

THE OUTCOME OF THE "REPARO" PROCESS IN VENEZUELA JUNE 04, 2004

The South America project organized a discussion on the outcome of the *reparo* process in Venezuela. The speakers included Peter DeShazo, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Carl Meacham, Majority Senior Staff member on the Senate Relations Committee, and Jennifer Simon, a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The panelists discussed the implications of the *reparo* process both within and beyond Venezuela.

Carl Meacham explained the basic process of the *reparo* (repair) process that occurred May 26-30. The process, aimed at acquiring enough signatures from registered voters to call a plebiscite on the Chavez government in the hopes of removing him from office, involved revalidating 1.2 million signatures collected by the opposition. Meacham provided insight on the process from his recent trip to Venezuela. He touched briefly on the reports of violence and intimidation by relating one of his experiences in a *reparo* center in Venezuela. According to Mr. Meacham, he witnessed government supporters on motorcycles wearing red shirts bearing firearms who threw fireworks at the Cervantes School *Reparo* Center. Meacham also relayed information about technical problems with the *reparo* process such as malfunctioning computers, and arguments about which government identification card would be accepted. Meacham explained that the OAS & Carter Center are involved in monitoring the *reparo* process, and that hopefully widespread violent conflict and social unrest can be avoided.

Jennifer Simon also presented her experiences from her trip to Venezuela. According to Simon, the *reparo* centers were open for three days from 6am to 6pm, but on the last day the centers were left open later until the lines had dispersed. Simon stated that she witnessed good information dissemination in the country, with full-page instruction sheets in the newspapers and ads on television explaining the process. Simon was in Venezuela with the Carter Center, which dispersed 50 employees in teams of two to observe at the centers. Simon stated that a representative from the CNE was present at each *reparo* center, along with an agent from the government, an agent from the opposition, a witness from the government and a witness from the opposition. Simon observed that she found the overall attitude welcoming and felt that hostility was the exception rather than the rule. Simon also described the process within the *reparo* center; there were two notebooks, one for those who wished to include their name on the list and one for those who wished to remove it. After voting, a participant had to sign his or her name and give his or her thumbprint, the pinky finger of the voter was then dipped in indelible ink to prevent them from voting again. Simon also described a few technical problems from questions about the shade of the ink to disputes over whether old identification cards would be valid, and described one instance in which she observed intimidation.

Peter DeShazo spoke about the value of encouraging OAS and Carter Center engagement in Venezuela, and he stated support for OAS Resolution 833. Mr. DeShazo also related a story of an incident that he viewed on T.V. of gunshots being fired outside while the mayor of Caracas addressed the press. Mr. DeShazo emphasized that there is no place for violence or intimidation in the *reparo* process.

Pedro Burelli, who was also in Venezuela last week, highlighted three points he feels are essential to

remember when talking about the Venezuelan process. Burelli stressed was that there is reason to be optimistic, but that there is also reason to be cautious because the Venezuelans are dealing with what he called an “extremely unhinged individual.” He also emphasized that extreme caution will be necessary because the *reparo* process is only one part of the challenge that faces Venezuela, it make take years to repair the institutional breakdowns that have occurred in the previous years.

Miguel Diaz also presented his experiences from a recent trip to Venezuela. Diaz stated that while he was in Venezuela he sensed a real urgency. Diaz related stories of people he met with in Venezuela whose bank accounts had been frozen and who had been blacklisted and were unable to find jobs, as a result of their loyalty to the opposition. He also stated that in one Chavista neighborhood the problems people stated were present in their lives were lack of jobs and insecurity in the country, the people expressed that the government must provide jobs, not give handouts. Diaz expressed a degree of distrust in the CNE, but suggested that they will be able to carry out the tallying effectively due to international pressure.

In the question and answer session, the panel answered questions about violence in Venezuela, the media role in the *reparo* process, U.S. government policy, and the role of international groups in the process. They also discussed international support involving countries other than the United States and discussed the role of the Group of Friends in the *reparo* process.