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Latin American Trends

STAFF NOTES

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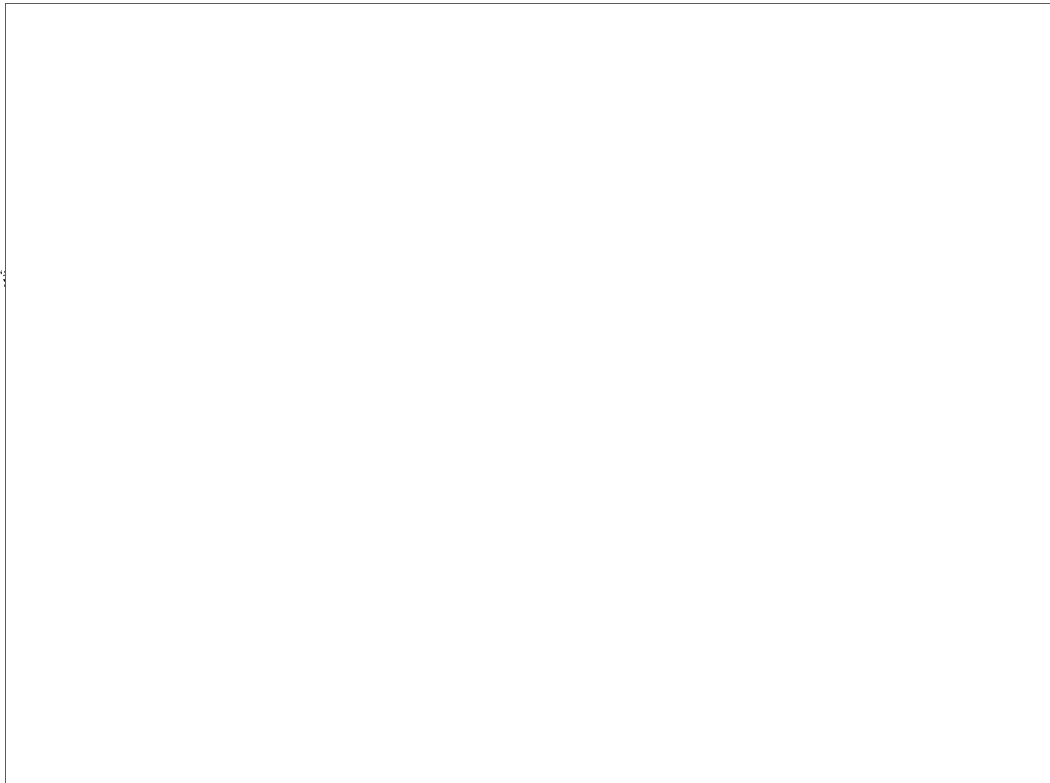
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Venezuela: Continued Fallout
from Nichous Kidnaping 9

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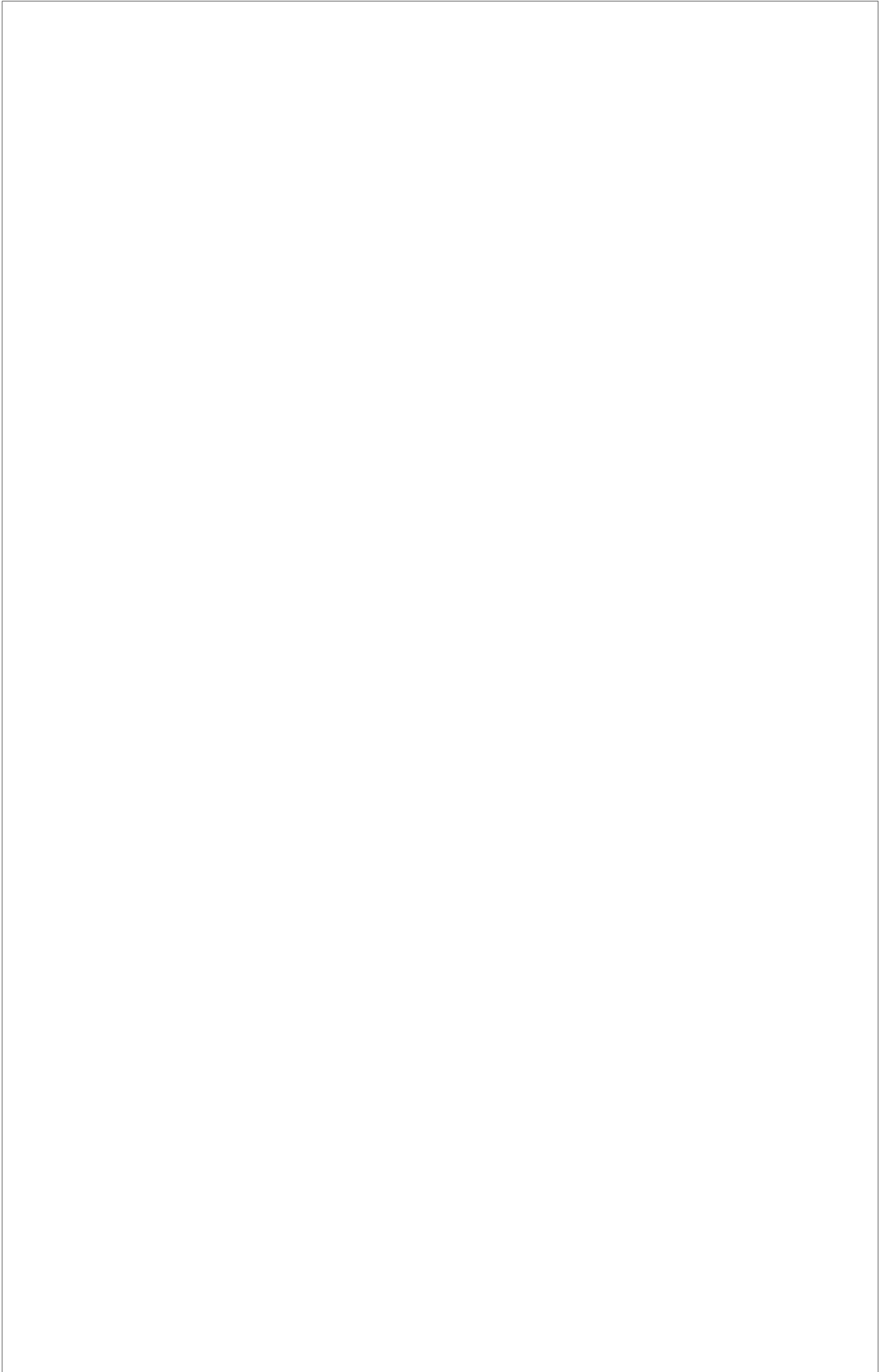




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Venezuela: Continued Fallout from Niehous Kidnaping

Almost a year has passed since US businessman William Niehous was kidnaped from his Caracas home by leftist terrorists. The government's investigation of the abduction has failed to turn up any leads, and Venezuelan authorities are increasingly concerned that he may have been killed and buried somewhere in Venezuela.

The Ministry of Interior is making what appears to be a last-ditch effort to break the case. Octavio Lepage, ministry chief, probably under President Perez' instructions, has begun negotiations with one of the suspects currently under detention. The government is offering the suspect a one-way ticket out of the country and sufficient funds for resettlement abroad in exchange for full cooperation in apprehending the kidnapers and their associates. Security officials involved in the talks may believe that this time they may be able to break the case, although it may be too late to save Niehous. It has been six months since the last communication from Niehous and five months since the last contact with his captors.

The government's inept handling of the affair has kept the story on the front pages of the local press, much to the embarrassment of administration officials. While they are probably sincere in their concern for Niehous' physical safety, they are worried about how to minimize the damage that has already occurred as well as the increased criticism that is expected if Niehous is dead. The political fallout has already been severe. For example, the presidential aspirations of at least one political leader, Octavio Lepage, have ended prematurely.

The police and security services have proved unequal to the challenge presented by the Niehous case.

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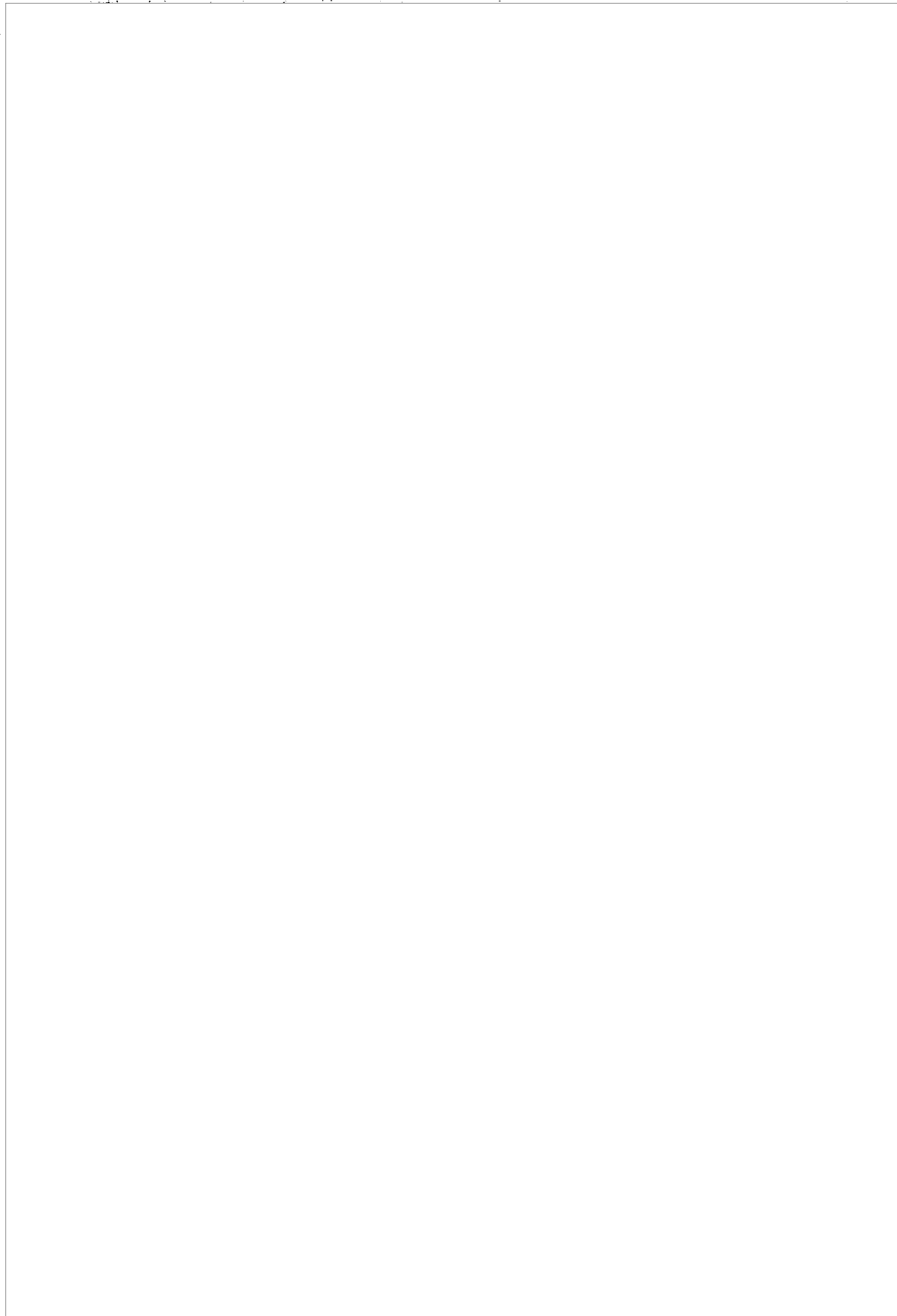
[redacted] (b)(1)
[redacted] the torture and subsequent death of a suspect, not only produced unwanted publicity, but also tarnished Venezuela's excellent record in human rights.

The kidnaping, with its political overtones and high ransom demands, obviously led to overreaction by the government, which [redacted] (b)(3)
[redacted] feared that additional abductions might threaten constitutional government. The belief reportedly still persists that democracy is fragile and that extraordinary measures are sometimes necessary to preserve the democratic process. This belief may be reinforced if Niehaus is found dead and the government is faced with domestic and foreign pressures for aggressive action to restore public confidence in the government. [redacted] (b)(3)

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