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## FEATURED Q&A

### What Issues Are Driving Guatemala's Presidential Race?

**Q** Guatemala's first lady, **Sandra Torres de Colom, confirmed March 8 that she will run for president as the ruling National Unity for Hope, or UNE, party candidate ahead of the September elections. She and her husband, President Álvaro Colom filed for divorce three days later in an attempt to circumvent critics who argue Torres is ineligible because of a clause in the constitution barring close relatives of the president from seeking that office. UNE argues the constitution also guarantees the right of all Guatemalans to participate in elections. How will the controversy affect the election? Which issues are driving the race? Why has retired Gen. Otto Pérez Molina been favored in the polls?**

**A** **Mario Polanco, director of Grupo de Apoyo Mútuo in Guatemala City:** "Candidates can register in the election beginning May 2, but the more powerful parties are already in full campaign mode—some for more than three years. Meanwhile, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal has been unable to punish them for campaigning early, weakening the electoral process. The pre-campaign presents something rather unique, not only because of the quality of the candidates, but also because of how they intend to be included on the ballot. Among the pre-candidates is an army general who has been accused of grave human rights violations and at least faces legal proceedings. Also, there is the daughter of another general

who was head of state after a military coup in 1982. In addition, there is a former president who clearly is constitutionally barred from being re-elected. Finally, there is the wife of the current president who, due to a ban on family members of the president running for that office, is divorcing her husband in order to participate. The divorce illustrates this candidate's aspiration for power. Being capable of leaving her husband—with whom she has shared part of her life—in this way shows that she is not entirely trustworthy. Furthermore, this

*Continued on page 3*



### Carter Meets With Fidel Castro, Leaves Cuba Without Contractor

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter met Wednesday with former Cuban President Fidel Castro and ended his visit to Cuba without winning the release of a U.S. contractor who has been jailed in Cuba since late 2009. See story on page 2.

*Photo: Juventud Rebelde.*

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## NEWS BRIEFS

**Authorities Arrest Guatemala's Reputed Top Drug Trafficker**

Authorities in Guatemala have arrested the reputed top drug trafficker in the Central American country, officials said Wednesday, according to the Associated Press. Juan Ortiz López and two alleged accomplices were arrested at a home in the western city of Quetzaltenango in an operation that involved Guatemalan and U.S. agents, said Interior Minister Carlos Menocal. Ortiz López stands charged in Florida with conspiracy to distribute cocaine and faces life in prison if convicted.

**Yale Returns Machu Picchu Artifacts to Peru**

The first shipment of Incan artifacts—366 pieces out of some 4,000—taken from Machu Picchu a century ago were returned to Peru Wednesday by Yale University, the Associated Press reported. The university agreed to return the items in November, ending years of lawsuits and lobbying over the artifacts' repatriation. President Alan García had been personally involved in the effort to have them returned to Peru.

**Banco Macro Lending Portfolio to Grow 40 Percent: CEO**

Argentina's **Banco Macro** expects lending to increase 40 percent this year, the bank's CEO, Jorge Brito, told Reuters Wednesday. While short-term lending has increased in the past year, credit stands at 13 percent of GDP in Argentina. "There are countries in the region with a rate of about 50 percent [of GDP]. There's a long way to go," said Brito, adding that he expects more foreign banks to come to Argentina and that Banco Macro may expand into neighboring countries.

## Political News

**Carter Meets With Jailed Contractor, But Leaves Cuba Without Him**

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter on Wednesday ended a three-day visit to Cuba, which included meetings with Fidel and Raúl Castro, dissidents, religious leaders and a U.S. contractor who has been imprisoned in Cuba since December 2009, the Associated Press reported. Despite the hopes of U.S. officials and the family of the contractor, 61-year-old Alan Gross, Carter's plane left Cuba without Gross onboard. The former president said that from the beginning of the trip, he knew he would be unable to secure Gross'

“Perhaps in the future an executive order might be issued to grant him a pardon, a release, on humanitarian grounds.”

— Jimmy Carter

release. "The Cuban officials made it very clear to me before I left my home that the freedom of Alan Gross would not be granted," said Carter, 86. He also played down the possibility of exchanging five Cuban agents imprisoned in the United States for Gross. "I did not come here with the idea of arranging any kind of swap," said Carter. "I think the two cases ... are completely separate." Carter met with Gross Wednesday in an undisclosed location and said the contractor had told him he has lost 88 pounds during his imprisonment. Nevertheless, Gross "still seems to be in good spirits, professing his innocence," said Carter. Gross was sentenced earlier this month to 15 years in prison after being convicted of illegally distributing communications equipment on the island. Gross' attorney is planning to appeal the conviction and if that effort is unsuccessful, "perhaps in the future an executive order might be issued to grant him a pardon, a release, on humanitarian grounds," said Carter. Gross' elderly

mother and 26-year-old daughter are both battling cancer. In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner expressed regret that Cuba did not free Gross during Carter's visit. "We are disappointed that he did not come back with Mr. Gross," said Toner. "We believe [Gross] should have been released long ago." Before leaving Cuba on Wednesday, Carter met for an hour with Fidel Castro, a day after sitting down with his brother Raúl. "We welcomed each other as old friends," Carter said of his visit with the former Cuban president. The elder Castro, 84, "seems to be in good health," he added. Raúl Castro said his meeting with Carter, which lasted six hours, was "good" and said he wanted progress on the common problems between the United States and Cuba. "We are ready," Raúl Castro told reporters, saying that any talks with U.S. officials must be meetings between equals. Carter also met early Wednesday with dissidents including members of the Ladies in White opposition group as well as 10 dissidents recently released from prison and blogger Yoani Sánchez.

**Argentina Assures Israel That Probe of 1990s Bombings Will Continue**

Argentina's foreign minister has offered assurances that Buenos Aires remains committed to investigating two bombings directed at Jews in the South American country in the 1990s, an Israeli official said Wednesday, the Associated Press reported. This week, Israel's government asked Argentina's government to address a report in Argentine newspaper *Perfil*, which said Argentine officials had proposed halting the investigation in order to improve trade relations with Iran. The Middle Eastern country has been long suspected of orchestrating the bombings of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people in 1992, and of the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association, which killed 85 people and wounded 200 in 1994. Iran's government denies any involvement. On Wednesday, Argentine Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman expressed "his deep commitment to the investigation," said Nathan Sharansky, head of the Jewish Agency, which handles

Israeli relations with Jews outside of Israel, the AP reported. Argentina's government has not publicly responded to report in *Perfil*. After meeting with



Timerman and Sharansky (L-R) Wednesday in Buenos Aires

*Photo: Argentine Government.*

Timerman in Buenos Aires, Sharansky said plans are still on for Timerman to visit Israel in April. Israel's government had considered delaying the trip until Buenos Aires responded to the newspaper report. *Perfil* reported that it had obtained a diplomatic memo from Iran discussing an offer from Argentina to drop the investigation in order to secure better trade ties with Iran. The newspaper did not say how it obtained the memo.

## Company News

### Petrobras' Argentine Unit May Sell Stake in Edesur

The Argentine unit of Brazilian state oil company **Petrobras** may sell its 27 percent stake in power distributor **Empresa Distribuidora Sur**, known as Edesur, Bloomberg News reported Wednesday. Petrobras, which is seeking to focus on exploration for oil and gas, wants "to polish its portfolio" in Argentina, the president of **Petrobras Energía**, Carlos Da Silva, told the news service in an interview. Last year, Petrobras sold a fertilizer plant and has also said it may sell gas stations and an oil refinery in order to sharpen its focus on exploration and production of oil and gas. Meantime, energy companies in Argentina, such as Edesur, must grapple with government price caps that bite into profits as inflation accelerates. "We have a strategy of consolidation

of the energy chain where some assets are not part of the strategy and other assets aren't as profitable as we would like," Da Silva told Bloomberg News in Punta del Este, Uruguay, where he was attending the Arpel energy conference. Petrobras also wants to develop gas projects in Patagonia, said Da Silva.

### Aeromexico Plans Initial Public Offering Before Easter: CEO

Mexico's largest airline, **Aeromexico**, is likely to have an initial public offering before Easter, which falls this year on April 24, the airline's chief executive officer said Wednesday in an interview, Reuters reported. Aeromexico became the country's only large airline after **Mexicana** stopped flying in August after filing for bankruptcy. Aeromexico CEO Andres Conesa also told reporters that

the IPO will only be available in Mexico and will be part of a \$1.3 billion, two-year plan to capitalize the airline, Conesa added. Aeromexico also is acquiring 10 Embraer jets with the aid of a \$314 mil-

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*Aeromexico became Mexico's only large airline after Mexicana stopped flying in August.*

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lion Brazilian bank loan, he said, adding that Aeromexico also wants to buy an additional 10 Boeing 737 planes and plans to transport 13 million passengers this year, an increase from 11.6 million last year.

### Featured Q&A

*Continued from page 1*

electoral process will be accompanied by generalized violence and the government response remains precarious. It has not been possible to capture even one person responsible for the 14 murders related to the presidential race that have occurred in the last three months."

**A** Donald J. Planty, managing director of The Emergence Group in Washington and former U.S. ambassador to Guatemala: "Sandra Torres de Colom's decision to run for president of Guatemala, despite the constitutional stricture, is a function of Guatemala's weak political and government institutions. Unfortunately, the controversy surrounding this cynical scheme will cloud the real issues that need to be debated in the upcoming election. Guatemalan government and political institutions need reform and strengthening across the board. In the first instance, Guatemala needs stronger political parties that can respond to the country's urgent problems by presenting candidates for office who can offer practical

solutions. A stronger party system would also help ward off personal machinations to remain in power such as those currently perpetrated by the Colom family. What Guatemala really needs in this election are candidates who, if elected,

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“The controversy surrounding this cynical scheme will cloud the real issues that need to be debated in the upcoming election.”

— Donald J. Planty

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are able to implement programs that will address effectively the country's myriad challenges: how to improve security, especially by curtailing the extensive activities of the narco-cartels (thorough justice sector reform is needed, especially a comprehensive re-training of the Guatemalan national police), how to generate more investment and economic

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**Featured Q&A***Continued from page 3*

growth and how to integrate Guatemala's marginalized indigenous population into the larger society. Gen. Otto Pérez is favored probably because he is seen as someone who can address these issues head-on and is not part of the traditional dysfunctional political system. As a former participant in the negotiation of the 1996 peace accords and someone who promises to deal with the critical security situation in the country, Pérez has more credibility than Sandra Torres de Colom."

**A James M. Meyer, partner at Harper Meyer in Miami:** "Most political observers would agree that leaders who are elected in a democracy, especially in fledgling democracies, have an implied mandate and responsibility to govern democratically as well. Recent and not so recent history has shown that such a responsibility includes the need to exhibit self-restraint from manipulating the democratic institutions which they lead for the express purpose of perpetuating their power and influence, whether it be directly or indirectly. Rather than discussing the presidential candidacy of Sandra Torres de Colom, most Guatemalans would probably prefer to be debating whether a single, brief term in office is enough time for any

Guatemalan president to confront the enormous challenges that he or she will face during their tenure. Instead, because of the aggressive positions being taken by the first lady, the ruling party and the current government, the country could be facing a constitutional crisis, which is the last thing that this embattled country needs. With organized crime in the region looking for any opportunity to expand its sphere of influence, weakened democratic institutions will appear as even easier targets than they have proven in the past. Given these circumstances, while prior elections in Guatemala have precipitated a notable and unacceptable level of violence, this election cycle promises to be dramatically worse. It would not be overstating the case to say that there is genuine and palpable fear in anticipation of this election cycle. Perhaps that is why security is first and foremost of the minds of most Guatemalans and, ironically, why the 'strong hand' of Otto Pérez Molina and the Partido Patriota are enjoying such a lead in the polls."

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*The Advisor welcomes reactions to the Q&A above. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gene.kuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gene.kuleta@thedialogue.org) with comments.*

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