

Thousands of People Take Part in Landmark Chilean Social Forum

By ANCHI (Chilean News Agency) | December 3, 2004

Chile is sending out a powerful signal: A broad-based anti-neoliberal social movement is active that vindicates the need for balanced economics, institutional democracy, and a just and united country.

The idea that “another world is possible and so is another Chile” gained ground in the Chilean Social Forum meetings, where over 200 organizations from civil society met in the Chilean capital Nov. 19-21.

On Nov. 19, 60,000 Chilean women and men marched through the streets of central Santiago to show their opposition to U.S. President George W. Bush’s presence in their country, shouting: “Look out Chileans, a terrorist is visiting us.” Demonstrators protested the neoliberal policies promoted by organizations such as the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) that brought together political and business leaders from 21 countries in Santiago on the same days as the Chilean Social Forum. The massive demonstrations also expressed the commitment and vision of a social movement that aspires to peace, justice, and equality; and its dedication to creating another model for development, democratic institutions, and a plan of integration and cooperation for Latin America and the world.

More than 200 indigenous, student, union, academic, environmentalist, political, journalistic, and cultural organizations took part. It was a bright, sunny day of joy, dancing, slogans, and the hope of peace and justice.

Chilean Social Forum spokesperson Martin Pascual declared in a press conference that the demonstration “was the largest turnout of citizens in the past 14 years. The people took to the streets, they marched against Bush, against APEC, in a peaceful demonstration. People came from many regions and from dozens of organizations, there was diversity and popular creativity, and the vitality of the grassroots organizations was obvious.”

For Sara Larraín, another forum spokesperson, the march was “probably the largest march since the beginning of the transition in Chile.” She noted that the march and forum demonstrated popular opposition to policies “that reinforce the hegemonic nature of neoliberal globalization.” Academic spokesperson Marcel Claude said that the march “told the political class of this country, the

dominant media, and the political parties that we are here and that we want another country, another Chile.”

During a cultural event in Bustamente Park after the long march, groups of youths confronted police in the surrounding area. Minutes later, the police fired water cannons and gas canisters at demonstrators. During a brief but tense period, several people were slightly injured and many were affected by gas. Confrontations on the streets of the Providence neighborhood lasted for an hour and a half.

On Nov. 20 and 21, 190 workshops and conferences took place on the campuses of Company of Mary College and the Carlos Casanueva Institute of The University College of Christian Humanism. Some 8,000 people, the majority of them young people, actively participated from at least 8 regions all over Chile.

As forum spokesperson Alvaro Ramis remarked, it was “the time for proposals, reflection, debate, and for thinking about the Chile that we want.” Prominent academics, journalists, intellectuals, artists, environmentalists, church people, women’s movement activists, indigenous representatives, human rights workers, lawyers, economists, and historians contributed to discussions where the central themes were: Latin American integration and free-trade treaties, environment, sustainability and natural resources, democracy, participation, public services, human rights, alternative proposals to the current development model, globalization, human development, world peace, original peoples and cultural diversity, cultures and identities, and labor, unionism, and the economic model.

For two days, 8,000 people debated and shared their knowledge and explored diverse proposals. One of the forum buildings housed a busy exchange of literature, music, leaflets, posters, T-shirts, videos, handicrafts, and local food, and featured poetry and musical events.

The Social Forum provided a sharp contrast to the APEC meeting. The region’s economic leaders and heads of state met formally in pompous dinners, luxury hotels,



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and grand halls, protected by police and security agents. Meanwhile, Social Forum representatives met in the open air, marched through the streets, expressed themselves openly, and handled their own security needs.

Forum participants concluded that dreams can be attained when the voice of the social movement grows strong enough to create new spaces, alternatives, ideas, and actions.

Even Chilean President Ricardo Lagos declared that over the few days of the meetings two Chiles were revealed—the very exclusive Chile of the “haves,” and the open and inclusive Chile of the “have-nots.”

The Chilean Social Forum marked a high point of the post-dictatorship political and social transition. And it showed that this is a time when Chilean society is asking some very profound and searching questions about the neoliberal model.

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