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Mexico Cancels Celebrations in Havana Embassy

by LADB Staff

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Cuba-Mexico relations have deteriorated since the early 1990s, as Mexico steadily aligned itself with US policies. During the last month, President Vicente Fox's administration seemed to go out of its way to offend Cuba, ordering its embassy in Havana not to sponsor its customary celebrations on Sept. 15 and 16 honoring Mexican Independence Day. During a bizarre controversy, complete with public salvos between Mexican Ambassador Ricardo Pascoe and the Mexican foreign office, Foreign Relations Secretary Jorge Castaneda laid bare the rationale for Mexico's Cuba policy.

Friction between the two countries became apparent during the administrations of Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) and has worsened since Fox came to power in 2000 (see NotiCen, 2000-08-31). During a visit to Cuba in February, Fox invited Cuban dissidents to the Mexican Embassy and said President Fidel Castro was aware of the meeting. However, Castro later said Fox never raised the question of meeting dissidents during their conversations (see NotiCen, 2002-02-28).

Later in February, Castaneda made remarks in Florida that gave the impression he encouraged Cuban dissidents to seek asylum in the Mexican Embassy (see NotiCen, 2002-03-14). Twenty-one Cubans violently entered the embassy grounds and had to be removed by police. While Castro absolved Castaneda of any blame for the incident, he said the secretary "shouldn't go around playing with words."

The string of clashes continued in April, when Mexico departed from its traditional abstentions and voted with the US on a UN resolution condemning Cuba for its human rights record (see NotiCen, 2002-05-02). Even outwardly cordial relations collapsed in April, when Castro released the transcript of a telephone conversation in which Fox asked him to absent himself from a UN conference on economic development that had been held the previous month in Monterrey, Mexico. Fox told Castro he wanted him to avoid an embarrassing encounter with President George W. Bush. The transcript contradicted Fox's repeated assurances to the media that Castro's unexplained early departure from the conference was of his own doing. The transcript caught Fox in a lie that infuriated the opposition at home and produced counterattacks in which Fox supporters scolded Castro for making public a private conversation.

Ambassador feuds with his own government

The latest irritation began in August when Ambassador Pascoe sent out a letter notifying those who had been invited to embassy events observing the Mexican holiday that he had been instructed to cancel all such events. He said in the letter that the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) had prohibited him from organizing or participating in any kind of Independence Day celebrations. The planned events included a reception in the embassy and the placing of a floral wreath on the statue

of Mexican independence hero Miguel Hidalgo in a Havana park. The observances were to continue for several days with a Mexican film festival, art exhibitions, and other cultural events.

According to Pascoe's version of the instructions from Mexico City, the cancellation constituted an unheard of break in the long Cuban tradition of honoring the patriotic holiday of the country Cuba considers its most loyal friend in the Americas. Pascoe told reporters that he was being politically harassed by his own government. Thus began a skirmish played out in public between Pascoe and Castaneda.

Sources inside the SRE contradicted Pascoe's version of the instructions. They said, according to the Mexican weekly *Proceso*, that the order was sent to 134 diplomatic posts around the world asking them to find private financing for the celebrations not to cancel them. The reason given was a lack of funds. The Cuban government went ahead with its own celebrations. Cuban television canceled regular programming to broadcast the events taking place Sept. 16 in Havana's Karl Marx Theater. Castro attended along with Mexican actor Maria Rojo and other Mexican guests, but no Mexican diplomats showed up.

Ambassador accused of embezzling US\$86,000

On top of the public bickering over the holiday observances, SRE chief administrator Mauricio Toussaint announced that government auditors were investigating possible irregularities in Pascoe's handling of some US\$86,000 in embassy's funds and questionable payments to Cuban contract workers. Toussaint said the auditors were not looking for a "big fish...but a small fish with Caribbean stripes." Later, Castaneda would criticize Pascoe for making public his differences with the SRE. But first, Pascoe scolded the SRE for making unproven accusations against him public. "The fact that they go public with the results of a supposed audit without informing me of its contents is behavior close to character assassination of a public servant," Pascoe said. "I am considering initiating legal action against the responsible party."

Indicating that there was an ideological and personal conflict between Pascoe a member of the center-left opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the Fox administration, Castaneda reportedly told a congressional delegation that Pascoe "wanted to have the Sept. 15 celebration in the embassy so he could have his picture taken with President Fidel Castro." Besides, he said, the celebration in the embassies would have cost US\$1 million. Pascoe was recalled Sept. 12 for consultation in Mexico City, but instead of facing the auditors, Pascoe was welcomed by a contrite Mauricio Toussaint.

In a joint news conference, Toussaint apologized for the "little fish" remark and said Pascoe's explanations for the alleged irregularities had satisfied the secretariat. Pascoe said that he accepted Toussaint's apologies and that all was forgiven. However, Pascoe did not return to Havana, and within days there were government leaks that he would be fired and replaced by career diplomat Roberta Lajous.

Castaneda explains Cuba policy

PRD senators held a meeting with Castaneda in mid- September to question him about Pascoe and Cuba policy in general. Later, they told reporters that Castaneda had said he would fire Pascoe within a week because he had gone public with his own opinions instead of those of the Fox administration. In defending Mexico's position with regard to the US and especially Mexico's probable support for Bush's war against Iraq, Castaneda said that almost every other country supports the US and Mexico would not be an exception. "This is the world we live in, so what do you expect me to do?" he asked.

As for Cuba, Castaneda said he would not "make up with Cuba" because Castro had insulted Fox by releasing the telephone transcript. Castaneda also said he did not understand why the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), when it controlled the Mexican government, had maintained close relations with Cuba.

Another senator brought up the issue of Cuban textbooks printed in Mexico under a longstanding agreement, asking why they had not been printed this year. Castaneda answered that Cuba had not paid for them. "I don't care about the children of Cuba nor does what you [senators] think interest me," he reportedly said. "The Cuban government requested that aid and they offended Fox."

Mexico ignores agreements with Cuba

Meanwhile, the embassy fracas crept into discussions at the V Reunion Interparlamentaria Mexico-Cuba held in Havana Sept. 18-22 between Cuban and Mexican lawmakers. The Mexico City daily *La Jornada* reported that, in an expression of disapproval of Castaneda's actions, most of the Mexican delegates refused to attend a luncheon at the embassy. Only members of Fox's governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) attended. During sessions of the interparliamentary conference, Mexican legislators complained that the Fox administration was worsening relations with Cuba by ignoring dozens of accords the two countries have signed. Some 40 bilateral agreements are signed but largely ignored by the Mexican secretariats of health, education, tourism, and agriculture as well as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) and the Commission Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONACYT), among others.

PRI Senator Carlos Rojas Gutierrez said that, in examining compliance with various accords, Mexican legislators found few concrete results. One of the broken promises, Rojas said, was the Mexican government's refusal to print the Cuban school books. He said that, according to what he had been told by Cuban counterparts at the conference, Cuba never asked to have the books printed free of charge. "Everything suggests that this was another bad-faith gesture that affects thousand of Cuban children and puts us in an unacceptable position as a country," Rojas said. Rojas concluded that the Mexican government was boycotting the agreements "in tacit support" of the US embargo against Cuba.

Another PRI senator, Cesar Camacho Quiroz, said the boycott dated back to the Zedillo administration and was "a clear strategy to cancel all exchanges with Cuba." If the senators' versions of the meeting with Castaneda were accurate, Castaneda's frankness exposed the fundamental Mexican policy masked by protestations that all was well. Just days earlier, Fox had told former South African president Nelson Mandela that relations with Cuba were good despite the clash in

April over the Monterrey conference and the telephone transcript. Nothing in Castaneda's remarks as reported by such well- respected senators as Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera of the PRD dealt with ideological or policy differences with Cuba, but rather the supposed insult to Fox. Opposition legislators and some members of Fox's own party have accused Castaneda of personalizing Mexico's foreign policy and Fox of failing to reign him in.

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