power, distributing rewards, jobs and favours in exchange for loyalty on the one hand, and acting to control and contain local discontents on the other.

The roots of the Maduro state, however, lay in the Chávez period. In 2006, having won his second presidential election by an increased majority, Chávez announced on his weekly television program the creation of a new party — the PSUV. It would be, he promised, a mass socialist party, democratic in its structures and accountable to its membership.

Nearly 6 million joined in a matter of weeks. Yet what emerged was not a party fulfilling the promise enshrined in the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela, which asserted that the new Bolivarian Republic would be a participatory republic in which the people would be the subjects of the process (*"democracia participativa y protagonista"*).

Within weeks it became clear that it was a party modeled on Cuba's Communist Party, which was anything but democratic or participatory. It was a highly centralized, top-down structure, in which the role of the grass roots was simply to acclaim and carry out decisions taken by the leadership.

Chávez's last document was his Economic Plan for 2013-19 (the *"Plan de la Patria"*).

In his preface Chávez acknowledged that he had failed to transform the notoriously corrupt Venezuelan state or advance his much proclaimed “socialism of the 21st century.” His governments had not undermined the bourgeoisie nor broken its mechanism of power — the state.

In fact, what had happened was that, far from state and public institutions becoming subject to control from below and the system of clientelism and patronage being replaced by accountable institutions, the creation of the PSUV had had the opposite effect. The mass organizations were brought under centralized control and absorbed into the state.

“A New Bureaucracy, Which Claimed Socialist Credentials And Used Revolutionary Rhetoric, While In Reality Enriching Itself”

The massive state budget and the high oil revenues coming into the country up to 2012 while oil prices remained high produced a new bureaucracy, which claimed socialist credentials and used revolutionary rhetoric, while in reality enriching itself, embezzling state funds and building a state apparatus to protect its own interests.

Many *chavista* leaders, a majority of whom came from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds, became very rich very quickly. Chávez’s death and Maduro’s election gave them control of the *chavista* state.

The many dedicated, committed socialists who gave their time and energy to carrying the *chavista* “process” forward were increasingly marginalized and silenced.

When the right wing won the National Assembly elections in 2015, Maduro’s reaction was immediate. He declared a state of emergency and ruled through presidential decrees (“*leyes habilitantes*”), bypassing the Assembly from then on.

The right wing’s only demands were the removal of Maduro and the release of Leopoldo López — their only other policy was, in line with Maduro’s own ambitions, to increase oil production.

In his public appearances Maduro always appears surrounded by the military. It is an accurate reflection of the nature of the state he heads. The discourse he uses is full of references to revolution and socialism, and denunciations of imperialism. He still claims the mantle of Chávez, whose promise was to challenge neoliberalism, throw off the chains of dependency and diversify the economy — using oil revenues to develop domestic industry as well as to create the foundations of a welfare state. His victory challenged a 40-year regime, based on corruption, which had commonly responded with violence to any challenge to its power.

In 2005, Chávez announced the implementation of “21st century socialism” in Venezuela. In the aftermath of an attempted coup in April 2002, which failed because of the mass mobilization of poor and working-class Venezuelans in support of him, the Bolivarian revolution moved in a more radical direction, redistributing oil revenues through social programs and nationalizing some enterprises (their owners were paid compensation) but also supporting organs of power at the grassroots. The creation of

the PSUV in 2006 claimed to continue and deepen that process, but the reality was that it represented the opposite of participatory democracy.

The new state bureaucracy constituted itself as a ruling class, whose political instrument was the PSUV, a top-down structure that distributed favors and fragments of power, and a great deal of money, in return for loyalty.

The 2015 election result was a warning from the mass social base of *chavismo*; the response was to strengthen the mechanisms of control and repression, and to concentrate both political and economic power in the hands of the ruling elite.

This new layer — the “*Boliburguesía*” as it came to be called — colluded with the Venezuelan capitalist class, while denouncing it in its public rhetoric.

The standoff with the Assembly after 2015 did not affect the currency speculation both groups were massively engaged in; it did not prevent the pillaging of PDVSA as the public sector descended into a spectacular decline.

The street barricades continued, it is true; but so, too, did the meetings between Maduro and leading members of the capitalist class, including the wealthiest of them all, Lorenzo Mendoza of the Polar Corporation.

As the price of oil fell, and with it the country's export income, rising inflation — soon to become hyperinflation — affected the majority. Dollars could buy anything — bolivars bought less and less.

Goods disappeared from the shops for long periods. Food, building materials, car parts, the absent medicines and drugs reappeared on a black market. The profits were enormous and unaccountable.

The main pharmacy chain in Venezuela Farmatodo, for example, was owned by a leading *chavista*.

The shelves in its Venezuelan branches were empty. But as I discovered on a visit to Bogotá, its branches in Colombia had every form of medication freely available. That was just one of many examples.

Yet neither the National Assembly nor Maduro did anything to address the deepening crisis that Venezuelans were facing. No genuine price controls, no attempt to stem the hemorrhage of funds through the exchange system, no anti-corruption measures that were anything other than rhetoric.

As the formal economy ceased to exist, corruption oiled the wheels of the black market economy. Loans to the state, whether from China or other external sources, disappeared without trace; public spending contracts generated huge “commissions” — or bribes as we might call them — which could involve anything up to 40 percent of the total.

One fund — Fonden — for home construction was financed by China, but published no accounts of its spending; there were some 50 others that operated in the same secret way.

Odebrecht, the Brazilian engineering firm that spent \$1.3 billion in bribes across the region before it was exposed was one of the main infrastructure contractors in Venezuela as well as Cuba.

In 2016, the direction that Maduro was taking became startlingly clear when he announced the Arco Minero project.

The Arco Minero covers the Orinoco River Basin and surrounding area, and includes part of the Amazon Basin. It is roughly the size of Cuba, and covers 12 percent of Venezuela's surface area.

It is astonishingly rich in oil and minerals, including gold, copper, antimony, diamonds and uranium. It is the main source of the country's fresh water. It is also home to a number of Indigenous communities whose rights are recognized and protected by the Bolivarian Constitution. Venezuela's immense oil reserves are there, but the mineral resources have not been exploited. The mining that did go on there before now was small-scale and artisanal; working conditions were appalling and life was very cheap. Chávez had previously discussed a plan for the region's development after the Canadian multinational Gold Reserve[1] was expelled from the region, but abandoned it. In his 2016 speech Maduro announced that 150 multinational companies (from various countries) had been invited to develop the region's resources with a promise of long-term tax relief and the construction of infrastructure at the state's expense. The Canadian corporation was invited back and its disputed demand for compensation agreed.

At the same time, it was announced that constitutional guarantees would be suspended and the region placed under military control. Chávez had rejected the plan precisely because of its constitutional implications and the environmental damage that would follow the renewal of mining, and particularly gold mining whose use of mercury had already poisoned so much of the Amazon basin. Maduro now returned to it. He announced at the same time the creation of Cominpeg, a company to be run by the military out of the Ministry of Defense — but independent of state control. It would be given control of Venezuela's mineral resources and parts of PDVSA. There were protests from many quarters — from leading chavistas and trade unionists on the one hand and Indigenous communities and environmental groups on the other.

Maduro's response was the state of emergency in the area and the tightening of military control. The expulsion of local communities began within weeks.

“The New Ruling Class Maduro Led Now Directly Controlled Many Key Resources And Their Growing Wealth From Graft And Corruption Merged Political And Economic Power

The significance of this decision was profound. In my view it signaled the reversal of the Bolivarian process. However flawed and unclear it might have been, Chávez's strategy had remained committed to state control of resources and the socialization of the profits from their exploitation. The Arco Minero project marked the abandonment of that strategy and the privatization of the nation's extractive industries. It represented the reversal of Chávez's strategy, and a return to dependency on the global market. The

political consequences removed any lingering doubt. Half of Maduro's cabinet now came from the military, as did most of the state governors elected in 2017 after a postponed election.

The new ruling class Maduro led now directly controlled many key resources and their growing wealth from graft and corruption merged political and economic power. Their instruments were patronage and corruption, the PSUV — and repression.

The deepening economic crisis was blamed on an “economic war.” Temporary schemes to hide the crisis included corruption commissions that did nothing, and the CLAPS (Local Committees for Supply and Production), a scheme to deliver basic food parcels to poor districts. These were administered through the PSUV — non-members received nothing, and even those who were eligible were often asked to pay or found their parcels plundered, when and if they arrived at all. The food parcels simply entered the circuit of corruption.

The creation of a “*Carnet de la Patria*” (National Card) meant, in effect, a loyalty card to the regime.

Without it, citizens could not collect any social benefits. Thus the million or so state employees, plus PSUV members and activists, could be relied upon to cheer Maduro to the rooftops at rallies and televised events.

Repression, on the other hand, was represented by the cynically named Organizations of Popular Liberation (OLPs), which conducted “anti-drug trafficking operations” in the poor areas.

The death toll of young men rose dramatically, but the trafficking continued. In reality, the state was running interventions favoring some traffickers over others. The OLPs have now been replaced with a more honestly named force, the FAES (Special Forces), which today are leading the controls at the borders.

I watched footage from the bridge between San Cristóbal and Cucuta in Colombia, where the U.S. has marshaled the trucks carrying its “aid.” It is blockaded by armed Venezuelan troops. I couldn't help but remember the information I had been given a year or two earlier about the number of Venezuelan army lorries passing across the same bridge day after day, carrying contraband into Colombia.

Maduro has denied that there is a crisis in Venezuela in his television interviews for the BBC and Spain's *La Sexta* channel. The crisis is real, the hunger is deepening and the lack of medicines has had consequences we can only imagine, though we know that infant mortality is rising and that malaria, a disease once eliminated, has returned to Venezuela. The government ceased to publish any data in 2013. [2]

What are the real dimensions of the crisis?

Inflation is set to pass the one million percent mark this year. To translate that into real terms, it means that a monthly wage will buy a tray of eggs, or a packet of disposable nappies (if either can be found). According to the World Health Organisation 61% of the population went hungry in 2017 and Venezuelans suffered an average weight loss of 11

kilos. And that was in 2017. At the same time, industrial production and GDP declined by 45% for 2013-18. Their products were replaced (if at all) by imports, which meant yet another bonanza for importers who bought their dollars from the Central Bank at a low official rate of exchange and then charged for their goods in bolivars at a black market exchange rate a hundred or even a thousand times higher. At the same time, oil production was falling below two million barrels a day, largely due to corruption, mismanagement and lack of maintenance of facilities. The pickings were huge.

The bourgeoisie gathered around Guaidó may claim to have an alternative to offer. But their only demand is for the state to return to their control. Under Chávez and under Maduro they have disinvested from production to invest in the currency speculation industry by becoming importers. Between 2003-13 imports by the public sector increased by 1033%. Imports in general rose in the same period from \$14 billion to \$80 billion – 70% of those imports were supposedly for industry, yet as we have seen, industrial production has declined catastrophically over these years. Yet in 2018 Minister of Industry Tareck El Aissam announced that one-third of the national budget would be allocated as credits to the private sector. The picture could not be clearer. In a recent article, John Pilger noted that ‘the restaurants in Caracas are full’. That is true and revealing. But who in Venezuela does he imagine eats in restaurants – and does he think they pay their bills on bolivars?

The leading revolutionary activist Roland Denis describes the Venezuelan state as ‘utterly corrupt and living on a revolutionary history transformed into an increasingly clumsy and false religious discourse’. If it has survived, this is for several key reasons. First the creation of an authoritarian state structure administered by a new ruling class that has merged economic, political and military power. That ruling class is committed to reintegrating into a global market as a provider of oil.

Secondly, the residue of loyalty to Chávez is still strong and reinforced by a system of patronage. But for an increasing majority life is lived on the edge of the abyss. The third factor is the ineptitude and political weakness of the opposition, which has at no stage offered any policy addressing the economic crisis.

If it has emerged now, it is only as a surrogate for US interests in the region, which reflect those of the Latin American right and European capital.

The demonstrations called by Guaidó have attracted massive support. It should be clear, however, that that is not a reflection of political support for the right. The marches also attracted many among the working class and the poor who are very clear about the interests that Guaidó represents. They are not anti-chavista, but they are bitterly critical of Maduro and the bureaucratic-military class that rules Venezuela today.

When Maduro was elected to the presidency in August, it was with the endorsement of a Constituent Assembly he had called earlier in the year. Unlike the 1999 Constituent Assembly, which wrote the new Constitution, and whose delegates were elected after widespread public debate, the 2018 Assembly was filled with unelected delegates placed by Maduro and the PSUV. It was an exercise in organised propaganda, not an example of popular democracy in any sense. In the presidential election in August, Maduro won 32% of the electorate – that is, 48% of those who voted. In his last election before his death, Chavez won 62% of voters; in just over five years since his election,

millions of chavista voters had abandoned Maduro. In the last two years, three million people (dismissed by one of the leaders of the state,

Diosdado Cabello, as mere 'followers of fashion') have fled the country – and they are not by any means just the middle class. The presence of the Special Forces at the borders is suggestive. But more suggestive still is the fact that at no time has Maduro developed strategies to address hunger, or the mounting violence and lawlessness, or the health crisis, let alone the corruption of which he and his family are also beneficiaries. Last August, once re-elected, he announced that there would be a plan, a solution to the crisis. No plan has yet emerged nor policies that might lead to one. But the internal repression has intensified.

Neither Guaidó nor Maduro have anything to offer the mass of Venezuelans. They are rival factions battling for the profits from oil and the huge benefits that come from corruption.

Guaidó has no real social base; the demonstrations are not expressions of support but manifestations of desperation on the one hand, and of the other of rage at the betrayal of a revolution. It is a confusing situation. But the confusion has been intensified by a left outside Venezuela which has accepted and supported Maduro as he sold off the revolution to the highest bidder. Looked at from his point of view, the issue is the survival in power of himself and the profiteers around him. Looked at from the point of view of the Venezuelan working class, which is the only position from which socialists can address the current situation, there is nothing to choose between Guaidó and Maduro. And there seems to be an impasse given the armed forces' support (until now) for him. The armed forces are defending their hold on political and economic power. With characteristic cynicism the right are offering amnesty for the military – that is, impunity for their economic crimes in exchange for abandoning state power to them. The dilemma for socialists is what the alternative is or should be.

The Bolivarian Revolution was carried to power by mass support of Venezuela's poor and working class. Their mobilisation and grass roots activism both saved Chávez from the coup of 2002 and built the resistance to the subsequent attacks from the opposition.

Their capacity for independent action was the only guarantee of the participatory democracy that Chávez had promised. The creation of the PSUV in 2006 changed that, absorbing those grass roots organisations into the state and disarming and demobilising them. Those organisations barely exist today; but the memory of the experience of mass involvement does still remain. In the medium term, the task must be to rebuild those organisations, and to build solidarity for any and every manifestation of popular, mass resistance that arises – like the recent strikes of nurses, teachers and state employees. To continue to argue for solidarity with a corrupt, authoritarian state that cynically claims revolutionary credentials is to undermine any possibility of a re-emergence of struggle from below.

Our solidarity should be with the Venezuelan people, exposing the lie of 'humanitarian intervention', calling for the immediate withdrawal of all troops from Venezuela's borders.

We should be clear where the responsibility for the crisis lies, both external and internal.

Solidarity must defend the rights of the Venezuelan people to determine their own future, and contribute to rebuilding their capacity to exercise that right against all imperialisms, against the right across the region and beyond, and against a corrupt ruling class that has profited from their desperation.

If there is any form of military intervention, the masses will respond in defence of that right, and the role of solidarity will be clear.

In the immediate term, the Committee for the Defence of the Constitution, which includes leading chavistas from the past, Trotskyists, indigenous and environmentalist movements among its number, has called for a referendum as allowed by the constitution, which would test the attitude of the majority to new elections. It is a limited and inadequate response, but there is no revolutionary upsurge on the horizon.

A referendum will at least provide an opportunity for Venezuelans to show that neither Maduro nor Guaidó speak for them, and it will unmask the hypocrisy of both camps.

What kind of socialism can it be that does nothing about the hunger and needs of its people and sends trained thugs to fire on them?

Beyond empty calls for revolution now, it is hard to imagine any other immediate alternative.

But the international left cannot allow itself to continue to provide an alibi for a corrupt ruling class, nor allow it to discredit the idea of a socialism whose most fundamental sense is the struggle to build a just future free of exploitation, corruption and fear.

[1] It may surprise people that Canada joined the Lima Group in supporting Trump, who has shown very little affection for Canada. The explanation is that Canada is a major player in the Latin American mining sector. See: Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber, 'Imperialism and resistance: Canadian mining companies in Latin America', *Third World Quarterly*, 29:1 (2007), 63-87.

[2] In the absence of any available official data I have relied on the carefully researched economic analyses of Manuel Sutherland, a young Venezuelan Marxist. He has recently been fired from his job at the state's Bolivarian University.

Against Imperial War: [1915] “Imperialism Is The Progressing Oppression Of The Nations Of The World By A Handful Of Great Powers”

“Basing Ourselves On Democracy As It Already Exists, Exposing Its Incompleteness Under Capitalism, We Advocate The Overthrow Of Capitalism”

We demand the freedom of self-determination, i. e., independence, i. e., the freedom of separation for the oppressed nations, not because we dream of an economically atomized world, nor because we cherish the ideal of small states, but on the contrary because we are for large states and for a coming closer, even a fusion of nations, but on a truly democratic, truly internationalist basis, which is unthinkable without the freedom of separation.

1915, By V. I. Ulyanov: Excerpts from Right To Self Determination, November 1915 & Imperialism And World Economy, 1915 [The writer used the pen name “Lenin” to keep the government from terrorizing his family.]

The proletariat cannot become victor save through democracy, i. e., through introducing complete democracy and through combining with every step of its movement democratic demands formulated most vigorously, most decisively.

It is senseless to contrast the Socialist revolution and the revolutionary struggle against capitalism to one of the questions of democracy, in this case the national question.

On the contrary, we must combine the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary program and revolutionary tactics relative to all democratic demands: a republic, a militia, officials elected by the people, equal rights for women, self- determination of nations, etc.

While capitalism exists, all these demands are realizable only as an exception, and in an incomplete, distorted form.

Basing ourselves on democracy as it already exists, exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we advocate the overthrow of capitalism, expropriation of the bourgeoisie as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for a complete and manifold realization of all democratic reforms.

Some of those reforms will be started prior to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, others in the process of the overthrow, still others after it has been accomplished.

The Socialist revolution is by no means a single battle; on the contrary, it is an epoch of a whole series of battles around all problems of economic and democratic reforms, which can be completed only by the expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

It is for the sake of this final aim that we must formulate in a consistently revolutionary manner every one of our democratic demands.

It is quite conceivable that the workers of a certain country may overthrow the bourgeoisie before even one fundamental democratic reform has been realised in full.

It is entirely inconceivable, however, that the proletariat as an historical class will be able to defeat the bourgeoisie if it is not prepared for this task by being educated in the spirit of the most consistent and determined revolutionary democracy.

Imperialism is the progressing oppression of the nations of the world by a handful of great powers; it is an epoch of wars among them for the widening and strengthening of national oppression; it is the epoch when the masses of the people are deceived by the hypocritical social-patriots, i. e., people who under the pretext of "freedom of nations," "right of nations to self-determination," and "defence of the fatherland" justify and defend the oppression of a majority of the world's nations by the great powers.

This is just why the central point in a programme of Social-Democrats must be that distinction between oppressing and oppressed nations, since the distinction is the essence of imperialism, and is fraudulently evaded by the social-patriots ...

This distinction is not important from the point of view of bourgeois pacifism, or the petty-bourgeois Utopia of peaceful competition between independent nations under capitalism, but it is most important in the point of view of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism.

From this distinction there follows *our* consistently democratic and revolutionary definition of the "right of nations to self-determination," which is in accord with the general task of the immediate struggle for Socialism.

It is in the name of this right, and fighting for its unequivocal recognition, that the Social-Democrats of the oppressing nations must demand the freedom of separation for the oppressed nations, for otherwise recognition of the equal rights of nations and international solidarity of the workers in reality remains an empty phrase, a hypocritical gesture.

Russia is a prison of peoples not only because of the military, feudal character of tsarism, not only because the Great-Russian bourgeoisie supports tsarism, but also because the Polish, Lettish, etc., bourgeoisie has sacrificed the freedom of nations and democracy in general for the interests of capitalist expansion.

The proletariat of Russia, marching at the head of the people, cannot complete the victorious democratic revolution (which is its immediate task); neither can it fight together with its brothers, the proletarians of Europe, for a Socialist revolution, without demanding at once full and "unreserved" freedom of separation from Russia for all the nations oppressed by Russia.

This we demand not as something independent from our revolutionary struggle for Socialism, but because this struggle would remain an idle phrase if it were not

linked up with a revolutionary approach to all the questions of democracy, including the national question.

We demand the freedom of self-determination, i. e., independence, i. e., the freedom of separation for the oppressed nations, not because we dream of an economically atomized world, nor because we cherish the ideal of small states, but on the contrary because we are for large states and for a coming closer, even a fusion of nations, but on a truly democratic, truly internationalist basis, which is unthinkable without the freedom of separation.

In the same way as Marx in 1869 demanded the separation of Ireland, not for the purpose of splitting England, but for a subsequent free alliance of Ireland with England, not for the sake of “justice to Ireland,” but for the interests of the revolutionary struggle of the English proletariat, so we at present consider the refusal by the Socialists of Russia to demand freedom of self-determination for the nations, in the sense indicated by us above, as a direct betrayal of democracy, internationalism, and Socialism.

[H]e who rejects the hard tasks of today in the name of dreams about easy tasks of the future becomes an opportunist.

Theoretically it means to fail to base oneself on the developments now going on in real life, to detach oneself from them in the name of dreams.

War is a “terrible” thing? Yes.

But it is a terribly profitable thing.

OCCUPATION PALESTINE

Unarmed 21-Year-Old Palestinian Executed By Zionist Occupation Forces

FEB. 5, 2019 (Ma'an)

JENIN -- A Palestinian was shot and killed, on Monday, with Israeli live ammunition near the al-Jalama checkpoint in the northern occupied West Bank district of Jenin.

According to local sources, Israeli forces shot and injured two Palestinians, who were passing by near the checkpoint on a motorcycle.

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) identified the killed Palestinian as Abdullah Faysal Towalba, 21, and succumbed to his injuries at the Jenin governmental hospital.

PRCS confirmed that Towalba was shot in the head and several times in his feet. PRCS also mentioned that the second Palestinian was shot and injured in his shoulder. He was transferred to the same hospital and received necessary medical treatment. His injuries were described as moderate.

The Israeli army claimed that one of the Palestinians passing by on the motorcycle threw a suspicious object at the soldiers situated near the al-Jalama checkpoint. However, locals pointed out that no suspicious object was seen being thrown.

Zionist Settlers Kill Another Palestinian: Unarmed Father Of Four Murdered In West Bank Village; “Israelis Committing Violent Acts Against Palestinians Are Rarely Prosecuted For Their Crimes”



Hamdi Naasan, 38, with his four children. (Photo: Ma'an News Agency)

Israeli settlers shot and killed a Palestinian father of four during a raid on the al-Mughayyir village in the central occupied West Bank district of Ramallah on Saturday night.

Palestinian officials and local media outlets reported that a group of Israeli settlers raided the village under the protection of armed Israeli soldiers — a common occurrence in areas of the West Bank located close to settlements — causing clashes to erupt with Palestinian residents of the village, who tried to fend off the settlers.

During the confrontations, a settler reportedly shot and killed 38-year-old Hamdi Saadeh Naasan.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health said in a statement that Naasan, a father of four young children and a former prisoner, arrived to the hospital in critical condition and succumbed to his wounds shortly afterwards.

The ministry also said that Israeli settlers shot Naasan in his back with live ammunition.

Ma'an News Agency quoted local sources who said that Israeli settlers attempted to raid the village's northern entrance, descending from a mountaintop into the outskirts of the village, "under the heavy protection of Israeli forces."

In response, locals from al-Mughayyir and villagers from the nearby Khirbet Abu Falah rushed to the mountaintop in attempts to push back the settlers and prevent them from attacking the homes on the edge of the village.

"Israeli forces repeatedly fired live bullets, rubber-coated steel bullets, and stun grenades towards the Palestinians to disperse them," Ma'an News reported, adding that at least 30 other Palestinians were injured during the attack, including six who were shot with live ammunition.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military released statements saying that a "confrontation" between settlers and Palestinians resulted in the light injury of a settler.

"Initial details suggest that shortly thereafter, a conflict erupted between Israeli civilians and Palestinians in the area, in which live rounds were fired by the civilians. One Palestinian died and several others are injured," they said in a statement, adding that an investigation has begun.

Videos released on social media of the incident, however, corroborate Palestinian accounts of the events, showing Israeli settlers and soldiers to be the initial instigators of the confrontations.

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nikolay Mladenov, condemned the killing of Naasan on Twitter, calling it "shocking and unacceptable."

"Israel must put an end to settler violence & bring those responsible to justice. My thoughts and prayers go out to the family of the Palestinian man killed and those injured," he said.

Senior PLO official Hanan Ashrawi condemned the “heinous murder” of Naasan, and held the Israeli government “fully responsible” for his death.

“The political climate in Israel negates Palestinian rights and expresses objectionable racism against the Palestinian people,” she said.

“As such, the marked escalation of terror attacks by armed groups of Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians is a natural outcome of the culture of hate and atmosphere of incitement and violence against Palestinians that this extremist Israeli government espouses and promotes.”

Al-Mughayyer is surrounded by eight Israeli settlements and outposts from all sides, and is frequently subject to settler attacks on the people of the village and their property.

Attacks like the one on Saturday night are a common occurrence in the West Bank, which is home to some 600,000 nationalistic and right-wing Israeli settlers living in illegal settlements and outposts.

Rights groups, local media, and grassroots activists have thoroughly documented such attacks, which often fit the profile of Saturday’s attack: Israeli settlers wielding guns, bats, and rocks descend on a village from a mountaintop, under the protection of the Israeli army, and attack Palestinians and their property.

2018 saw a steep rise in anti-Palestinian hate crimes carried out by Israeli settlers in the West Bank. As of mid-December, 482 such incidents had been reported, more than triple the reported 140 incidents in 2017.

Rights groups and activists have long accused the Israeli state and security officials of fostering a “culture of impunity” for Israelis committing violent acts against Palestinians, who are rarely prosecuted for their crimes.

Meanwhile, Palestinian minors have repeatedly been sentenced to decades in prison if they are found guilty of attacking or killing Israelis.

To check out what life is like under a murderous military occupation commanded by foreign terrorists, go to:

<http://www.palestinechronicle.com/>

The occupied nation is Palestine. The foreign terrorists call themselves “Israeli.”

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