

# MESOAMERICA

Volume 25, Number 1, January 2006

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## GUATEMALA

### Berger Unpopular Entering Third Year

President Oscar Berger presented his second state of the nation report to Congress on the same day that *Prensa Libre* published a Vox Latina poll revealing that a large majority of respondents disapproved of his administration after its first two years in office.

Invigorated economic growth, a plea to Congress to put aside personal interests, and an expressed conviction that his administration was moving in the right direction were the main points of his speech, which clocked in three times shorter than last year.

Berger said the GDP increased by 3.2% in the past year, that the economic growth was boosted by IMF-awarded international reserves amounting to \$3.7 billion, and that progress had been made in the education sector, exemplified by the drop in repeating first graders from 32% to 25%. “I think that despite some limitations and things not moving as quickly as we would have liked, we are moving in the right direction,” said Berger.

Meanwhile the Vox Latina survey of 1,260 Guatemalans, published by *Prensa Libre* on 14 Dec, reported that Berger faced a 75% disapproval rating going into his annual speech; only 18.5% of respondents said they were satisfied with their current president. Additionally, 86.3% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the government as a whole.

“We do not get giddy over positive poll results, and we don’t grieve over negative poll results,” said Berger before his speech. “They are tools that serve us.” Berger added that he found the results somewhat surprising based on his experiences interacting with the citizenry while traveling the country.

In a year marred by multiple mass-exodus prison breaks and subsequent revelations of deep-seated corruption in the nation’s law enforcement agencies, the negative poll results did not come as a complete surprise. In a 3 Jan interview with *Siglo Veintiuno*, Vice President Eduardo Stein acknowledged some of the administration’s shortcomings. “We were not clearly conscious of the magnitude, gravity and profundity of [the nation’s] insecurity problem,” said Stein. “If we made any mistake in judgment, it was to think that organized crime and illegal structures inside the public apparatus were easy to combat.”

Berger said that upcoming political reform legislation, specifically the creation of a governmental agency created to fight corruption within the political apparatus, could help to alleviate many of the citizens' concerns.

### **Seniors Denied, Military Rides**

Only 15 days after vetoing a law to provide further economic stability to senior citizens because it was "economically unfeasible," the Executive branch announced it will designate an additional \$11.5 million to its \$137.7 million military budget in order to "modernize" its armed forces.

**Military Budget Increase.** Minister of Defense Francisco Bermúdez said that with the additional money "we want to modernize the marine and air forces and improve our ground mobility, as well as our system of communications."

Critics held that the '04 decision to decrease the size of the military to a 15,500-member force should have reduced the military's budget from \$123.9 million to \$107.4 million. Instead, this year's budget will total nearly \$150 million.

Bermúdez said that this will be the first time since downsizing the military that the government has designated resources directly to the military's modernization. He said that all bids will be conducted on Guatecompras, the electronic portal that publishes governmental purchases from private companies on the Internet. Global positioning systems (GPS), radar systems, cellular phones and two UH1H helicopters—together costing \$500,000—head Bermúdez' wish list.

**Law for Senior Citizens Vetoed.** On 1 Dec, President Berger vetoed the pension law for older adults, saying the government lacked the economic resources to sustain the law's \$33 million budget required to pay \$55 a month to some 60,000 needy seniors.

The National Advancement Party (PAN) has vowed to seek the necessary 105 votes to overturn the president's veto. "It will be difficult, but it will not be impossible," said PAN legislator, Manuel Baldizón. Legislators from the nation's other four major political parties also said they would try to reverse the veto.

According to a study conducted by the Executive branch, there are 775,000 seniors in the country, 80% of whom receive no benefits from the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security. Berger did say that his administration is drawing up a plan that would create a \$3.4 million annual fund to support seniors in need.

### **Border Law Opposed by All**

Human rights and religious groups criticized the new US border security law passed by the House of Representatives in Dec, while the vice president said it could force the nation to reevaluate its relationship with the US.

According to Vice President Stein, 1.2 million Guatemalan immigrants currently reside in the US—equal to 10% of the Guatemalan population. The new law would put 1,700 additional agents on the US-Mexico border, deny citizenship to US-born children of illegal immigrants, and more strictly sanction those who employ illegal immigrants, among other things.

“It is a declaration of war against immigrants,” said Maricela García, president of the Guatemalan Immigrant Coalition. “With this law you can be accused of people-trafficking by being with an undocumented person; it does not matter if it is your father, your wife, or your children.”

Stein said the method that the US has undertaken to combat illegal immigration forces him to consider diplomatic relations in other countries more respectful of the Guatemalan citizenry. “It is not just building walls and enacting laws, it is criminalizing the search for better economic opportunities ... There is going to be a need to reconsider [foreign relations] because [the US] is only interested in our wealth and resources, not in the people,” said Stein.

Adam Isacson of the Center for International Politics in Washington, DC, said that initial concerns about the new law were premature as it has not yet reached the Senate floor. “This law was [approved by the House of Representative] because [House members] are more conservative, but there are more moderates in the Senate, and there is more debate. If [the Senate] approves something, it will be much more moderate and it is not going to criminalize undocumented immigrants.”

The second part of the immigration reform currently in the US Congress is a guest worker program, which would grant temporary work visas to many of the illegal immigrants already living in the US. A successful worker program combined with extended Temporary Protection Status, according to some experts, could quell some of the nation’s concerns.

### **The Desperate State of Sololá Schools**

The Office of Human Rights (PDH) reported that 117 schools in the department of Sololá lack minimum educational services and appealed to the Ministry of Education to fulfill its obligation to provide proper educational services to all citizens.

Ovidio Paz Baal, a PDH officer in the Sololá department, said the majority of education centers lack appropriate teaching personnel, sufficient furniture and adequate teaching material. Paz added that many school buildings are in abysmal condition and that classes are held in sub-human conditions.

Furthermore, 95% of the population in Sololá is of Mayan descent. There are three distinct languages spoken among its residents, but classes are taught exclusively in Spanish.

A representative of the Defense of the People, a Guatemalan human rights organization, attributed the department’s problem to the government’s tendency to neglect people outside their contingencies. “Sadly, politicians create laws that favor their political parties and not to benefit the population as a whole,” said the representative.

To boost awareness for the department's educational woes, the superintendent of Sololá participated in a 13 Jan protest in Guatemala City where the nation's teachers gathered in opposition of the recent proposal by Minister of Education, María Carmen Aceña, to privatize education.

—*Rob Fischer*