

## Andean Report by Valerie Rush

### Civil war in Venezuela?

*CAP may discover that turning a deaf ear to his own people can prove dangerous to his political health.*

Venezuela is "on the threshold of civil war," claimed Osvaldo Alvarez Paz, the governor of Zulia state, during a May 3 television interview. "Modern civil war does not mean half the Armed Forces declaring war against the other half," he said. "Modern civil war begins with . . . an outbreak of violence here, another there, and soon the whole country is wrapped up in a wave of violence. . . . Venezuela is not very far from this," stressed the governor.

Alvarez Paz is not alone. Growing fear of a civil war in Venezuela stems from the failure of President Carlos Andrés Pérez's special advisory council to convince him to resign. The council was supposedly set up by "CAP" to lend an ear to the people's demands, but the President's response to his council's pleas has been to insist, "I will finish my term at all cost."

Pérez's political deafness notwithstanding, the past month's developments in Peru have "stirred the pot" among various political and military sectors inside Venezuela. Pérez's outrageous suspension of relations with Peru in response to President Alberto Fujimori's recent actions dramatically contrasts with the expressions of sympathy the Peruvian head of state has received from Pérez's political opponents. In the aftermath of the Feb. 4 coup attempt against Pérez, discontent with his government has grown.

Indeed, the dead calm of Easter Week ended abruptly amid repeated media charges that the Pérez government is training a personal mercenary force of former Salvadoran FMLN

guerrillas and Nicaraguan "Contras," led by "anti-Castro" Cuban veterans of the Bay of Pigs. The charges were initiated by journalist José Vicente Rangel.

What has become evident is that the institutional rupture between the Executive and the Venezuelan Armed Forces has become irreversible. For example, during late April, police strikes occurred in two key states, Mérida and Carabobo. The capital of Mérida is also the site of the Los Andes University, known for its political activism, and it served as a center of support for the police actions April 23. The government ordered the National Guard to repress the Mérida strike, but failed to dissuade the police in Valencia, capital of Carabobo, from launching their own strike movement one week later. In both cases, the government didn't dare to use the Army to repress the strikers, out of fear of triggering something far larger.

Indeed, during the Mérida police strike, rumors began to circulate of a military uprising in Maracay, in the state of Aragua. Gov. Carlos Tablantes admitted April 22 that there "had been something," but that "things were under control." The daily *El Globo* also reported on irregular actions by troops at Fort Guaicaipuro, in the state of Guárico, and by cadets of the Technical School of Aviation and at the Army School.

One of the persons closest to Pérez has given substance to Alvarez Paz's charges. Former director of military intelligence Gen. Herminio Fuenmay-

or (ret.), identified by the opposition press as the head of Pérez's mercenary force, warned April 22 of the existence of a terrorist plot. "We must be ready to handle a political situation where something like the 'Bogotazo' [uprising] that occurred in Colombia after [Luis Carlos] Galán's death may be attempted. A high-level political leader may be chosen for assassination. They are sure this would produce an insurrection in the country, and perhaps even a revolution," said Fuenmayor.

Among the possible targets Fuenmayor mentioned were former President Rafael Caldera, Attorney General Ramón Escovar Salom, and writer Arturo Uslar Pietri, all known opponents of the Pérez government. While Fuenmayor insisted that the attacks would be perpetrated by ultra-leftists linked to the Bolivarian Movement, none of his suggested targets believe it. Uslar Pietri claims that the real problem is that Pérez "has a fatal tendency to surround himself with foreign and some Venezuelan professional police, to create an ill-advised and untrustworthy security apparatus." In such bodies, he stressed, "there is a blurred line between a certain kind of policeman and a criminal."

Pérez's Interior Ministry has denied the presence of foreigners in the ranks of state security agencies. However, it has failed to explain the role played by the Cuban Orlando García, who served as Pérez's security chief until he was quietly dismissed to avoid a major scandal concerning fraud against the Army. Pérez has been linked to García since his brief exile in Cuba in 1948, after which the two went to Costa Rica together. García is tied to a group of "anti-Castro" Cubans from the Bay of Pigs period who have been involved with the Venezuelan political police (DISIP) since Pérez's first presidency.