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## STUDY

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Translation: Martin Bruggendieck

### CHE GUEVARA'S ARMY AND ITS CHILEAN FOLLOWERS

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This article describes the course of the guerrilla focus set up by Che Guevara in 1967 in the mountain ranges of Bolivia.

The report deals with the branching of the “Ejército de Liberación Nacional” (ELN), and its connections with Cuba, Chile and other Latin American countries.

The author renders special attention to the Chilean followers of the ELN, and to the ideological conceptions that took them to join the guerrilla, as well as on their underground lives and their participation in the subsequent combats of Teoponte.

“Sit down and write—I told him: ‘Today, February 14, 1968, we the survivors of the guerrilla of Che in Bolivia, approaching the village of Sabaya and grasping its conditions—the school lack of desks, without notebooks and without pencils— donate U.S. \$ 400.- for the acquisition of teaching material. Handed over: Pombo, Urbano, Benigno; amount received by the Mayor and the smuggler, “Mr. so and so”. We had him sign the original and two copies. One we handed out to the mayor in face of the villagers. Then we made it to get out of the place”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Daríel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), *Memorias de un Soldado Cubano: Vida y Muerte de la Revolución* (1977), p. 169.

In the midst of the Altiplano, at an altitude of more than 4.000 m., almost rounded up by the Bolivian army, desperately aiming at crossing the border and reach into Chile, where other members of the Ejército Nacional de Liberación (ELN) expected them, three cuban combatants, the last remainder of Che Guevara's guerrilla-army defeated at Ñancahuazú, took time for this gesture to the Bolivian people and gave away part of the money they carried in order the authorities of Sabaya would provide the local school with learning material. That was a try to conquer the Bolivian people, a way of remaining faithful to the legate of their dead commander. The dwellers of Sabaya stood incredulous and frightened. The summoning to revolution dropped on bear land and we believe that this was exactly the ELN's fate: an intent to bring the revolution to a people not willing to be part of such an undertaking.

In the following pages we will present the historical evolution of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), since its creation in 1967 up to its vanishing in 1982. We will pay special attention to the runaway from Bolivia of the cuban combatants siding Che Guevara and the later guerrilla focus of Teoponte and to the Chilean structure of the ELN.

In the first section we shall see how events led Che Guevara to the mountain ranges of Bolivia, where he established the ELN and fought his last battle; in the second, we will pay attention to the actions set about by the Chilean members of the ELN in their efforts to rescue the fighters surviving Ñancahuazú; the third is designed to analyse the step during which the "elenos" launched their *return to the mountains*, an effort culminating in the establishment of the guerrilla focus of Teoponte; and finally we research the escape of the survivors to Chile, their activities in that country and, briefly, the vanishing of the ELN.

This research grounds on the testimonies of the main actors that managed to survive, completed with a compilation of printed material. In this article, the war names of the companions of the Che –fairly well known- are not highlighted in any way (for example, Pombo); the war names of other actors are given in quotations ('Cristián'), and the cover names created by the author in order to protect some identities are given in quotations and runnings ('*Raul*'). Finally, the tape recordings with the real names of the interviewed, that appear in the bibliographical quotations with fancy names and simple quotation marks and runnings- remain with this author.

## 1. CHE: FROM THE CONGO TO ÑANCAHUAZÚ

*To love you we learned  
Up on those historical heights,  
Where the sun of thy courage  
Set siege to death itself.*

*With us remains that clear,  
Intimate transparency  
Of thy well-loved presence,  
Commander Che Guevara.*

*Thy glorious and so strong a hand,  
Takes blames from history  
At once, when all of Santa Clara  
Awakens to see you riding in.*

*Here...*

*You're coming burning breeze  
With springtime suns,  
To plant the banner  
With the light of thy smile.*

*Here...*

*Your love for revolution  
Leads us to new undertaking,  
Waiting where it is, the strenght  
of thy arm of liberating.*

*Here...*

*We will march on,  
Following thy path,  
And tuned with Fidel's voice we'll salute:  
¡Hasta siempre, Comandante!<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> This song, called "Hasta Siempre", was composed by the cuban musician Carlos Puebla after Fidel Castro went public with the "Carta de Despedida al Pueblo de Cuba", written by Che Guevara.

The year 1965 Commander Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, leading a group of cuban guerrillas, most of them coloured men<sup>3</sup>, headed for Tanzania, on the frontier of the Belgish Congo —now Republic of Zaire— to support the congolese rebels led by Alphonse Massemba-Debat, Gaston Soumaliot and Lauren Kabila.

By the end of that year, the expedition, punished by starvation, fever and the thrust of the mercenaries of the Fifth Commando Batallion of South Africa, headed by Mike Hoare, was up to collapse. With great difficulty the cubans managed to resist on the shores of lake Tanganyika and had no chance to continue fighting. The government of Cuba, as soon as it came to know about the situation, rushed an officer called Barcelay, better known as Lawton —his *nome de guerre*— to the field, with the task of rescuing Che Guevara and his troupe in whatever way. Fidel Castro's order was peremptory: they had to give up and leave the area<sup>4</sup>. This was the way the guevarist dream of rising black Africa in arms had come to fail.

For Che the defeat was squashing; the public reading Fidel performed on October 3, 1965 of his farewell letter to the people of Cuba, written when he left for the Congo, added to it. This letter contained his resignation to all public positions, the Central Committee of the Party and his cuban citizenship. Fidel decided to go public with it in order to solve a difficult situation of rumors and speculations that the press was creating about Che's vanishing from the island<sup>5</sup>.

This way, on November 21, 1965, staring at the muddy waters of lake Tanganyika overside the barge that had rescued him, emaciated and

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<sup>3</sup> Rafael del Pino, by then commander of the cuban air force, was ordered to choose the "blackest troupe" at the base of Holguín (Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero. Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara*, 1997, p. 365).

<sup>4</sup> When the barge designed to rescue Che arrived "(he) scolded us saying that first the women and the children had to be taken out and only then he himself". But Lawton answered no, that no, because he had precise orders from Fidel himself to get out the Che. A discussion built up between the two men, but Lawton didn't take notice of the Che's words. "If I need to tie you up, he said, I'll do, but you will leave first (...)". Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), *Memorias de un Soldado Cubano: Vida y Muerte de la Revolución*, 1997, pp. 101-102.

<sup>5</sup> After some time the Che had left secretly for the Congo, speculations about his fate began to arise. The cuban government had given hints that the commander was in the province of Oriente, cutting sugar cane. See Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero. Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara* (1997), p. 367. Castañeda sets the date on which Fidel went public with the Che's letter October 5, 1965 (p. 372). A clear example of the press' speculations about Guevaras disappearing was the article "¿Dónde está el Che Guevara?" (Where is Che Guevara?) by the mexican writer Sol Arguedas. An answering letter to this article can be seen in Ernesto Che Guevara and Orlando Borrego —a close cooperador of Che at the Ministry of Industry—, "Where is Che Guevara" (2001), p. 28-32. Benigno says that Che was upset because of Castro's going public with his epistle. See Daniel Alarcón R. (Benigno), *Memorias de un Soldado: Vida y Muerte de la Revolución* (1977), p. 117.

sick, he had a chance of recapitulating the recent events, grasping that he would not be able to reside in Cuba after the public lecture of his letter by Fidel. The circle of his life was closing, the only possibility would now be to throw himself into one more guerrilla adventure, perhaps in Argentina, his fatherland, or near to its borders.

After spending some months in Czechoslovakia recovering from his afflictions, he returned secretly to Cuba. There he met Fidel and Raúl Castro with the aim of completing the details of his eventual armed inroad<sup>6</sup>. They agreed to set up a guerrilla training school for the latin american southern cone in the mountain ranges of Bolivia. The aim was to train combatants and then order them back to their countries of origin to initiate guerrilla struggle. This was up to materialize the Che's concept of fighting imperialism. For him it deemed necessary to create "one, two, three more Vietnams". The idea was shared by the cuban leaders, who were after deflecting the U.S. American attention to more remote regions of Latin America. The plan consisted in taking revolution into Bolivia and from there extend armed struggle into Argentina, Brasil, Perú and Uruguay; not Chile, a country they considered a strategic reserve due to its long coast and because, as the cuban analysts thought, the conditions required for implementing an armed struggle were not given there.

Once the mission was agreed on, Raúl Castro, Commander René Tomasevich, the group headed by Manuel Piñeiro<sup>7</sup> and Che chose the combatants<sup>8</sup>. Some of the men selected were: José María Martínez Tamayo (Ricardo), Daríel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), Antonio Sánchez Díaz (Pinares), Juan Vitalio Acuña (Joaquín), Harry Villegas Tamayo (Pombo), the military doctor Octavio de la Concepción de la Pedraja (Moro), captain Eliseo Reyes (San Luis or Rolando) and Leonardo Tamayo Núñez (Urbano), who had been a Che's escort. All of them were outstanding soldiers of the cuban armed forces, some were veterans of Sierra Maestra, others had fought during the last stages of the war against Batista, many had worked together with Che in the Ministry of Industries and some had fought in the Congo. This group joined a detachment of young Bolivian communists headed by the brothers Peredo and comrade Loyola Guzmán (General Secretary of the Communist Youth of Bolivia) as well as some peruvians headed by Juan Pablo Chang (Chino)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero. Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara* (1977), there is an interesting narrative about the return of Che to Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> That was the *team* of the America Department, an institution put in charge of Latin American affairs by the Cuban government.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero. Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara* (1977), p. 412.

<sup>9</sup> A complete and detailed list of the guerrilla's members and a short biography may be seen in Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo. Un hombre de la Guerrilla del Che* (1997).

By the end of December 1966, the combatants met at the farm the support netting established in Bolivia had acquired in the region of Ñancahuazú, in the southeast of Bolivia. The guerrilla struggle in Bolivia was about to begin: it would come to be the last adventure of Ernesto Guevara de la Serna.

On February 1, 1967, the militia launched its operations with a reconnaissance march of 25 days along the rough land at both sides of the Río Grande. The objectives of this expedition were: 1) “(...)to adapt to the conditions of a guerrilla life such as hunger, thirst, want of sleep, exhausting treks, all factors as important as combat itself if not more, in order to cast the future revolutionary soldier. 2) Set up of a peasant supporting basis (...). 3) To recognize and extend eventual operating areas”<sup>10</sup>.

This excursion was a downfall: two of the men drowned<sup>11</sup> and when they reached back to the base camp, called “Tres Cabezas” at the farm in Ñancahuazú, they found out that the military had already discovered it. Adding to this failure was the desertion of some combatants which had started cooperation with the Bolivian army, providing it with valuable information about the composition and objectives of the guerrilla<sup>12</sup>. Of course, these events would be fatefull for the further development of the guerrilla, because they forced the group to initiate military operations when it was not yet duly fit for them.

On March 23, 1967, Guevara’s men fought their first battle. They led a military patrol in ambush, killing seven soldiers and capturing fourteen. Two days later, the night of March 25, gathering around a fire in the moon’s dim light, they decided to call themselves *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). On the following day, Che wrote the first communiqué of the organization. The initial part of the document rendered some details of the combat and then made public what would be, as he saw it, the rule of his army: “Revolutionary Truth”, that is, let the people always know the truth. The release concluded with a clear challenge set forth to the Bolivian authorities: “hostilities have been started”<sup>13</sup>. So, in the midst of the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> The men drowned were the Bolivian Benjamín Coronado Córdova (Benjamín) and Lorgio Vaca Marchetti (‘Carlos’).

See Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo. Un hombre de la Guerrilla del Che*, (1997). pp. 76, 80 and 243.

<sup>12</sup> It were the Bolivians Pastor Barrera and Vicente Rocabado Terrazas. Once captured, they began to collaborate with the Bolivian army. They were court marshalled and absolved. The author’s interview with Daríel (Benigno) Alarcón Ramírez (January 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo. A Man of the Che’s Guerrilla* (1997 ), pp. 85-85-87).

Bolivian mountain ranges and still feeling the heat of combat and when their guns had not yet cooled down, it was that the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the militia of Commander Ernesto Guevara, came into being.

Only three of the members of the guerrilla had some medical knowledge: the Cuban Octavio de la Concepción de la Pedraja (Moro), the Peruvian Restituto José Cabrera and the Bolivian Freddy Maymura Hurtado (Ernesto)<sup>14</sup>. But three doctors were not enough and more people with medical knowledge were necessary. For that reason they asked the supporting structure in Chile to send some doctors to Ñancahuazú. Doctor Oscar Soto, who later came to be President Allende's bedside doctor, says that the Chilean journalist Elmo Catalán, the Che's contact person in Chile, requested him to join Che in Bolivia, together with some other three or four people. They agreed, but the speed of the events prevented them from travelling<sup>15</sup>. Besides, they had no guerrilla training.

Yet, as time passed by, the guerrilla's problems in Bolivia kept deepening. In what was a mistaken tactical decision, Che split his army into two groups, thereby exceedingly weakening their military power. The two detachments never again managed to meet, due to the thrust of the Bolivian army, the topography and the adverse climatic conditions<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, the urban support net, in charge of Loyola Guzmán, was dismantled and all contact with the cities got lost. On the other hand, the guerrilla was not able to establish contact with Cuba, because even though they carried a high power radio that would have allowed them to get encrypted information from the Caribbean and watch to the international broadcasting of Radio Havana, they could not answer to the messages because they lacked the lever or key to execute the Morse encoding. They left it in Cuba in order to avoid arising suspicion in case of eventual searching by the police. Nor Mario Monje (Secretary General of the Bolivian Communist Party, PCB), nor Tania<sup>17</sup>, —in charge of contacting with the cities— carried it to the mountains. Besides, the expected enrolling of Bolivian peasants did not come to be; in the course of seven months of struggle, only one peasant and a dog joined them. The dog left them on September 26,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Final Appendix.

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Soto, interview by the author (Segovia, Spain, October 1999).

<sup>16</sup> The groups were 'Vanguardia', led by Che, and 'Retaguardia', commanded by Juan Vitalio Acuña (Joaquín), that was exterminated at the ford of Puerto Mauricio on August 31, 1967.

<sup>17</sup> She was Tamara Haydée Bunke Bider, a german-argentine translator, who began to cooperate with Che many years before his expedition to Bolivia. Later on she joined the group 'Vanguardia'. She was killed together with all the group at the ambush at Puerto Mauricio, August 31, 1967.

because “the shootout scared him as hell”<sup>18</sup>. Finally, the soldiers of the Second Battalion of Rangers of the Eighth Division of the Bolivian Army, advised by U.S. military men<sup>19</sup>, began to speed up operations and to encircle the guerrillas. So, lacking all contacts and support, each time the group suffered a casualty it would be impossible to replace the combatant and this situation gradually trimmed down their operative ability.

Walking in circles, starving, wounded, with no medicines and fresh water, badly dressed and lack of arms, the expected result came about during the first days of October 1967. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the vanguard of 17 men headed by Che ran into an ambush the rangers had set up in the ravine of the Yuro. The Commander, as well as Simón Cuba Sarabia (Willy) and Juan Pablo Chang (Chino) were wounded and captured in battle. On the next day and following instructions from the government, the rangers proceeded with the execution of Che Guevara in the school of a small village called La Higuera. Then they put away his remains. Some days later and not too far away, another small group of militants were riddled with bullets by army men. Summarizing, from the 55 men and one woman —Tamara Haydée (Tania)— that made up the Che’s guerrilla, only 14 survived<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. THE *ELN* IN CHILE: RESCUING THE SURVIVERS OF ÑANCAHUAZÚ

The night of October 9, 1967 six combatants kept hiding next to the school of La Higuera; they patiently awaited the Bolivian military to relax their guard in order to get out of the place. Headed by Inti Peredo, they finally broke through the siege and managed to escape in order to regroup and launch once more the struggle interrupted by the death of their commander, although under better conditions.

Armed with a rifle each and a few radiofonic battery receivers that allowed them to listen to the news, foremostly those regarding themselves,

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<sup>18</sup> Daríel Alarcón (Benigno), *Memorias de un Soldado Cubano: Vida y Muerte de la Revolución* (1997), pp. 158-159. Benigno’s textual words in an interview by the author (January 2001).

<sup>19</sup> The advisors were about 20 green beret commandos headed by Pappy Shelton and some CIA agents (Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero. Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara*, 1997, p. 474).

<sup>20</sup> Daríel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), *Memorias de un Soldado Cubano: Vida y Muerte de la Revolución* (1997), p. 157.

By raffles they decided that it would be lieutenant Mario Terán who was to take charge of executing Che. Once dead, Che’s hands were surgically cut off and his remains buried in the air strip of the airport at Valle Grande. Of all of the guerrilla’s survivors, five were deserters. See Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo. Un hombre de la guerrilla del Che* (1997), pp. 241-264.



they tried to get out through Brasil, but failed, because the Bolivian army discovered them next to the frontier; then they tried a breakthrough at the Argentine border but did not succeed. Peru was an extremely difficult option, so the last they had at hand was a try at the Chilean frontier<sup>21</sup>.

Félix Huerta, one of the best men of the section of the ELN that had been established in Chile by then, was approached personally by the chief of that section of the ELN, Elmo Catalán, in order to leave for Bolivia and try to help the survivors of the Che's guerrilla to cross the "cordillera"<sup>22</sup> "at a spot where the so called 'Taco de Goma' and 'Ferretería Bandera'<sup>23</sup>—war names of the two Chilean ELN members— would be expecting them. Once in Bolivia, Félix established contact with the guerrillas and arranged a breakthrough near Chapiquita, a gorge at the height of the Chilean port of Iquique<sup>24</sup>.

Four months later and after surmounting various obstacles, three Cuban guerrillas (Pobo, Benigno, Urbano) and a guide supported by the underground machinery of the ELN headed for the Chilean border about a thousand kilometers away from where the Bolivian army had spotted them for the last time. By then, the Chilean ELN had already dispatched a numerous group of militants to the Altiplano<sup>25</sup>. Harry Villegas (Pombo) gives a detailed account: "On the third day returned 'Petiso' and ('Víctor')<sup>26</sup>, a delegate from the ELN. They had established contact with their Chilean counterpart and agreed that we would be expected at the frontier from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>. In case this contact would come to fail, they would expect us on the 21<sup>st</sup> at the village of Camiña, on Chilean territory, about 150 Km away from the frontier. A truck belonging to a militant would be driving around expecting us and would pick us up at the Lauca river, if we would make it through"<sup>27</sup>. For some reason we still ignore, they opted for the second alternative and crossed the frontier to arrive at Camiña on February 20, 1968. In spite of all the efforts displayed, the Chilean militants of the ELN did not spot them.

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Félix Huerta, interview by the author (Santiago, September 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Mónica González, "Félix Huerta: Sobreviviente de la Guerrilla del Che en Bolivia", *Cosas* (Chilean weekly) (Nr. 534, March 14, 1997), p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Patricio Quiroga, *Compañeros. El GAP: La Escolta de Allende* (2001), p. 26. Benigno states that the Chileans sent more than a hundred men to the frontier (Daniel Alarcón Ramírez, interview by the author, Paris, January 2001).

<sup>26</sup> We believe this was Félix Huerta's war name.

<sup>27</sup> Harry Villegas (Pombo), *Pombo: Un Hombre de la Guerrilla del Che* (1997), p. 226.

During one of the many military operations to find the Cuban guerrillas escaping from Bolivia, the Chilean 'Fernando' went out to explore and as the temperature was many degrees below zero, one of his feet got frozen. The medical team of the ELN had to amputate two of his toes in order to avoid gangrene<sup>28</sup>. There are two versions regarding who carried out that operation: the first one was delivered by Benigno, who says it was carried out by Dr. Taty Allende, a daughter of Senator Salvador Allende. The other version states the operation was carried out by Dr. Arturo Jirón in the hospital of the township of Chiu Chiu<sup>29</sup>.

The Cuban guerrillas, facing imminent danger of being captured, decided to hide the weapons they carried. Without any possibilities of defending themselves, they were finally captured by members of the Chilean police (Carabineros) watching the area<sup>30</sup>.

We are lack of an explanation regarding what was it that hindered the Chilean ELN to find its Cuban comrades. Perhaps hazard played an important role, because in the town they finally arrived at and as 'El Indio' testifies, there was a member of the organization awaiting them; as he said, "it was a matter of hours, perhaps only minutes"<sup>31</sup>.

The captured men of the guerrilla were taken to Santiago by plane, only stopping by at the city of Antofagasta. Once in the Chilean capital city, they were subject to a detailed medical examination; so, in the case of Benigno, for example, he was X-rayed and then offered to be operated in order to extract a bullet lodged in his neck; they also were subject to various cross-examinations by the Chilean political police. The Chilean leftist parties organized their people for rallies and demos in support of the men. Salvador Allende, by then a Senator, showed himself extremely worried and visited them continuously<sup>32</sup>.

As the pressure exerted by the press for interviewing the guerrillas kept increasing, the government and the guerrillas themselves were forced to organize a press conference. Shortly before it was realized, Allende

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Patricio Quiroga, *Compañeros. El GAP: La Escolta de Allende* (2001), pp. 26-27. This version is confirmed by 'El Indio'. Multiple conversations with the author (Santiago, 2000-2002).

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

Benigno underlines that they were not captured but followed broadcasted instructions of President Frei Montalva, putting themselves into the hands of the Chilean authorities.

<sup>31</sup> 'El Indio' was a miner and one of the first Chilean exiles. After the September 11, 1973, he exiled himself in Cuba. Multiple conversations with the author (Santiago, 2000-2002).

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

arrived at the place where the Cubans were kept and showed them some photos, urging them to memorize the faces seen, because those would be the friendly journalists, and to only answer to questions stated by these. One of the photos was of Elmo Catalán. During the conference a journalist tried to ask something important and Elmo immediately shot up with a question about the social background of Benigno, an irrelevant topic in that context. The period of one hour established in advance for the conference was filled up with that sort of questions and the guerrillas did say nothing important or binding<sup>33</sup>.

Finally, after assessing different alternatives, the Chilean government allowed a departure of the guerrillas Benigno, Pombo and Urbano to Cuba via Tahiti. Salvador Allende escorted them during part of that periplous<sup>34</sup>.

As we will see further, the Chilean section of the ELN had by then achieved a brief although intense development, whose background follows next.

Months before Che's leave of Cuba for Bolivia, probably during 1966, he entrusted Tania (the Argentine-German translator Tamara Haydée Bunke Bides) to establish connections with Latin American leftist movements<sup>35</sup>. The first contact with Chilean leftist organizations probably was established through Jaime Barrios<sup>36</sup>, member of the Socialist Party, once he returned from Havana, where he had been working as a technician for some time. One of the Chileans contacted on that opportunity was the socialist journalist Elmo Catalán Avilés, who worked for the newspaper *Las Noticias de Última Hora* and the weekly *Punto Final*; he also was in charge of public relations for the copper mining unions<sup>37</sup>. During the strike of the workers of the coppermine El Salvador that same year, Elmo played an active part as one of the advisers for the miners. That conflict came to an end with the dislodgement of the union's headquarters, the imprisonment of many miners and the death of some workers.

After the miners' strike, Catalán went to Cuba in order to get paramilitary training<sup>38</sup> and once back in Chile he established the Chilean

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Benigno asserts they did not know the results of those contacts, because Che didn't inform them about such details. At the same time, he asserts that Fidel Castro told them that the Chilean were to be responsible for the group. Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> On September 11, 1973, Jaime Barrios was in the presidential palace La Moneda with Allende. From there he was taken to the Tacna regiment, where his tracks got lost. He is still on the listings of the "detenidos desaparecidos" (arrested and disappeared). See Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (Rettig Commission), "Informe" (1991).

<sup>37</sup> 'El Indio', multiple conversatios with the author (Santiago, 2000-2002).

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

section of the ELN. One of the members of that group was Eduardo, attorney and member of the Socialist Party, who became one of the most important leaders of the ELN, converting himself after 1973 into one of the leaders of the Socialist Party that had gone underground (he died in Santiago in the 1990s). Another lawyer that was part of the group was Arnoldo Camú Veloso, designed chief of the ELN in Chile after Elmo's death. Later he came to be member of the Political Commission of the Socialist Party and also the most important man responsible for the military apparatus of that organization (his *nome de guerre* was 'Agustín'). Other names to be considered are those of 'Fernando' (a miner), and of a young nurse called Celsa, as well as of a group of union leaders from the copper mines fond of armed struggle, like Jaime Sotelo and 'El Indio'. As Patricio Quiroga says: "The first were Elmo Catalán, Tirso Montiel, Arnoldo Camú, Walterio Fierro, later joined by Félix Vargas, Paulina Weber, Celsa (...), Félix Huerta, Eduardo Carvallo (...). Also Beatriz 'Taty' Allende, a daughter of Salvador Allende, came to be part of it"<sup>39</sup>."

There is no established idea about how Taty came to be related to the elenos, but perhaps it was through Jaime Barrios or Elmo, or perhaps she was recruited by Inti Peredo during one of her trips to Cuba. The mission of the ELN in Chile was to establish a wide logistic network capable of supporting Che Guevara during his eventual guerrilla adventure in the mountain ranges of Bolivia<sup>40</sup>.

### 3. COMMANDER 'CHATO' GETS READY FOR WAR

At the beginning of 1968, the very chief of the ELN, Inti Peredo, who had been the political commissary of Che Guevara's guerrilla, met Elmo Catalán somewhere in Bolivia after escaping from the siege set up by the Bolivian army and authorities. During those meetings they decided to maintain and strengthen the ELN's structure in Chile in order to have it further supporting the logistics of the new guerrilla in Bolivia. Elmo, on the other hand, demanded his right of "taking it to the mountains", that is to start fighting in the rural areas of Bolivia. We believe this request was more than daring, because as Benigno, who had trained him in Cuba said, he was a great military and political cadre, although lack of the physical conditions needed for a rural guerrilla<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Patricio Quiroga, *Compañeros. El GAP: La escolta de Allende* (2001), p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> As Benigno said, Fidel Castro told the guerrillas training with Che that that was a task for de Chileans (Dariel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author, Paris, January 1, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> Dariel Alarcón Ramírez (Benigno), interview by the author (Paris, January 2001).

Inti went to Cuba once more in order to organize the new phase of the guerrilla. As soon as he was back in Bolivia, army men captured him: he was executed on September 9, 1969. The Commander in Chief of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional died without even an opportunity to set forth to the mountains.

Inti's death was a hard stroke for the ELN, because he was the best of its militants. The Che's evaluations of his combatant shows it: "27/7/67—three months. He accomplishes in a very efficient way his functions as a commissary dedicated specially to the Bolivians and sets an example at all sort of tasks. 27/5/67—six months—: Very good. He keeps in high spirits eventhough he has a weak constitution; he sets an example and approved the double exam of sacrifice and combat in the most satisfactory way. 27/8/67—9 months—: Very good. He keeps his high spirit and is a great warrior"<sup>42</sup>.

When Inti died, the conditions for an underground activity of the organization were precarious; they only had few security houses and a wanting infrastructure; repression was always latent. Under such circumstances, Rodolfo Saldaña took over as the topmost chief; to say it with the jargon of the elenos, he was a member of the high staff and the commander. The new chief proposed a strategic drawback into Chile, where they counted on a better infrastructure and better conditions for working. The initiative was supported by some of the members. Inti's smaller brother, Osvaldo, whose war name was 'Chato', and who had studied medicine in the Soviet Union<sup>43</sup> opposed; Elmo sided him. Their thesis was simple: the elenos should stay in Bolivia and go back to the mountains to fight. The matter was settled during a meeting in October 1969. In the course of that gathering, 14 comrades—including Elmo, Omar, Zegada and Rodolfo Zaldaña—designed 'Chato' as chief of the ELN. During that meeting, Elmo announced that a group of Chilean militants, living in Chile, would soon be arriving to Bolivia and join the struggle<sup>44</sup>.

October 1969, two years after the death of the first chief and only a month after the execution of the second, the ELN had a new commander, that came to be its last, too: 'Chato' Peredo. On his mother's side, the new commander descended from a family which pioneered the exploitation of

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<sup>42</sup> *El Siglo* (newspaper), special edition, July 26, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> When Inti and Coco Peredo were in the guerilla with the Che, 'Chato' did not take part in it, although he knew about their activities. His brothers had instructed him to study and as the war would be long, he later could take part in it. Testimony of Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

rubber and chestnuts in the Beni area. On the side of his father's family, his grandfather had been a liberal which was elected Senator of Bolivia in the XIX century representing the Department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra; 'Chato's father was a Senator too, but for the Beni area<sup>45</sup>.

After Ñancahuazú, the foremost objective of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) was to get back to the mountains, that is, to once more launch the struggle in the mountain ranges of Bolivia in order to continue the expedition of Che Guevara. They felt committed to carry out the assignment widely made known by Inti after Che's death: "Back to the mountains"<sup>46</sup>.

In the midst of 1969, short before Inti's death, Elmo Catalán arrived at Bolivia and settled down at a security house in the city of Cochabamba. Elmo got know under his warname, 'Ricardo'. He immediately took charge of his position as a commissary of the ELN, that is to say, as its ideologist. His political thought (the guerrilla's ideology) he made public in a letter dated April 19, 1970 written to his family from Bolivia.<sup>47</sup> In this epistle he described

his process of becoming a revolutionary. He wrote: "I suffered poverty and exploitation in bone and flesh –as you keep on suffering of at present. Working as a miner in the nitrate fields, as a copper miner or a construction worker just after leaving school exerted a deep impact on me and made me sensitive. I came to know and to love the working class, which undoubtedly is the better part of all people". Then he refers himself to the professional class: "I got my professional title (what an irony, the only professional in my family!). And you placed your hopes –quit mistakenly– on me, because the professional has, within this system, a wide economic horizon, specially if he manages to get corrupt as soon as possible. But this you did not understand and it is difficult you will". Then he follows: "I strongly believe that a professional only gets to be one on the platform of exploitation, suffering and sacrifice of many other human beings. The professional is a parasite that deals with the poverty of his fellow men or an ally to the rich exploiters. For all he might speak about revolution, liberation or love for the people, he will not cease to be just one more slave aware of the system, an accomplice of oppression until he takes up the one

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<sup>45</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002)

<sup>46</sup> Testimony of Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Elmo Catalán, "A mi madre, hijos, hermanos, tíos y demás familiares", Bolivia, April 19, 1970) (To my Mother, Sons, Brothers, Uncles and other Relatives, Bolivia, April 19, 1970), printed in the weekly *Punto Final* Nr. 107, Tuesday 23 of June, 1970, pp. 2-4.

honest way there is for making our countries independent: the route of armed struggle up to its last consequences". This clear spite for the role professionals play in a society and specifically that of revolutionary intellectuals, lead him to the conclusion that he had to change his life radically; he underlines "due to this I definitely broke with the past". Further on in this letter he would recognize his true identity: he is a warrior. "I'm a soldier of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional, the army founded by Che and a handful of brave men at Ñancahuazú". His proudness of belonging to that organization he expressed writing: "Many dream of such big an honor and never achieve it. Therefore I consider myself a privileged man".

The objective of his struggle grew evident when he proclaimed: "We are not in search of glory. We only struggle to destroy this corrupt and oppressive society and for establishing a new world, without exploiters and exploited. A world lack of injustice and humiliation, in which all will have the same opportunities, (a world) where man as Che said, 'will not be the wolf of man' ".

In the following paragraphs of the letter he addressed the topic of revolutionary internationalism and the reasons of why Bolivia was the country to be chosen for starting the struggle: "You may ask yourselves why I do not fight in Chile for those ideals. It is simple: revolution is only one. Not all countries can be liberated at the same time. All efforts shall be concentrated on the country showing the best conditions. Bolivia is in the midst of the southern cone, it's a country where exploitation and famine have been felt the most and its people have a tradition of fighting, a fact that turns it into one of the continent's bravest. (...). And due to the seeds the Che came to sow, it is the natural and unquestionable historical scenario". For Elmo, the Chilean revolution also depended on the Bolivian. As he saw it "(...) there will be no Chilean revolution if the Bolivian does not succeed (...). It would be painful if the Chilean people would not understand this reality and remain static, waiting for their freedom to come 'for free'". Referring to his fatherland he wrote: "You might think I am wrong fighting at a place that –as I once was told in Chile- is not my fatherland. I deeply disagree with those that make such an outlining. Fatherland has a real and deep meaning to me. Of course it is the geographical territory where one was born. But fatherland in its full dimension is the oppressed soil where a revolutionary fights for the freedom of its people or dies defending his ideals. Fatherland is copper, is tin, is iron (...). Fatherland is the miner suffering from silicosis. Fatherland is the exploited peasant. (...) Fatherland is the New Society and the New Man we will create".

Speaking about his fellow guerrillas, his armed companions, he did not conceal his feelings: “My companions are the best of the best and we are brothers in spirit that share the same ideals up to death or victory”. About himself he said: “I make great efforts to fulfill myself as a human being and come to be a free man. Freedom blossoms when we brake definitely with the past, when we destroy unrelentlessly its myths, when we scorn its immoral rules promoted to the category of supreme ruling codes of humanity in order to preserve an ignominious slavery”. The letter continues: “The free man arises when his action has pledged him up to a point that he is transformed into the definitive foe of the old society; when there is no more outlook for him than to destroy that corrupt creature born out of the guts of the colonizers or die in the attempt of establishing the foundations of the new order. And then, even dead, the free man will live”.

He concluded: “I have summarized our principles. I hope you will understand them. My dearest hope is that one day some of my brothers or sons will get to be soldiers of Che’s army. (...) I fully believe in our victory. I think I will survive and then, during the brief time we will be here before continuing *our adventure to establish freedom* in other countries, I will try to give them all of the affection I didn’t know how to show. But if a bullet puts an end to my life in Bolivia —that’s our professional risk—, you should know that I tried to fulfil our principles, that are those of the Che, up to the very last moment in an honest way. I say good-bye using my war name, because the real one is buried in the past. I kiss you all. We will be back to the mountains! Death or victory! ‘Ricardo’”.<sup>48</sup>

‘Ricardo’ assumed as chief of the area of Cochabamba. Due to his personality, his older age and experience as well as the ascendant of a teacher he had on the junger, soon he was able to establish relations with many high school students. With them he created guerrilla units in charge of exploring the area of the Chapare, because those times it would possibly come to be the place chosen by the ELN to relaunch their struggle. ‘Ricardo’ also was very successful establishing an urban underground network which performed some operations for the ELN<sup>49</sup>.

‘Ricardo’ began to live with a handsome young architecture student of german origin called Jenny Köller. She was one of the most important student leaders of Bolivia. After some time she got pregnant. ‘Ricardo’ felt very happy as we can read from the fare well letter already cited; he wrote:

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<sup>48</sup> All the paragraphs quoted are from Elmo Catalan’s letter, “To my Mother, Sons, Brothers, Uncles and other Relatives”, Bolivia, April 19, 1970; printed in *Punto Final* (Nr. 107, tuesday June 23, 1970, pp. 2-4. (Highlights are ours).

<sup>49</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).



“There is something more, something great, that binds me deeply to this soil. I love a student member of the ELN and I will have a Bolivian child. I’m happy”<sup>50</sup>.

Two members of the group, a student called Jorge or Aníbal Crespo and his girl friend moved into the house where Elmo, Jenny and Jesus were already living. It seems that the girl felt very much attracted by ‘Ricardo’, her chief, perhaps coming to fall in love with him. When he took notice of that he decided to tell ‘Chato’, whom he trusted much because they were friends. ‘Chato’ suggested to get the other couple out of the house. But Elmo, taking up once more his role as a teacher, decided to talk to Crespo in order to settle the situation, explaining that he had no affair or what so ever interest in the young woman. But the young combatant reacted in a very bad way and resentment against ‘Ricardo’ began to build up. Some day of June 1970, Crespo attacked the house, killed Elmo Catalán and presumably also Jenny Köller in order to do away with any traces. Then he escaped<sup>51</sup>.

The next day Jesús and another militant of the ELN arrived at Elmo’s house to perform political instruction activities and found the bodies. They travelled to La Paz in order to talk with ‘Chato’, but he was away, exploring the area of Teoponte. When he came back, the two militants briefed him in detail about what was going on. They opted for taking the bodies away from the house to avoid involving the people that had rented it, doing away any traces which could lead the police on the clandestine apparatus of the ELN. As some days had already gone by, they had difficulties because the corpses were rigid and they had to pull them out of the house tied up with ropes in order to push them into a motorcar<sup>52</sup>. They dropped the bodies under a bridge nearby the lagoon of Alalay for the Bolivian authorities to find them<sup>53</sup>.

The funeral of ‘Ricardo’ and his distinguished lover, who also was one of the most important leaders of the Bolivian students, arose a wave of student rallies with street battles, soon joined by workers and militants from social organizations that blamed the American CIA and the Bolivian government of (General) Ovando of being the authors of the two

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<sup>50</sup> Elmo Catalán “A mi madre, hijos, hermanos, tíos y demás familiares”, Bolivia, April 19, 1970, (letter), *Punto Final*, (weekly) Nr. 107, tuesday June 23, 1970, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002). The same version, although with less details, was given by Félix Huerta; see Mónica González, “Félix Huerta: Sobreviviente de la guerrilla del Che en Bolivia”, 1997, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Jaime Faivovich, “¡Homenaje a un revolucionario!” (1970), p. 4.

killings<sup>54</sup>. But the truth was another, as the communiqué released by the leaders of the ELN in June 1970 showed. In this public statement the ELN regretted the events and expressed its conviction that there was no participation of the CIA nor of the Bolivian government as the people had believed. Sorrowful it laid down that the militants were murdered by a member of the organization due to private quarrels<sup>55</sup>.

But the leader of the ELN had to face the opposition of important militants in order to be able to go public, amongst them 'El Indio', the second man of the rear guard in Bolivia; for those men, the politically revolutionary would have been to hide the truth and blame the CIA and the Bolivian government. What they were after was to capitalize the great unrest caused by the events in favour of the ELN<sup>56</sup>. Finally, 'Chato's' stance prevailed and truth, however painful for the organization it was, was revealed<sup>57</sup>. Those members that disagreed with the positions assumed by the ELN's chiefs left Bolivia and returned to their countries of origin. The contingent that retired was headed by 'El Indio', one of the most important Chilean elenos and by Félix Vargas ('Luisito')<sup>58</sup>. Vargas later joined the GAP<sup>59</sup>, fought on September 11, 1973 defending Allende's private residence at Tomás Moro Street, from where he vanished wounded. Then he went underground and later was arrested by governmental agents and taken to the Regiment of Tejas Verdes; there he was seen for the last time<sup>60</sup>. 'El Indio's' stance was he didn't know with whose help 'Chato' had written down the final statement that admitted the events as they were, but at present he seems to believe 'Chato' may have done it all by himself.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, issue Nr. 107 of *Punto Final*, Tuesday June 23, 1970.

<sup>55</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002). Another version, attributing Elmo's death to the CIA, is subscribed by Benigno as he states the killer was a CIA agent and that it was revealed by the former Minister of the Interior of Bolivia, general Arguedas, during his tour to Havana. We don't think this version is exact enough.

Jorge or Aníbal Crespo and his girl friend fled the country and went to England and the elenos lost sight of them. There are versions, although not very reliable, which say that some years ago Crespo paid a brief visit to Bolivia.

<sup>56</sup> 'El Indio', multiple conversations with the author (Santiago, 2000-2002).

<sup>57</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002). Regarding the same topic, Félix Huerta says: "Their was a very serious discussion about saying the truth or blaming the Bolivian army; the option was for truth in so a tragic situation" (Mónica González, "Félix Huerta: Sobreviente de la Guerrilla del Che en Bolivia", 1977, p. 54).

<sup>58</sup> 'El Indio', multiple conversations with the author (Santiago, 2000 – 2002).

<sup>59</sup> The Group of Personal Friends (GAP) was the security apparatus set up to protect Salvador Allende. See Cristián Pérez, "Salvador Allende, Apuntes sobre el Dispositivo de Seguridad: the GAP" (2000), pp. 31-82.

<sup>60</sup> Bernardo Vargas, 'Luisito's' brother, interview by the author (Santiago, July 2002).

To make the truth about ‘Ricardo’s’ and Jenny’s death public meant to put an end to the rallies and social mobilization in Bolivia. Nevertheless, the tremendous honesty shown by the organization brought about many young people wanting to join the ELN. As ‘Chato’ said, there were so many of them that they had to select carefully those that were to head for the mountains<sup>61</sup>.

#### 4. SHOOTING IN THE SIERRA

The area of Teoponte is located about 200 kilometers north from La Paz. It is a region with amazonic features, its wilderness is made out of thick foliaged trees that may reach up to a height of 35 meters.

The most common species are bamboo, fern and giant palm trees. Its wildlife is rich in species apt for human consumption. There also are dangerous animals like rattlesnakes and coral snakes and tree climbing vipers. Teoponte used to be an area of miner’s cooperative settlements, whose members had some notion of setting up unions. Besides, it was an area that could allow them to push into the Alto Beni, the optimum place to start a long term guerrilla warfare. Teoponte was a well known place for the ELN because as its members had no longer tight bonds with Cuba, they were forced to establish military training in that area<sup>62</sup>. It seems that after the death of ‘Ricardo’ in June 1970, the contact between Cuba and the ELN came to an end or at least was only sporadic; likewise it seems that the military training of the ELN combatants in Cuba came to an end.

Once everything was ready and they managed to set up the chosen contingent, they threw themselves into fighting. It was July 1970. They fulfilled the forecast of ‘Inti’: “We will be back to the mountains”. Fifty seven combatants of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) left for the forests of Teoponte. The group was mainly constituted by peasants, backed by some university students.

The ELN forces marched at the orders of Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo and a coloured man called ‘Omar’, both members of the staff. The detachment was also integrated by some Chilean militiamen as, for example, Julio de la Cruz (‘Cristián’), Tirso Montiel (‘Pablito’), Guillermo Véliz (‘Gastón’), Raúl Zamora (‘Dago’), Calixto Pacheco (‘Rogelio’),

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<sup>61</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author, (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, May 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

Hilario Ampuero ('Poporopo') and Carlos Brain Pizarro ('Perruchín')<sup>63</sup>. José Miguel Véliz González —Guillermo's brother— was also there; 'Perruchín' had been an officer candidate or even an officer of the Carabineros de Chile, the Chilean military like Police; other versions say he was a member of the Chilean Armed Forces as a cadet of the army's officer school<sup>64</sup>. On the other hand, Tirso Montiel ('Pablo' or 'Pablito') had been a police lieutenant, with appointments at the city of Concepción and other places; later on he retired, perhaps because of harrasment by his commanders due to his fondness of the left. In a letter to his family, dated La Paz, June 17, 1970, a month before walking into the forests of Teoponte, he clarifys the reasons of his struggle: "(...) we, the 'ELENOS' are a big family that is part of the big latin american family. Some day we will achieve our goals in order to set up only one fatherland. The great Latin American Fatherland, the dream of Bolívar, Che and my great sfriend and companion 'Ricardo' (...)". The missive closed with the war slogan of the ELN: "Victoria o muerte. Let's head back for the mountains!"<sup>65</sup>.

Two years and six months after the Che Guevaras' death, his army, now made up by other men, was again in the mountains with the hand on the trigger and ready to shoot as once had been his historical commander. Nevertheless, not too much time had to go by before most of the militians met the same fate as Che did.

The goals of the guerrilla were multiple, although the need of breaking up the "military-peasant" covenant<sup>66</sup> seemed the most important. That was a strategic need for the ELN, because in practice the peasantry acted as a contention wall for the miners supporting revolution. This had been demonstrated in 1967, when the miners organizations decided to grant one day of their monthly salary to support Che's guerrilla. The workers of mines like Siglo XX, Hanuni and Catavi went to strike, being supported by

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<sup>63</sup> Patricio Quiroga, *Compañeros. El GAP: Allende's Escort* (2001), p. 37. Regarding the number of the Chilean combatants that went to the mountains there is some disagreement; for example, Fabricio Gallardo insists they were seven and that their commander was Tirso Montiel ('Pablo'). See Francisco Gallardo, "Los Siete Chilenos que Combatieron en el Ejército del Che" (1977) pp. 12-13. We, on our side and following 'Chatos' testimony, believe they were eight.

<sup>64</sup> See Fabricio Gallardo, "Los Siete Chilenos que Combatieron en el Ejército del Che" (1977), pp. 12-13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> The pact suscribed by the Army of Bolivia and the peasant unions, pledged the armed forces to maintain the reforms conquered by the workers, as agrary reform, basic schooling, the right to establish unions. On the other hand, the peasants pledged themselves to support and defend the military institution, commit to military orders against subversive maneuvers of the left (Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero: Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara* (1997), p. 429.

the students movement: then the miners were massacred the day of Saint John, bringing about the extinction of the movement<sup>67</sup>.

The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) took the initiative by rounding up a village and capturing two german citizens from the South American Placers, later exchanged for 10 political prisoners<sup>68</sup>. Soon after, the guerrilla suffered their first serious drawback. Eight of its members, all students, asked for a leave; it was granted and they left the detachment, soon being caught by the military forces of Bolivia, without the leaders of the ELN even coming to know about it. Combats followed pretty soon. The first skirmish with the Bolivian troupes was succesfull: the revolutionaries killed nine army soldiers. The ELN published a war dispatch to the Bolivian people. The communiqué was sent with a peasant indian courier to broadcasting station Caranavi. This is the only message that the militiamen managed to broadcast during four months. Very soon all the broadcasting stations were taken and controlled by the armed forces and no journalist was allowed into the area of the warfare.

The Bolivian military reacted by delivering a war communiqué saying they killed 8 guerrillas who, as later was known, were the student guerrillas on leave<sup>69</sup>.

On the other hand, in 1970 the Bolivian army was not the same that had clashed with Che's guerrillas in 1967. As soon as they knew about the new guerrilla focus, the military applied their counterrevolutionary strategy, setting up three sieges (one right on the guerrillas and two further away) in order to avoid an escape of the militians from the area. Various regiments of rangers took part in this warfare, all of them experts in anti-guerrilla tactics; these troops wore the adequate clothing, had airborne support and a high concentration of fire power. One of the most important changes on the army's side was that the *rangers* were trained to penetrate the mountain ranges in order to detect the guerrillas; some years earlier they had only been able to patrol along trails in the forest; this new tactic forced the rebels to display themselves in the forest with great difficulties and mostly at night, avoiding the trails. Besides that, the army took possession of all the *taperas* (huts in villages and small towns). On the other hand, the guerrilla suffered serious defects. For example, the radio they carried and which was

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<sup>67</sup> Jorge Castañeda, *Compañero: Vida y Muerte del Che Guevara* (1977), pp. 455-456.

<sup>68</sup> Fabricio Gallardo, "Los Siete Chilenos que Combatieron en el Ejército del Che" (1997), pp. 12-13.

<sup>69</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

in charge of 'Guatón' Véliz (a Chilean) was of good quality and high potential, but as it needed a driving motor, its weight was unbearable; no less than three men had to carry it. Soon they decided to hide it, and just how it happened to Che, they were consequently lack of all internal and external communication<sup>70</sup>.

During the four month the struggle lasted there were nine battles. Eventhough the guerrillas managed to arrange for causing a number of losses to the army, as time passed by the confrontations seemed more and more favorable to the soldiers. And here we must mention the serious difficulties of the rebels to provide food for themselves too, because they were impeded to hunt because of their enemy always lurking around. So it came to be that during 45 days strolling through the forests the best dish they could get on a certain opportunity was a snake and two rascals<sup>71</sup>.

With extreme swiftness the military enclosed the ELN's column between the military posts of Caravi in the south, Mapiri and Tipuay in the northwest and Huanay in the north<sup>72</sup>. With such a scenario the expected final result would not take long to come, as it did not in Che's times. On September 1, there was a very hard battle. After this combat, the situation become unsustainable due to the military siege, hunger and the undesired and fateful separation of the group. The vanguard, headed by 'Alejo', with 18 combatants –including the Chilean 'Poporopo'- took itself apart from the main group because of a misinformation. They would never meet again. Their fate was uncertain. It seems as if 'Alejo' tried to break through the siege dividing his group into small units of two combatants; they were all captured and assassinated. The center, at the order of 'Chato', now had only 14 militiamen left<sup>73</sup>.

The state of those men was calamitous. For 20 days they hadn't swallowed any food. 'Chato' gathered his combatants and asked for volunteers to explore for food, but nobody answered, because all of them were too weak. He choose Mario and they left to find some capture to alleviate their hunger. 'Omar' was put in charge of the group. He handed over to 'Perruchín', the former Carabinero, the knapsack which 'Chato' had left behind with his diary, money and the two cans of sardines that made for the strategic reserve of the guerrilla and which could not be made use of without a specific order. 'Perruchín' and a Bolivian dropped their guns, swallowed the sardines and deserted. They would try to break through the

<sup>71</sup> *La Defensa de Arica* (newspaper), Arica, Friday November 6, 1970.

<sup>72</sup> Fabricio Gallardo, "Los Siete Chilenos que Combatieron en el Ejército del Che" (1997), pp. 12-13.

<sup>73</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

military siege and abandon the war area; unknowingly they followed the same trail taken by 'Chato' and his companion. Soon they ran one into each other. 'Chato' realized they were unarmed and the conclusion came by itself: they had deserted<sup>74</sup>.

The group commanded by 'Omar' decided the deserters had to be executed. With instructions to kill them, 'Coinbra' and 'Cristián' (a Chilean) started the persecution of 'Perruchin' and the Bolivian. In an area of the forests of Teoponte, near Tipuany, 'Chato', Mario, 'Cristián', 'Coimbra', 'Perruchin', and the Bolivian met for a summary judgement. Soon the decision was unanimous: the code "written" for such cases had to be kept. 'Perruchín' and his companion accepted the decision without protesting. They felt grieved but stayed calm<sup>75</sup>. Perhaps they thought death would be the only way to expiate the guilt they were feeling; they wished to remain in peace with their consciousness, so the only thing left for them was to die as men. Without being blindfolded, the two guerrillas faced the shots and so a Bolivian and a Chilean, brothers in spirit, left this world for ever.

The execution of the two combatants is the most tragic event of the war at Teoponte. During many years many versions have been told by the combatants who were in the mountains as well as by their acquaintances. Some say 'Perruchín' was killed for being a Chilean citizen, because 'Chato' and the other Bolivian militants felt uneasy about the presence of the "southerners"<sup>76</sup>. We believe this version is not credible because the commander of those who persecuted the deserters was 'Cristián', a Chilean. All in all, be it true or not, reality or myth, the only real thing is that two militiamen of the guerrilla of Teoponte were executed by their own companions.

Of the 57 men belonging to the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) that made up for the guerrilla focus of Teoponte, only 8 survived: three Chileans (Calixto Pacheco Gonzalez, José Miguel and Guillermo Véliz Gonzalez); and 5 Bolivians (Jorge Gustavo Ruiz Paz, Cancio Plaza Artola, Juan Edison Segada, Mario Suárez Nuñez and Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo. 'Quirito', 'Coimbra' and 'Cristián', that was wounded, were part of the four that starved to death; 'Chato' and Mario, who were the explorers, were arrested in the village of Tipuany while a doctor was administering serum to them in order to save their lives, endangered by extreme weakness.

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<sup>74</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Version given by 'El Indio', multiple conversations with the author (Santiago 2000-2002).

## 5. HEADING FOR BUENOS AIRES AND A STOPBY AT ALLENDE'S CHILE

In spite of the catastrophical scenario, the surviving guerrillas were lucky because the political conditions in Bolivia suffered a radical turnover with the assumption as a head of state of general Juan José Torres. This military man proclaimed publicly his fondness of leftist ideas, but of course he was no militant of a political party. Torres and 'Chato' began to negotiate in order to put an end to the war. They agreed to set up a peacemaking commission and stop the fighting in the Teoponte area. As 'Chato' was under arrest, in theory he no longer was the chief of the ELN; the commander in charge now was 'Omar'. Anyway, 'Chato' released a tape recording suggesting his former disciples to put an end to the skirmishes. 'Omar' and the survivors agreed. Some days later, six bearded, slean, pale and ragged men, almost unable to walk, carrying rifles and surrounded by miners that kept away the military men, walked out of the forest resembling ghosts. Later they were taken to the city of La Paz where they refuged in the Papal Nunciature<sup>77</sup>. After four months, the war of Teoponte had finally come to its end.

On November 5, 1970, the eight guerrillas that made it to survive the fightings, guarded by four policemen, were taken to the airport of El Alto in the Bolivian capital city and at 15:05 boarded an airplane of the Bolivian Air Force taking off for the airport of Chacalluta, in the Chilean city of Arica; there they landed at 16:50, exactly one day after Salvador Allende took over the Presidency of Chile. They were expected by Red Cross officials which had to certify the delivery of the exiled to the Chilean authorities. The government of Chile granted them political assylum<sup>78</sup>.

Once in Arica, they were confined in a police station only to be virtually freed by groups of students which took them to the Azapa motel, some kilometers away from Arica<sup>79</sup>. The students payed for all the expenses the stay of the guerrillas demanded; they also established a commission made up of Eloy Cortines, Guillermo Avendaño, Dr. Juan León and the university's public relationer Peter Woodbridge, in order to attend to all the needs of the former combatants<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>78</sup> *La Defensa de Arica* (newspaper), Thursday November 5, 1970, Arica.

<sup>79</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>80</sup> *La Defensa de Arica* (newspaper), Friday November 6, 1970, Arica.



The eight guerrillas were unable to retain any food; they had to be taken to the hospital for a medical check because of the colitis symptoms that followed from their state of malnutrition. One of them, Calixto Pacheco, had to be hospitalized because of his lung affection and the acute bronchitis he suffered of, although physicians said he would bear a flight to Santiago<sup>81</sup>.

On Saturday 7 of November, the lawyer Arnoldo Camú arrived at Arica in order to find out about the conditions of the former guerrillas and to discuss their transfer to Santiago<sup>82</sup>. Camú, using the war name of 'Agustín' after the death of 'Ricardo' in Bolivia, was the ELN's leader in Chile. As 'Chato' said, he was sent by the incumbent President Allende to talk with them and coordinate their transfer to the Chilean capital. During that conversation, 'Agustín' explained to 'Chato' that the Chilean *elenos* were working for Allende in what they called the Group of the President's Personal Friends —*Grupo de amigos personales* (GAP)—<sup>83</sup>.

The former guerrillas toured the city of Arica on Monday 9, visiting the Morro hill, the beaches and the Azapa Valley. They showed grateful to the university delegates of Arica all the time along. On the next day's afternoon, Tuesday November 10, guarded by a police officer called Osvaldo Yañez and escorted by a group of students, they boarded the LAN plane that took them to the capital of Chile. The militians with a Bolivian citizenship were granted a temporal visa for one year<sup>84</sup>.

In Chile the political situation experienced a radical change with the takeover of Salvador Allende as a President. The new occasion allowed some *elenos* to be appointed at government positions; they were put in charge of administrative tasks in the country, or made responsible for keeping up public order advancing towards socialism following the strategy designed by the president. In other words, in Allende's Chile priorities were different: now the aim was not an upheaval against the state, because an important component of it —the executive— was under control of revolutionary parties. In this view, the ELN had no reasons for developing its policy of confrontation with the Chilean government. But at the same time, the control exerted by the left on the police forces allowed them to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *La Defensa de Arica* (newspaper), November 7, 1970, Arica.

<sup>83</sup> Osvaldo 'Chato' Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002). GAP was the personal body guard of Allende. A complete research on that organization can be found in Cristián Pérez, "Salvador Allende, Apuntes sobre su Dispositivo de Seguridad: El Grupo de Amigos Personales (GAP)" (2000), pp. 31-82.

<sup>84</sup> *La Defensa de Arica* (newspaper), Monday 9 and Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1970, Arica.

widen the logistic activities needed for establishing a new guerrilla focus in Bolivia.

The ELN kept a twofold stance regarding this opportunity: on the one hand and as we have seen, some of its members took up governmental responsibilities and others decided to join the armed apparatus of the Socialist Party and the GAP. This trend was headed by ‘Agustín’. On the other hand, a part of the ELN kept functioning like an underground machinery with an operative structure.

Some members of the second fraction mentioned visited ‘Chato’ and groamed that ‘Agustín’ had decided to put up the *Grupo de amigos personales* (GAP) for Allende. They said they belonged to the ELN of Bolivia, that their orders were to worry about an infrastructure which had been hard to establish and that they could not just put it at the service of Allende. They argued that they were performing an intelligence task and at the same time establishing shops for the manufacture of arms —something they only did later, in Bolivia. Finally, they underlined that Allende would not last for long and that their aim was to head back for Bolivia and fight there. One of those in charge of this fraction was an Argentine known as ‘El Pelado’, who at the same time was an activist of the Chilean Socialist Party<sup>85</sup>. This group seemed to be active, as we will see in the following.

By the midst of 1972, a young and outstanding university student belonging to the Socialist Party was invited on her merits by the chief of the nucleus<sup>86</sup> she was a militant of, to join the ELN. Some time later she attended to a meeting where she met ‘Chato’ Peredo and some other important leaders. During their conversation there was talk about armed struggle and that they wanted to transplant the Bolivian experience to Chile. She was requested to perform some work for the group as, for instance, provide license plates to furnish stolen cars with; she was also trained in the use of shotguns. She kept participating for some time until she realized that “that is not the leading way” and decided to tell her chief from the ELN that from there on she would only be a militant member of the “Partido Socialista”<sup>87</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>86</sup> “Núcleo” was the socialist party’s grass root organization in the 70s. Núcleo developed the party’s policy at the various social fronts.

<sup>87</sup> Magdalena Falcon, interview by the author (New York, May 1999). She was a professional journalist with a title from the Universidad de Chile. She began to be a militant member of the Federación Juvenil Socialista (FJS) at the age of 16. Her first task as a militant was to set up student’s organizations. During the presidential campaign of Salvador Allende she was part of a Unidad Popular’s committee. After the coup 1973 she went underground. She was arrested by DINA in October 1975 and suffered multiple tortures. When she was in

With that background it is easy to assert that the ELN maintained in Chile a structure obedient to ‘Chato’ and controlled by ‘Agustín’. Besides the already described infrastructure, the group kept a clandestine printing press used to adulterate all sorts of documents, passports included. This printing shop went on functioning for a long time after the military coup of 1973<sup>88</sup>. It seems that a battle group of the ELN obeying to ‘Chatos’ orders carried out an operation of “recovery of military equipment”, which affected another eleno nucleus. This operation caused uneasiness to Allende’s government and they proceeded with some measures against the elenos; some of them may even have been expelled from Chile<sup>89</sup>.

The day of the military coup the armed machinery of the Socialist Party, headed by ‘Agustín’, resisted at a factory called INDUMET and at the shanty town of La Legua; at sunset all chances of reverting the situation were lost and they had to go underground. ‘Agustín’ ordered to cease resistance in an industry at the south of Santiago, recovered the guns and hid them, leaving his men armed only with pistols<sup>90</sup>. Some days later he was captured and assassinated by state agents<sup>91</sup>. Other elenos, like ‘El Indio’ and ‘Fernando’ managed to leave the country and obtain political assylum abroad<sup>92</sup>.

On the other hand, at the time of the socialist government in Chile, ‘Chato’ travelled to Bolivia to take up the command of the ELN and face an eventual *coup de etat* of General Hugo Banzer. But as repression was constant in Bolivia, the eleno’s chief had to leave back for Chile. He remained there for some few days after the military coup of September 1973. Then he travelled to Cuba and later settled down in Argentina, where

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the hands of DINA she tried to escape inventing a story about a certain street corner of Pedro de Valdivia street. She tried to get away climbing into a bus and then ran desperately towards the Swedish Embassy, but short before arriving at its doors she was captured by various agents that took her to Villa Grimaldi. On June 5 and due to arrangements of the United Nations she could leave jail and travel directly to the United States, where she still is residing.

<sup>88</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2001).

<sup>89</sup> ‘El Indio’, multiple conversations with the author (Santiago, 2000-2002).

<sup>90</sup> ‘Raúl Marcos’, interview by the author (Santiago, May 1995). This name covers up a young university student belonging to the ELN, which was part of the fighting at INDUMET and La Legua on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 1973 as a member of the apparatus of ‘Agustín’. It’s worthwhile to see, Hernán Barahona: “How the last words of Allende could be saved and resistance in the shanty town of La Legua” (2002); Patricio Quiroga, *Compañeros. El GAP: La Escolta de Allende* (2001).

<sup>91</sup> See Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación (Rettig Commission), “Informe” (1991). An extract of the report appeared in *Estudios Públicos*, 41 (summer 1991).

<sup>92</sup> ‘El Indio’, multiple conversations with the author (Santiago de Chile, 2000-2002).

he established the high command of the ELN<sup>93</sup>. Along our research we did not register any activity to resist the coup in Chile on the side of ‘Chato’s group. We said they were fond of Allende, but did not consider his strategy as the right way to bring about a socialist revolution in Chile. They thought the experiment would not last.

The Argentine Republic of the 1970s was virtually immersed in a state of civil war<sup>94</sup>. The assault of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) —The Peoples Revolutionary Army—<sup>95</sup> and of the *Montoneros* (The ‘Soldiers of Perón’) headed by Mario Firmenich, was facing a tough attack from the police force and the army, which often proceeded in bad terms with the law in force<sup>96</sup>. As we can see, Argentina was not the best place to try a coordination of all the guerrilla groupings of the latin american southcone. But in spite of this, together with Edgardo Enríquez (from the Chilean *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* —MIR), Roberto Santucho (chief of the argentine *Ejército Reolucionario del Pueblo*—(ERP) and ‘Negro Marcelo’ (Raúl Sendic’s deputy, who was in jail, from the *Tupamaros* of Uruguay) they made to establish the *Junta Coordinadora Revolucionaria*. The comunicué about the creation of this organization was written down separadely by ‘Chato’ Peredo and Roberto Mario Santucho<sup>97</sup>.

‘Chato’ Peredo sustains that during 1974 they carried out various financial operatives in Buenos Aires. One of them would be the kidnapping of the CEO of Esso in Argentina, Víctor Samuelsson, which they performed

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<sup>93</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

<sup>94</sup> A good summary of the principal features of that period can be seen in Félix Luna, *Argentina: De Perón a Lanusse 1943-1973* (1972).

<sup>95</sup> The ERP was established during the V Congress of the PRT (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores), celebrated on July 28 and 29, 1970 at the camp of Isla Magnasco, in Lechiguanas, province of Entre Ríos. Mario Roberto Santucho was designated as its commander (Eugenio Mández, *Santucho: Entre la Inteligencia y las Armas*, 1999, p. 45).

<sup>96</sup> The murder of the Secretary General of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CGT), the peronista José Ignacio Rucci, during an operative of the montoneros, brought about a reaction from even the most orthodox peronistas. These, together with retired police officers and commissars of the federal police, established the Alianza Antiimperialista Argentina. Once Perón had passed by, it changed its name for Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, known as AAA. Chief of the movement was the Minister for Social Affairs, José López Rega. This organization battled against the guerrilla using methods contrary to lawfulness.

An interesting report about the Argentine guerrilla groups, published as a series of three, can be found in: “Guerrillas Argentinas”, Chile Hoy (weekly) Nr. 48, 49, 50, May 1973.

<sup>97</sup> Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo, interview by the author (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, May 2002).

as Junta Coordinadora. ‘Chato’ sustains they got 14 million U.S. Dollars as ransom money. Of that sum, they would have sent 6 million to the Chilean MIR and the rest of the money they would have divided: the ELN got 1.200.000 U.S. Dollars with the aim of helping the Bolivian opposition, specially the MIR and President Juan José Torres. They also put up schools for training cadres in Buenos Aires and organized activities to instruct peasants of the rural areas of Bolivia. Nevertheless, the truth regarding the people involved as well as the amount of money involved seems to be different. The kidnapping was carried out by the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), and the operation was headed by Gorriarán Merlo<sup>98</sup> and Benito Urteaga. The ERP gave account of this via a communiqué: “The Staff of the ERP by way of its command Silva Tettamanti, from the northern unity of Buenos Aires, kidnapped the executive Víctor Samuelsson”. In total it negotiated 12 million U.S. Dollars, distributed as follows: Esso had to distribute 4 million U.S. Dollars in food to the people; the ERP would be in charge of distributing various elements worth 5 million U.S. Dollar to the people; 3 million would be assigned one million each to revolutionary organizations in Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay and Argentina, in order to subsidize their struggle. As we can conclude, it was not the Junta Coordinadora which carried out the kidnapping, but the ERP; regarding the money, ELN and the Chilean MIR got a sum far below the one mentioned by ‘Chato’<sup>99</sup>.

The ELN organized its first Congress in the city of Lima in 1975. During the event criticisms regarding ‘Chatos’ leadership showed up, whom they blamed for the mistakes that led to the failure of the revolutionary strategy. They also criticized the status of a ‘movement’ given to the organization. These sectors, representing the great majority of the group, very much influenced by the Trozkism of the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (PRT) from Argentina, decided to establish an organization with the structure and the objectives of a party; this way they came to set up the *Partido Revolucionario de los Tranabajadores de Bolivia* (PRT-B).

Nevertheless, as everything pertaining to human history some day has to vanish, the ELN would be no exception. The certificate of demise of

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<sup>98</sup> Known under many war names (‘Gungo’, ‘Pelado’ or ‘Ricardo’). He survived the guerrilla warfare of the 1970s in Argentina and later refuted himself in Europe; during 1979 he fought in Nicaragua with the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) and in 1989 headed the attack against the regiment La Tablada in Buenos Aires.

<sup>99</sup> *Estrella Roja* (weekly) –official journal of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP)- Collection 1974. Quoting extracted from Eugenio Méndez, *Santucho: Entre la Inteligencia y las Armas* (1999), pp. 105-107.

the ELN was “extended” in 1982, when in Bolivia came about a change in the political conditions that had generated its establishing: the *Unión Democrática Popular* (UDP) assumed government as the Bolivian Constitution establishes and Hernán Siles Suazo was elected a President. The army of commander Ernesto Che Guevara de la Serna, created 15 years back under the trees of Ñancahuazú, had come to find its end.

### Epilogue

The political circumstances of Bolivia were extremely disturbed during the first part of 2002. Presidential elections took place that year and a new force began to dispute the hegemony of the traditional parties: it was the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), a group with an ideology contrary to globalization and prone to take up a substantial part of Trotskyist axioms. This movement allowed for the come back of the old guerrillas of the 1970s, integrating them with organizations of coca leaf producers of Chapare. Their standard bearer was Evo Morales and the candidate for the vice-presidency was Antonio, the oldest of the Peredo brothers. The political organizer in chief of the presidential campaign of Evo Morales and of the MAS in the area of Santa Cruz de la Sierra was Osvaldo ‘Chato’ Peredo.

As soon as the ballot boxes were opened, the MAS began to climb up to the second place, not too far behind of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who was elected. Vast masses of peasants and workers marginalized from the benefits of the system had voted for MAS. This electoral tide would come to be a powerful element of legitimation and after elections, the MAS had come to be one of the most important political forces of Bolivia.

As to Chile, the *elenos* do not function there any longer as an independent group or as a political apparatus on their own. Most of them militate in the *Partido Socialista* (PS), from where they originally came. From time to time they gather to tell stories about a past that branded them. As members of the PS they learnt how to govern without giving up the belief that it is possible to establish a society different on their terms.

As we can see, at the very beginning of the XXI century the old militants of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), deprived of their guns and pistols and pertaining to different parties, movements or groups keep struggling, although with different tools, in order to achieve the construction of that society where man would not be the wolf of man, as the legendary Che had instructed them to set up.

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