

### Introduction

**W**hen Spanish explorers first saw the unbounded natural splendour of Paraguay, they declared it a 'second Eden' – an apt title for a nation isolated from its neighbours by a rocky moat of forest-clad mountains.

Today, Paraguay remains concealed from the world's eyes: a country where poverty has made its kingdom with destitution as governor.



### History

Paraguay was first discovered in the mid-16th century by Juan de Salazar and incorporated into Spanish dominion, although its remoteness meant that it was usually cut off from the colonial authorities. After overthrowing the Spanish in 1811, the nation fought a long campaign to assert its independence from the neighbouring countries. The War of the Triple Alliance in the 1860s, and the Chaco War with Bolivia in 1932 were defining moments for the nationalistic movement in Paraguay that led to a greater unification of the indigenous population and the Spanish-descended mestizos.

In 1940, the constitution of Paraguay was suspended and political opposition was banned by the military dictatorship. However, rioting and dissent led to elections being reintroduced in 1946 when coalitions began to form. The uneasy political stalemate ended violently with a civil war between the Paraguayan Communist Party and their allies, and the Colorado Party, who eventually gained control by the end of 1947. Democracy was once again suppressed in 1954, when General Alfredo Stroessner took control and used the State-of-Siege provision of the constitution to guarantee his rule for nearly 34 years. During that time persecution of opposition groups, and an often violent policy of assimilation of the native Amerindians were justified as 'necessary' for national security.

Stroessner was overthrown in 1989, allowing the ruling Colorado Party to push through reforms to the economy, politics and the legal system. A modern constitution was drawn up in 1992, preparing the ground for the first free and fair elections in 1993. Attempted coups and a protracted legal conflict between the President and the Supreme Court made the turn of the millennium a tense period for Paraguay. Many of the problems that the new President has inherited are long-standing and unlikely to have swift resolutions, but a more determined effort is being made by the international community to help raise standards of living in Paraguay.

In 2008 former bishop Fernando Lugo achieved an historic victory in the country's presidential election, ending 61 years of conservative rule. His promises to tackle inequality and corruption stand alongside a more determined effort by the international community to help raise standards of living in Paraguay.

### Current challenges

- ▶ Almost 60 per cent of Paraguayans live in poverty; the economy has consistently been weak and unstable, often as a result of tension and uncertainty in government. Even in Asunción, the capital, many middle class residents are without running water, and goods such as shoes are seen as luxuries. In rural areas the situation is even worse, and accordingly the levels of rural to urban migration have risen considerably. Shanty towns and slums where families of eight live in a single-room house are all too common.
- ▶ Although the judiciary is technically independent, it is often subject to corruption and political pressure. The media will also face similar harassment if it pursues stories about bribery and institutional vice. Crime often goes unpunished, and areas of the interior region of Paraguay are often controlled by armed bandits and robbers.
- ▶ Adapting from traditional life in the rainforests and subsistence farming to the more Western lifestyle has been hard for many of the people of Paraguay. The new hydro-electric industry that has begun to make use of Paraguay's

abundant rivers requires a level of training and education that many of the residents simply do not have. For the elderly and for women, who are still burdened by gender inequality despite changes to their legal status, finding employment and income is extremely hard. Even new-born children face a lifetime of poverty if education provision is poor locally.

## BMS involvement in Paraguay

BMS World Mission's involvement in Paraguay began in 2005 with three supported partner workers initiating the pre-school education programme (PEPE) in the country. Currently there is one Supported Partner Worker, Elbio Marques, working in the country.

## Background information

### The land

Though land-locked, Paraguay has numerous navigable rivers that provide trade routes and transportation where other infrastructure is less than consistent. The name 'Paraguay' literally means 'river flowing to the ocean' in one of its official languages, Guaraní. Western Paraguay is a paradise of verdant rainforest and rugged hills, but the contrasting region of Chaco is one of flat plains that are alternately flooded and parched. Much of the country has poor soil, which does not lend itself to commercial farming, and flooding during the wet seasons is a constant threat to livelihoods and sometimes life.

### Religion

Paraguay is predominately Christian with a huge majority of Roman Catholics. However, many areas still retain occult-related traditions that have been merged with the traditional Catholicism. Increasingly, committed Christians are bringing the gospel anew to many communities.

Growth in the evangelical churches has been good, but a lack of co-operation between denominations has meant that outreach has often been ineffective or lacking outward vision. Protestant churches in Paraguay tend to be organised according to minority ethnic groups, such as with the German Lutherans, the Ukrainian Baptists and Pentecostals, and the Korean Presbyterians. Many such groups arrived with migrants and are often only in urban areas of the country.

The Convención Evangelica Bautista del Paraguay is the main Baptist convention, with some 10,700 members across 135 congregations. Currently there is a great need for leadership development and for new ministers that can bring the hope of Christ to the people of Paraguay.

## Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the churches of Paraguay, that they would be united in their desire to evangelise their country. Pray also for the mission workers to the rural areas, and all those involved with church planting and Bible translation. Pray especially for the safety of ministers to small or isolated churches.
- ▶ Give thanks for the renewed commitment from the international community to help Paraguay, and pray that sustainable economic prosperity would be developed. Pray that the infrastructure, hospitals, schools and civic institutions would be adequately funded so that they might empower the Paraguayans to build a stronger nation.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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