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Venezuela's Amazonas state **Lawless rivers and forests**

The difficulty of being an opposition governor

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THE gaudily painted perimeter wall of the army barracks in Puerto Ayacucho, the capital of Amazonas state, leaves no doubt as to the political sympathies of its commanding general. “The 52nd Jungle Infantry Brigade is *Chavista* Too”, it proclaims, in defiance of constitutional strictures about military neutrality. The slogan—a reference to Venezuela’s late president Hugo Chávez and the regime he founded—is a daily slap in the face for the state governor, Liborio Guarulla.

Chávez’s successor as president, Nicolás Maduro, has waged a campaign to throttle the administration of Mr Guarulla, one of just three opposition governors across the country’s 23 states. It is a foretaste of what the opposition can expect if it triumphs in

mayoral elections on December 8th—which have turned into an unofficial plebiscite on Mr Maduro’s shambolic and increasingly authoritarian rule.

He claims that Amazonas is in a “critical” condition because of the negligence of the state authorities. He has set up a parallel administration under Nicia Maldonado, a former minister for indigenous affairs, who was trounced by Mr Guarulla in an election last December. Ms Maldonado, the governor’s people say, has a budget bigger than his. Venezuelan states depend almost entirely on the centre for their revenues; there is little to stop the president employing creative accounting and delays in disbursements to make the governor look bad.

The result is that Mr Guarulla says he owes around 200m bolívares (over \$30m at the official exchange rate) in salaries. The state police, the airport, a newly built hospital and the main hotel in Puerto Ayacucho have all been taken out of his hands. In July the 52nd Jungle Infantry showed up to snatch a state agency for children, but a crowd of the governor’s supporters forced a retreat. Four local radio stations, including one run by the state government, have been closed down and had their equipment seized.

Amazonas has many problems, but those most cited by local people are mainly the responsibility of central government. Frequent and lengthy power-cuts, unpunished violent crime, a precarious air link with Caracas and an almost non-existent internet service are among them. Outside Puerto Ayacucho, in the jungle that extends almost unbroken to the Brazilian border, an even darker mood prevails in the scattered Amerindian villages. Illegal mining is destroying the forest and polluting the water. The armed forces, whose duties include environmental protection, are accused by the Amerindians of complicity with the illegal miners and with the guerrillas of Colombia’s FARC, who have shifted their camps to Venezuela to evade military pressure at home.

“The guerrillas ordered the villagers not to go out at night,” says Uriel Blanco of OPIJKA, an organisation that defends the rights of the Jivi tribe. In the early hours, community leaders claim, boats laden with fuel and food head upriver to guerrilla camps. Neither these boats nor the miners seem to have problems with checkpoints run by Mr Maduro’s National Guard. But the guard seizes game from Amerindian hunters, as well as any fuel or processed food for which they lack receipts. The state’s Catholic bishop, José Angel Divasson, says that for the FARC, Amazonas is more than just a refuge: “It’s clear that they are trafficking drugs. Why else would they need 500-metre airstrips? The light planes go over [to Colombia] with guns and they come back with drugs.”

The cocaine business, along with illegal mining of gold and coltan, a mineral used in the manufacture of electronic devices, creates an almost insatiable demand for petrol and diesel, which are heavily subsidised by the Venezuelan government. The official price of a 200-gallon drum of petrol is just 14 bolívares. But once it leaves the river-port of Samariapo, it sells for at least 2,000 bolívares on the black market. By the time it gets to San Carlos de Río Negro, near the Brazilian border, it can cost five times that. Permits to buy fuel are controlled by the army.

“We get diesel for our generator once a month,” says a villager. “That gives us six hours of electricity.” Shops on the Colombian side of the river are well-stocked with subsidised Venezuelan food, while the people for whom it was intended go hungry. Amerindian groups have demanded a meeting with the president, but there has been no reply.