

3-27-2003

Region Reacts to Iraq War

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Region Reacts to Iraq War." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9071>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Region Reacts to Iraq War

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2003-03-27

Reaction to Washington's war in Iraq drew mixed, but generally downbeat, reaction throughout the region. Spokespeople from the spectrum of civil society voiced concerns reflecting the economic and moral consequences to their countries, while others feared for their independence. Government leaders met to agree on a unified message of support for the increasingly isolated US administration but failed to do so.

The presidents of Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica met in Roatan, Honduras, for that purpose and to put together a strategy for a scheduled April 11 meeting in Washington with US President George W. Bush about the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), but Guatemala's Alfonso Portillo and Costa Rica's Abel Pacheco would not sign on to a unified declaration of support for the war. Those who did join in faced some anger and dismay at home.

Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos, for instance, was welcomed by an indignant opposition party, the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), which called the president's support "ridiculous and anti-national." The party asked him to reverse his foreign policy, calling Bush's incursions "brutal, unjust, in violation of human rights and of international principles," and asking that he "distance himself honorably from the list of countries that are "enemies of peace."

However, Carlos Sequeira, chief of Bolanos's negotiating team, spoke of pressing realities in the relationship with the US, "a tremendously important partner." He said that the presidents were going to Washington with the continuation of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) in mind, emphasizing that the CBI is a "privilege" that can be suspended at a moment's notice, "leaving us swinging in the wind." Bolanos denied having actually endorsed the war. The statement he signed with the other three only said that "the definitive moment has come for the government of Iraq to disarm and give up its negative and dilatory attitude, which encourages the suspicion of the presence of arms of mass destruction on its territory." While the presidents' document did not specifically endorse war, it did acknowledge UN resolution 1441 as conveying authority to the US to make war on Iraq.

Bolanos' signature also brought down the wrath of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. The Papal Nuncio's office responded by reading a note from the Vatican that said, "Whoever decides that all peaceful means that International Law has to offer have been exhausted, assumes a grave responsibility before God, his conscience, and history." The Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos (Cenidh) added its indignant voice. "With amazement and impotence we have heard the defiant message of the president of the United States threatening the world, criticizing the United Nations Security Council, proclaiming with impunity the destruction of the efforts to build systems and mechanisms that would impede another war of such dimensions," read the statement.

Costa Rican president Vilma Nunez then added, "Let us not permit that, in the name of our countries, fearful and insensitive leaders bless the new holocaust for a few more dollars. We demand dignity of President Bolanos, and that he not compromise the name of Nicaragua in so irrational a war." The Movimiento Social Nicaraguense contra la Guerra en Irak organized a boycott of US, British, and Spanish products, as well as of McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Domino's Pizza, and Esso gasoline. They are also organizing demonstrations and protests at the US Embassy. The organization is composed of a number of nongovernmental organization (NGOs). The mood in Costa Rica was equally dour, the concerns even broader.

Legislator and member of the opposition Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN), former public security minister Laura Chinchilla (see NotiCen, 1998-05-07) forecast sweeping changes for the worse as a consequence not just of the war, but of the new world order that Bush has imposed. She said that CAFTA implies a new concept of international relations on the part of the US administration. The twin pillars of the new world order, preventive war and internal security, could reduce the scope of decisions that Central America can make, both within the trade negotiations and in international policy. This means that Costa Rica has lost control of the process, she said. "It seems to me that difficult times are coming" for Latin America in general and for Central America in particular," said Chinchilla. "We are going to have to establish with great clarity what those influences will be and how we are going to manage in the context of advancement of the state of law in Latin America."

Chinchilla said that the Patriot Act (see NotiCen, 2002- 11-21) produced "a great fear of what lies ahead on the continent after having made many forward strides toward a more democratic concept of security." She was referring to the progress made since the last US-imposed unwritten rulebook for the region, the National Security Doctrine (see NotiCen, 1997- 12-04), and the wholesale bloodletting that resulted from it. She characterized the Bush initiative as a great blow to the UN, a great blow to the alliance of the western world, and to the attempts at reconciliation among different peoples of the world. "Frankly, I'm saddened for the consequences that it will bring. We lament it, not only because Costa Rica lost leadership in this process, but because we gave in to a position that divides the region. It divides us in favor of one of the belligerent parties, and it leads us further away from consolidating a multilateral order. It seems to me that this doesn't speak well of the level of independence that the region can take in the commercial negotiations."

In Guatemala, the other country that refused to condone the US for its war, international analyst Isaac Cohen foresaw that the region would be seriously harmed by the US action. He pointed to the crippling effect of rising oil prices and the interruption of the recovery of the US economy as blows to Central America. Cohen, an advisor to the Guatemalan CAFTA delegation, said that the severity of the repercussions would depend on the duration and aggressiveness of the war. He indicated that the region would be helpless in the face of a US recession and would see an immediate flight of capital in the event of rising interest rates there. Panamanian comment and prognostication reflected that of its neighbor, Costa Rica.

The main concern for former foreign minister Carlos Lopez Guevara was that "Panama continues losing independence in the management of its diplomacy; it does not take initiatives, and those that it does take are not supported by actions." He called Bush's bellicose behavior "biased and unbalanced." The former official, best known for having negotiated the Torrijos-Carter canal

treaties in 1977, lashed out at Bush for having bloodied its hands in violation of the UN charter. Panama's President Mireya Moscoso signed the support document. Foreign Minister Harmodio Arias defended his government's action, citing its view that Iraq failed to respect Security Council resolutions.

The Archbishop of Panama Jose Dimas Cedeno called the war a failure of diplomacy and called on people to pray that the world not suffer a catastrophe. Looking ahead, the president of the Comision Legislativa de Relaciones Exteriores Marco Ameglio said that small countries like Panama would suffer the consequences of war because of oil dependence. "It is worrisome because nobody can encourage a war. Its real results are difficult to predict, since the little countries always end up paying for the effects of a war where it is implicit that the war is about oil."

Another consequence of the war for Central America will likely be the further distancing of governments from their respective populations. While Honduran President Ricardo Maduro was busy offering the US ambassador post-war reconstruction aid by sending personnel, such as nurses, to Iraq, Hondurans representing civil-society organizations demonstrated outside the embassy against the war. A similar dynamic support in the government, protest in the street played out in El Salvador.

Washington does not forget easily

Despite the limited show of support from Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama, in all of Latin America only five countries gave even grudging acceptance. Colombia was the fifth. In Washington, Michael Shifter, program director for Inter-American Dialogue, a think-tank, predicted that there would be a cooling of ardor on the part of the US for trade negotiations. "There will be something that will certainly affect the tone, the atmosphere," he said. The Bush administration was noticeably miffed as well by the lack of support from Chile and Mexico in the Security Council, and by snubs from Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay on the matter. Central America will, by association, likely have to pay for that, since it is widely believed that US interest in CAFTA is mainly as a prelude to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). If, either through US pique or preoccupation elsewhere, the FTAA loses momentum, CAFTA could find itself back-burnered too. B

ut even without tantrums from the notoriously thin-skinned administration, Shifter anticipates that economic matters will take on less importance as Bush concentrates on security matters, and "economic relations will become less important than they are now." Otherwise, the Bush administration made the most of the Latin American response. It counted the five countries as part of its coalition.

-- End --