

# ROCLA UPDATE ON THE AMERICAS

A PUBLICATION OF THE ROCHESTER COMMITTEE ON LATIN AMERICA

## ROCLA

### MISSION STATEMENT

Founded in 1973, the Rochester Committee on Latin America (ROCLA) seeks to build bridges between the Rochester, NY, community and the people of Latin America. Through its monthly presentations, speakers, films, and quarterly newsletters, ROCLA educates local residents about the culture, economics and politics of the countries of Central and South America, Mexico and the Caribbean and the ways globalization, US trade and drug-war policies impact the lives of their people. ROCLA also supports the work of frontline organizations involved in working for justice and democracy in the global south, including the Latin America Solidarity Committee (LASC), Nicanet, Committee in Solidarity with the people of El Salvador (CISPES), Network In Solidarity with the people of Guatemala (NISGUA), Rights Action and the Pastors for Peace Cuba Friendshipship. We also encourage our members and others to advocate for US policies that support human rights and reverse the often oppressive history of US involvement in Latin America. Annually, ROCLA presents its international and local White Dove Awards for outstanding leadership and service in the cause of human rights in Latin America.

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## LAS MADRES: ART AND DEATH IN THE ARIZONA DESERT

By Peggy Rosenthal

"The artist is a beggar because she is empty, waiting to be filled. But the artist is also... someone who is driven to go out to the margins of society in order to learn what the margins can teach those at the center."

When I'd read these words . . . I immediately thought of fiber artist Valarie James. Living in the desert of southern Arizona, James . . . finds objects left behind by Central American migrants who have risked their lives—and often lost them—as they traverse the harsh desert mountains seeking safety and the dignity of work in the United States.

"Since I was a child," James told *Fiber Arts* magazine, "I've had this raw impulse to create art out of natural materials. The only thing that has changed is what I find that has been left behind in the environment."

What she found on one walk with her dog was a filled diaper bag next to a woman's clothing. Picking up these objects, these traces of life that had passed through the spot, she began wondering about the lives—and probable deaths—of this mother and child. Immediately she knew that she had to create art out of the objects left behind from their lives—and the lives of countless others who attempt this desert journey.

She began finding bits of denim jeans, hundreds of them. "The jeans are ripped and shredded and have huge holes that are caused by jumping over cholla and prickly pear and barbed wire. You see the whole journey in this fiber. This humble, broken-down pair of jeans has got a world in it. So the fiber to me is alive."

The fiber is alive even when its former wearer has died in



the desert—usually of dehydration, heat stroke, or hypothermia . . .

Then she got the inspiration for *Las Madres* . . .

Collaborating with three fellow Arizonian artists, she created life-sized sculptures of three indigenous Central

(*Madres* continues page 6)

## URGENT ACTION

### Take action today to demand Human Rights for all in the Dominican Republic!

In Sept. 2013, the Constitutional Tribunal of the Dominican Republic stripped as many as 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent born in the DR, of their Dominican citizenship. The ruling was also retroactive, applicable to the descendants of people who have resided in the DR as far back as 1929.

Thousands have already fled into neighboring Haiti, further exacerbating the strain on resources available for post-quake recovery efforts and mounting a growing challenge as humanitarian

aid groups working at the border scramble to address the needs of those displaced.

The Black Immigration Network invites you to sign a petition to President Obama to urge the Administration to leverage its economic and political power to insist that the DR restores full citizenships to Dominicans of Haitian descent and allows due process for Haitian migrants to become regularized. The petitioners are seeking to obtain 100,000 signatures by August 25, 2015. To sign, go to <http://wh.gov/il2il>. ■

## Connections: U.S. policy, Human Rights Violations, and Migration

### Pre-sentencing Statement by Chuck Kaufman, Alliance for Global Justice, July 20, 2015

On October 11, 2013, Alliance for Global Justice National Co-Coordinator and 2008 White Dove Award Winner Chuck Kaufman took part in a civil disobedience action to draw attention to the human rights abuses committed under Operation Streamline. Operation Streamline is an immigration enforcement and deterrence program begun in 2005, where 70-80 immigrants a day are convicted en masse in Federal Court after they are apprehended crossing the U.S./ Mexico border. Their choice: Plead guilty to the misdemeanor of illegally entering the country and receive up to 180 days in jail, or plead not guilty and face felony charges and a sentence of between two and 20 years in prison, depending on one's criminal record. When convicted in these assembly-line trials, they are precluded from ever entering the U.S. Gross violations of constitutional due process and international laws on the treatment

of migrants occur.

Chuck and 11 others chained themselves to the tires of buses carrying the migrants to the courthouse after others had stopped the buses on the exit road from the interstate. Originally charged with felony interference with a federal prosecution, the judge convicted the twelve defendants of 2 misdemeanors, blocking a highway and creating a public nuisance. On July 20, 2015, she sentenced Chuck and the other defendants to time served. Below are excerpts from Chuck's pre-sentencing statement before the court. [Ed. Note]

I stand before you convicted of an act of civil disobedience . . . Before sentencing I would like to explain why I considered Operation Streamline to be such a shock to the conscience that I purposely took an action to shine the light of world attention on the human rights violations that occur

in that federal courtroom every day of the work week.

. . . .  
For the past 28 years, . . . I have been on the national staff of the Alliance for Global Justice and its predecessor, the Nicaragua Network. My work has focused on support for human rights in Latin America and to change my own government's policies that create the environment in which human rights abuses take place. . . . Forced migration became more than a theoretical issue.

I began leading human rights accompaniment delegations to Honduras soon after the June 2009 military coup. [I]n July 2012, my delegation stood between militarily armed police and the people of Rigos, Honduras. . . . The police were there to illegally evict the farming community so a rich man could plant more African Palm trees. . . . We were there that morning because one week earlier the police had attacked the community, burning their houses, school, two churches, and damaging their well pump. The uniformed police had killed their animals and destroyed their crops. . . . We were there to witness and support their claim. . . . the police, armed with military grade weapons, came out of the tree line and their commander set up two snipers with their rifles pointed at us . . . For 3-1/2 hours, during which the police had their handguns drawn and kept trying to outflank us, we refused to move. Finally the commander got a call from someone and the police gave up and left. I'm proud to say that the community of Rigos remains on its land today. Only three families gave up and left.

For thousands of Honduran families, this is the life that they live. Fleeing violence from police and military trained and funded by the U.S. government, some of them make the dangerous trek to the United States. Some of those are caught and sent through Operation Streamline where they are further abused. To shine the light on this immoral injustice is why I chained myself to a bus almost two years ago.

On Wednesday, I leave to lead a delegation to Nicaragua and Honduras with the purpose of studying the root causes of migration and to compare the two coun-



**Rigos, Bajo Aguán, August 15, 2011—Funeral of a campesino killed on August 14, 2011, in an armed confrontation on the Paso Aguán plantation. Photo credit: Human Rights Watch, Manu Brado, 2011.**

## Connections: U.S. policy, Human Rights Violations, and Migration

try's approaches to security, the rule of law, and poverty alleviation. There are reasons that many Hondurans migrate and very few Nicaraguans do. . . . the injustice of Operation Streamline is anything but a theoretical or ideological issue for me.

I grew up in the Mennonite Church, one of the historic peace churches. My ancestors migrated to the U.S. fleeing violence and persecution in Germany, just as many Central Americans and Mexicans do today

. . . . In September 2013, I felt that I could no longer in good conscience fight for human rights in other countries while standing mute to the violations in my own country — indeed in my own community.

Operation Streamline commits violations of due process every day it is in session. Others will speak of the trauma of families split apart, of the desperation that causes people to take the dangerous trek across the desert, of our neighbors ripped out of our community, sent to private, for-profit prisons, and deported to places where some will be killed. The crimes they are punished for weren't even crimes fifteen years ago; they were civil infractions. I too am offended and was motivated to action by the recent criminalization of migration.

But I want to address the issue of due process that I witnessed in the Operation Streamline court. Candidates for Operation Streamline are charged with a felony and a misdemeanor and offered a plea bargain of up to several months in a private, for-profit prison if they plead guilty to the misdemeanor. At most, they meet with a defense attorney for 10 minutes. They probably haven't slept. They are dehydrated. They are still dressed in the clothes in which they were apprehended. Many don't even speak Spanish, much less English . . . Many of them had no idea what was happening to them. They often weren't asked if they had any grounds for asylum. They didn't understand that with a criminal conviction they would never qualify to return under any likely Comprehensive Immigration Reform that Congress might pass. Their treatment is an abomination and a shock to the conscience. It is also a violation of the best thing this country ever produced, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution — the



**During the demonstration against Operation Streamline, protesters chained themselves to buses transporting migrants from the court to prisons. Photo credit: Jason Michael Aragon, Tucson Weekly**

Bill of Rights. They set out the rights that each human being has within the borders of the United States. If we allow those precious rights to be infringed for some, they soon will be infringed for all of us. . . .

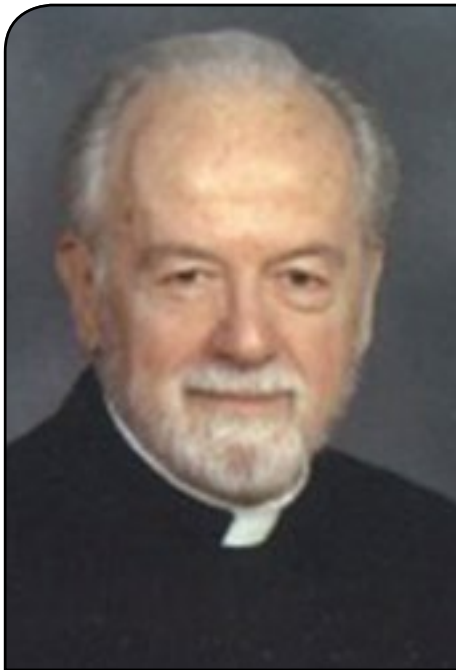
Thank you.

**Chuck Kaufman's full statement is available on ROCLA's website: <http://rocla.us/> and on the website of the Alliance for Global Justice: <https://afgj.org/afgj-co-coordinator-convicted-for-shutting-down-operation-streamline> ■**



**Chuck Kaufman addressing the court at his sentencing, July 20, 2015. Photo credit: KGNU-TV, Tucson, AZ.**

## JOIN US FOR ROCLA'S FALL PROGRAMS!



**Wednesday, September 9, 2015, 7 PM — “El Salvador: The Struggle Against the Impunity of Violators of Human Rights.”** The Reverend William L. Wipfler, Ph.D., D.D., will speak on the history of human rights violations in El Salvador and the continuing struggle to bring the violators to justice. An Episcopal priest, Rev. Wipfler has been involved in the struggle for human rights in Latin America for sixty years and has received numerous awards for his human rights work. The Roman Catholic Church of El Salvador recently honored Rev. Wipfler with a personal invitation to the Beatification ceremony for Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was Rev. Wipfler's personal friend and was assassinated in 1980. The presentation will take place at the Downtown Presbyterian Church, 121 North Fitzhugh Street, Rochester, NY.

Free and open to the public. ■



**Wednesday, October 7, 2015, 7 PM —** ROCLA will have a special showing of the recently-released film **“Resistencia: the Fight for the Aguan Valley.”** This remarkable documentary film tells the story of the struggles of *campesinos* in Honduras to retain their lands and defend their communities after the 2009 coup. They face murder, torture, the destruction of their homes, and eviction—violence perpetrated by the wealthiest man in Honduras, who wants the land to grow African palms for palm oil. We are especially pleased that Director Jesse Freeston will join us to discuss the film! Location to be announced. ■



**Wednesday, November 4, 2015, 7 PM—**ROCLA will host an in-depth discussion of the 1968 Argentine film, **“La Hora de los Hornos,”** (The Hour of the Furnaces), facilitated by David Tamarin, Professor Emeritus at SUNY Geneseo, an expert on Argentina. The 1968 documentary was filmed surreptitiously during the military dictatorship and shown underground to revolutionaries and anarchists fighting it, some of whom were killed during the “dirty war.” **See the film at the Labor Film Festival on October 16, 2015, 6 PM, at the Dryden Theatre** (see page 5 for the announcement), **and then join ROCLA on November 4th for a follow-up discussion.** The discussion will be held at Downtown Presbyterian Church.

Free and open to the public. ■

## NEWS AND UPDATES



### ROCLA DONATES MEDICATIONS FOR 26TH CUBA FRIENDSHIPMENT CARAVAN!

By Dr. Arnold Matlin and Vic Vinkey

This year, many people asked ROCLA if the Cuba Friendshipment was happening. After all, the Obama administration had begun the normalization of U.S. trade and travel policies toward Cuba, and established diplomatic relations as of July 20, 2015. Gail Walker, Director of IFCO/Pastors for Peace, answered with an enthusiastic “Yes!” She added, “Until the U.S. government has totally eradicated the blockade our work continues . . . [and] our buses will continue to travel down the road.” Since ending the embargo requires an act of Congress, the embargo is likely to continue for some time.

Joining with the Western New York Peace Center in Buffalo, where the Caravan had a planned stop, ROCLA decided to contribute as many medicines as possible this year for the Cuban people. As in past years, ROCLA entrusted me with purchasing medicines to send to Cuba on the Friendshipment. Usually, I have to work without guidance, but this year Vic Vinkey was able to get some specific suggestions from IFCO/Pastors for Peace. Among the medications requested were medicines for hypertension and asthma.

What I’ve learned from previous Friendshipments is that it’s best to buy the medicines in bulk. Buying large amounts of two or three medications makes more sense than “a little of this and a little of that.”

This is particularly true because, as you would expect, the price of the medication decreases as the amount ordered increases.

This year I chose hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ) 50mg. HCTZ is a basic anti-hypertensive medication in the U.S., and I assume it’s the same in Cuba. This year ROCLA sent 20,000 HCTZ tablets to the people of Cuba. Assuming that each patient takes one tablet a day, we have donated enough medication for 55 people for one year of treatment.

For asthma medication, we sent albuterol for nebulizer therapy. (This medication is highly prized in Nicaragua, so I assume it will be equally welcome in Cuba.) ROCLA sent 100 boxes of albuterol. Each box contains 25 nebulizer vials, so we sent 2,500 doses. In Nicaragua, and probably in Cuba, this medication is reserved for one- or two-dose therapy in the emergency room. It is wonderful to consider that about one or two thousand children will get relief from their acute asthma attacks thanks to ROCLA.

Because I’m a pediatrician, I always try to send some chewable vitamins with iron. With the remaining \$50 from ROCLA, and an additional donation from the Matlins, we were able to send 50 bottles of 100 tablets each to Cuba. If the tablets are taken once a day, that means we sent enough for 13 Cuban children to be given a year’s supply of multivitamins.

This is a very gratifying part of my work within ROCLA. I always tell the sales representative, “This medicine is going to Latin America, and we have to keep prices really, really low.” So far, that approach has worked. We’ll see if ROCLA can raise even more funds in 2016.

Thanks to Arnie’s quick work in obtaining the medicines suggested for Cuba, Kathy [Goforth] and I [Vic] had plenty of time to label the boxes for shipment and arrange for delivery to the site of the WNY Peace Center’s Friendshipment truck loading celebration in Buffalo on June 29th. We sent our electronic manifest on June 28th with receipt confirmed by IFCO Pastors for Peace’s Anna Maria Cardenas on that date. In Buffalo at the celebration, we enjoyed spending time with Maxine Inera, a long time supporter of Cuba and the Friendshipment party host, discussing issues about Cuba and touring her extensive gardens.

After a long trip, our medicines are now safely in Cuba helping people in need! ■



### NEW WAY TO SIGN UP FOR THE ROCLA EMAIL LIST!

By James Bearden, ROCLA Webmaster

Recently, the ROCLA Steering Committee has been reviewing its email and postal mailing lists and procedures. We have made some changes to the email listserv with the help of listserv administrator Maryann Stopha Reissig to make it more accessible and create the ability for members and interested parties to list themselves. The email list currently consists of 151 people, who receive event

(List continues on page 6)

## NEWS AND UPDATES

(*List continued from page 5*)

notices, newsletters and membership appeals by email.

ROCLA does not inundate you with emails! Instead, being listed on the ROCLA email listserv allows you to more fully enjoy the benefits of your membership. This includes receiving the newsletter in color and immediately, rather than waiting for it to be copied and mailed to you. You will also receive timely information about our programs and events. If you are already on our email list, you don't need to do anything.

For those who are not currently on the email list, we encourage you to sign up for

it following these new instructions:

### VISIT THE ROCLA WEBSITE AT [HTTP://ROCLA.US](http://rocla.us)

In the Menu on the top of the page, click on "Subscribe to ROCLA email." (Alternatively, you can click on the link "1. ROCLA email list," on the right side of your screen.) Both will take the user to the same sign-up form. Fill in your name and email address on the form and submit it. It's user-friendly, and only takes about 30 seconds.

**Note: Subscribing to the email list does not add your address to the postal mail list. ■**

## ROCHESTER LABOR FILM SERIES COMING SOON!

By Jon Garlock, Rochester Labor Council

The 26th annual Rochester Labor Film Series, co-sponsored by the Rochester Labor Council and the Dryden Theatre, will begin on September 4, 2015, and run through November 20, 2015. The



series presents motion pictures celebrating workers around the world.

ROCLA supports the Film Series and has tickets for ROCLA members available from Marilyn Anderson at the Dryden Theater before each film. Tickets will also

be available at the September 9, 2015, and October 7 ROCLA programs. Ten films will be shown during the series, all at the Dryden Theatre at the George Eastman House, Rochester, NY.

Two films of special interest to ROCLA members are "The Hand That Feeds," about the wage struggles of immigrant workers at a deli in NYC, which will be shown at 8 PM on Friday, September 4. The other is "The Hour of the Furnaces (La Hora de Los Hornos)," to be shown on Friday, October 16, beginning at 6 PM. Because of the length of the film, there will be a break for empanadas! Made and shown clandestinely in Argentina in 1968, the film was especially meant for the anarchists and revolutionaries fighting the military dictatorship then in power. It is considered "a treatise on the injustices of colonialism."

**Watch for upcoming announcements about the November 4, 2015, ROCLA program (see "ROCLA Fall Programs" on page 4), which will feature a discussion of the "Hour of the Furnaces," facilitated by an expert on Argentine history, SUNY Geneseo Professor Emeritus David Tamarin.**

Please come and enjoy and learn from the films! ■

(*Madres continued from page 1*)

American women. What's extraordinary about these sculptures is the materials they were composed of: one created out of denim from the desert, pummeled with desert sand; the other two covered in bur-lap, from bags carried by migrants walking north. Discarded objects once belonging to people who'd been discarded by society.

Then nature added a surprising dimension to the art. To hold their fibrous pieces together, the sculptures had been covered with a natural sealant made from resin and beeswax. As the desert sun beat down on them, the sealant began to melt—as if the mothers were weeping. "It was magical," James said to Fiber Arts. "This memorial articulated, in a very real physical way, the feelings of our entire community."

"These sculptures are echoing the reality of the pain and the loss that mothers feel when their children and their husbands are gone, crossing the desert," James told the Tucson Citizen. "It's the transcendent nature of art. This project goes beyond the politics of the issue." . . .

I've walked the southern Arizona desert not far from where James lives. I've met people who leave water in the desert along migrant trails, in hopes of saving a few lives. I got to know Tucson journalist Margaret Regan, whose book *The Death of Josseline* recounts the stories of migrants making this journey . . .

Las Madres eventually decomposed—as we all will. Valarie James knew that the sculptures, created out of natural materials, would soon dissolve back into them, especially in the harsh desert environment. She wanted the sculptures to reflect how our own fragile bodies would respond if left out in this environment through the seasons.

As indeed the bodies of an appalling number of our sisters and brothers from Central America have been left. No one knows how many. Only bodies that happen to be recovered can be counted, and they number in the thousands. Desert heat is not kind to human flesh. A dead body decomposes quickly, leaving bleached-out bones—and shreds of clothes.

*Peggy Rosenthal is director of Poetry Retreats and writes widely on poetry as a spiritual resource. Her books include Praying through Poetry: Hope for Violent Times (Franciscan Media) and The Poets' Jesus (Oxford). Peggy and her*  
(*Madres continues page 7*)

(*Madres* continued from page 6) husband, George Dardess, are ROCLA members and Rochester residents who have spent several winters in Tucson, Arizona. **You can read the entire article at:** <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/goodletters/author/peggyrosenthal/>

Permission to use the photo of Las Madres was granted by the artist, Valarie James. ■

## Family Detention of Women and Children Stopped by Court

In the Fall 2014 Update on the Americas, we extensively covered the horrific conditions in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras that were causing a spike in migration to the United States by women and their children and unaccompanied minors. We also wrote about the U.S. government response, which resulted in the immediate deportation of thousands back to the harm they fled and the detention of many more in so-called family detention centers in Texas and New Mexico. Despite the asylum claims of the vast majority, many were not afforded access to attorneys and proper due process. Here, we reprint a July 27, 2015, press release issued by the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, along with excerpts from some of the faith leader statements included in the press release. [Ed. Note] ■

## Faith Leaders Celebrate Court Decision on Family Detention; Call for Administration to Comply

WASHINGTON - Late on Friday, July 24, 2015, U.S. District Judge Dolly Gee ruled that the Obama Administration's practice of detaining immigrant families violates the 1997 settlement in *Flores v. Meese* and all families, excluding those who pose a flight or national security risk, must be

released as soon as possible.

The *Flores* settlement set guidelines for the detention of unaccompanied migrant children: if they are detained, they should be held in the least restrictive environment possible, cared for by licensed professionals. Judge Gee ruled that the settlement also applies to children detained with their mothers. She has given the federal government until August 3, 2015 to respond, or she will implement measures to enforce her ruling. Over the past two months the federal government and the plaintiffs have failed repeatedly to reach an agreement.

In response to the influx of almost 70,000 Central American families seeking asylum last year, the federal government began to detain mothers and children en masse in three dedicated facilities - Karnes City, Texas; Dilley, Texas; and Berks County, Pennsylvania. Since June 2014, 6,300 mothers and children have been booked into a family detention center. Currently, 1,700 mothers and children are being detained, even after the Department of Homeland Security began their release of some mothers and children who have demonstrated a credible fear of returning to their country. According to the Women's Refugee Commission, 88% of recently detained mothers have passed screenings for credible fear of return to their countries of origin.

The challenge to family detention came from counsel on behalf of several detained mothers. DHS responded with disappointment in the ruling, maintaining the government's need for detention as a means of responding to mass influxes of immigrants at the border, such as the surge last summer.

Advocates, including dozens of faith groups, rejoice in Judge Gee's ruling and plea for the Obama administration and DHS to comply. They will continue to push for the decisive end to this inhumane and immoral practice.

### Excerpts from Statements of Faith Leaders:

"Family detention exacerbates the trauma families have already experienced, profits prison companies, isolates legitimate asylum seekers from services, and constrains hope that liberty might ever be found. Judge Gee's order instructs the administration to develop a plan to release the mothers

"THE SISTERS OF MERCY CELEBRATE JUDGE DOLLY GEE'S RULING ON FAMILY DETENTION. WE ASK THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO END THE SHAMEFUL POLICY OF INCARCERATING REFUGEE WOMEN AND CHILDREN."

and children "without unnecessary delay." . . . It is not illegal to seek asylum, and mothers and children should not be treated like prisoners . . . "

**The Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada**

"Church World Service applauds Judge Gee's ruling. The criminalization and detention of families seeking asylum and refuge is a moral stain on our nation. Our country has a moral and legal obligation to respect asylum and protection laws. CWS will continue to advocate for the immediate release of families held in detention centers and the reduction in the overall use of detention."

**The Rev. John L. McCullough, President and CEO of Church World Service**

"Our Jewish values and history call us to protect life and to love the stranger. As American Jews, we must work to ensure that anyone who reaches our border is afforded safety and dealt with fairly. This ruling confirms that the U.S. government is not living up to its obligation of ensuring the proper care of children in its custody. The Jewish community has long supported policies that promote human rights and ensure the protection of children."

**Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, Vice President for Community Engagement at HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), the global Jewish nonprofit that protects refugees**

**To urge the Obama Administration not to appeal Judge Gee's decision and to end family detention, go to <http://capwiz.com/pcusa/issues/alert/?alertid=67355626> to sign the petition. (It is on a Presbyterian Website but all can sign!) ■**

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## **HELP KEEP ROCLA'S WEBSITE CURRENT!**

ROCLA has a lively website (see: <http://rocla.us/>) where webmaster Jim Bearden posts current information about Latin America on an ongoing basis, as well as announcements of programs and other news. If you have information, articles or action opportunities about Latin America that you believe may be of interest to ROCLA members, please email the link or content to Jim at: [jeb.bearden@gmail.com](mailto:jeb.bearden@gmail.com). ■