

7-17-2003

Region Follows Spanish Lead

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Region Follows Spanish Lead." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9114>

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 Follows Spanish Lead

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2003-07-17

Spain's President Jose Maria Aznar arrived in El Salvador on July 8, on a four-pronged mission. He needed simultaneously to express gratitude for Central America's contribution to the international troop presence in Iraq while ensuring that wavering governments would actually deliver the soldiers, school isthmus presidents on the benefits of a free- trade agreement with Europe, establish credibility for himself as go-between in the Latin America Europe relationship, and open a new front in his ongoing war of words with Cuban President Fidel Castro. This last prong also serves to support El Salvador's President Francisco Flores in the latter's electoral battles.

Flores' right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) is trailing the leftist Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) as presidential elections draw near. Schafik Handal, likely FMLN presidential candidate (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05), had told union representatives that his party would copy the Cuban model in areas of nutrition, health, education, and social security. Schafik also told his listeners he would invite Castro to his inauguration, so mud slung at Castro splatters Schafik. The gauntlet apparently fell at Aznar's feet when Castro led a demonstration past the Spanish Embassy in Havana in June, protesting Spain's promotion of sanctions limiting the European Union (EU)'s relations with Cuba (see NotiCen, 2003- 06-19).

Castro took the opportunity to label Aznar a "fascist" and a "bandit." Aznar was nevertheless circumspect in his public pronouncements concerning the Handal-Castro axis, limiting himself to, "In the world it is known that there are models that function, and models that don't function. Those that function, you know which they are, and those that don't function, [you know] as well." The Spaniard, whose agenda included a meeting with FMLN officials, was aware that he might be dealing with these people after the March 2004 presidential elections.

Free trade become top item

Grinding the Cuba axe, however, did not take as high a priority as free-trade promotion. Scarcely four hours after landing in El Salvador, the Spanish president had signed a joint statement with Flores on the desirability of integration of the Central American states, a necessary antecedent to getting on with a free-trade agreement (EuroFTA). The statement also linked to the troop deal with language about international terrorism. The presidents followed the signing with a review of Spanish investment in the country and remarks by Aznar to the effect that things have been going so well Spain will be launching even more projects.

In boosting the EuroFTA concept, Aznar laid out a timeline that looked toward a signed agreement on political cooperation between the Central American countries by the end of 2003, which would serve as a basis of negotiation at the III Cumbre UE-America Latina planned for 2004 in Mexico. "The ball is not in the European court, it is in the Central American court," said Aznar. "The European Union has made some proposals to Central America...it must be Central America that

responds and makes counteroffers." Spain, he said, has a real interest in the region becoming a market capable of negotiating with the "great powers." As proof of that, Spain has expressed interest in becoming part of the Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCIE).

A first step in the EuroFTA process was a meeting of presidents of the region in San Salvador with Aznar. At the meeting's conclusion, the heads of state, including of Belize and Panama, as well as Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, signed a joint declaration committing themselves to completing an integration pact by the end of 2004 and to a common economic and commercial strategy. The regional leaders also asked Aznar for money to finance the work.

The agreement also committed the countries to facilitate Spain's integration as an "extra regional associate" in the BCIE, and to install a Central American tourism-promotion agency in Spain. On the cooperation front, the countries would cooperate on education, health, public administration, sustainable development, environment, natural disasters, and other issues. There was also language on terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, security, and international peace, and praising the sending of regional troops to Iraq.

With integration and cooperation the watchwords, all eyes were on Guatemala's Alfonso Portillo, seen as a major obstructionist (see NotiCen, 2003-05-15) for his unilateralism in the current negotiations for a Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). As Belize Prime Minister Said Musa, secretary pro tempore of Integracion Centroamericana, promised in the name of the region that integration would be achieved by year's end, Portillo was forced to state for the record that, although some differences exist regarding how the isthmus should open its markets, those differences would not impede the signing of an agreement with Washington.

Aznar told the assembled leaders that Central America is "a priority for Spain. It is a priority now and will continue being a priority." In less than a decade, he said, Spain's development aid to the region has increased by a factor of ten, making it the number-one recipient of Spanish largesse. He reminded his interlocutors that his country has also forgiven US\$1 billion in regional debt and has supported stability agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Business leaders accompany

Aznar The Spaniard did not come alone to El Salvador. A bevy of business leaders came along. In coordinated meetings with private-sector powerbrokers, the Spaniards hammered home the idea that regional integration was crucial to trade with Europe, and they had better get on with it. Said one, "Integration cannot wait any longer." Julio Salcedo, president of the Camara Oficial Espanola de Comercio de El Salvador warned that the region is "relatively new" territory for business, and separately the countries are not sufficiently attractive for investment. Leopoldo Lopez-Fuche, president of the Comite Hispano- Centroamericano, fanned the flame. "Definitely, doing a big project for just one country is not profitable," he said.

The Spanish impresarios are keeping an eye on the region's current free-trade negotiations with the US. For them, a CAFTA accord means that the integration work will have been done, and even

better, it "can serve as a bridge to bring Spanish investment to the world's largest market," as one observed. But while agreements were being forged, warnings given, and advice heeded, some in the press looked upon the Aznar visit with a jaundiced eye.

Under the banner *Myopic Maneuvers of Aznar*, commentator Sergio Munoz Bata led with, "His brilliant management of the Spanish government does not authorize Aznar to try to assume an international leadership that nobody asked for." The column reminded readers that Aznar enjoys little support from his own people in his enthusiasm for Bush's war in Iraq, and he went on to analyze Aznar's strategy as an attempt at parleying his relationship with the US leader into a challenge to Europe's heavy hitters, Germany and France.

Seeing little chance of Spanish success, Munoz Bata quoted Charles Kupchan of the Council on Foreign Affairs, who said the Spanish president's activities "reflect the desire of Aznar to box in a division beyond his weight..." Kupchan said that, when the dust clears, "Spain will have to recognize that its voice in the European concert has diminished for two powerful reasons. Aznar has placed Spain against...the two great economic and political powers..." and "against European public opinion, which in overwhelming majority is against the war."

The columnist then called the pretension of Aznar to become the interlocutor between the US and Latin America "almost delirious." The column appeared in El Salvador's *El Diario de Hoy*. Munoz Bata is a member of the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times*.

-- End --