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U.S. Accusations Against Cuba

by LADB Staff

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The administration of US President George W. Bush has begun accusing Cuba of forging an anti-US alliance with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. This is a somewhat altered version of claims persistently put out by Chavez's opposition in Venezuela, which alleges he is plotting to drag the country into communism under the tutelage of President Fidel Castro (see NotiSur, 2003-10-17).

Administration charges go well beyond Cuba to suggest that an axis is forming among Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Venezuela to interfere in the internal affairs of Bolivia and Ecuador and to otherwise destabilize the entire region. In support of this new Latin American "axis of evil" charge, recent press reports, citing unnamed "administration advisors," suggest that Venezuelan oil money might have been used to depose Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in October 2003 (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24) and to influence politics in Ecuador. No hard evidence to support these claims was cited in these reports.

Now another of those mystery news cycles has begun, in which sensational claims are made such as the certainty of Castro's imminent death or a Castro plan to unleash a mass exodus of Cuban boat people to Florida with the resulting US naval blockade of the island (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05).

Since early January, the current news cycle has focused on the alleged destabilization conspiracy. The allegations began escalating Jan. 6, when Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, criticized Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa for not meeting with Cuban dissidents during a recent trip to Cuba. Noriega said Castro "a broken-down, old dictator who doesn't cast much of a shadow" was trying to destabilize Latin America. He cited only unnamed sources and did not specify any country Cuba had targeted. The current push from Washington started last fall with Bush's declaration of a new crackdown to reassure Florida state legislators who warned that he could lose Cuban exiles' votes if he did not harden his anti-Castro policy (see NotiCen, 2002-08-28).

In October, Bush ordered strict airport inspections to catch people traveling to Cuba in defiance of the travel ban, and he created a commission "to hasten" the end of the Castro government (see NotiCen, 2003-11-20).

Criticism aimed at Argentina Noriega followed up on administration concerns that Argentine President Nestor Kirchner was moving too close to Castro and complained that Argentina was not doing enough to restructure its debt (see NotiSur, 2004-01-16). It should be done, he said, "in a serious and responsible way." An Argentine Cabinet official called the remarks "impertinent" and "annoying."

Secretary of State Colin Powell seconded Noriega's remarks, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told reporters that Chavez was not playing a "constructive role" because of his ties to Castro and because of tensions between Venezuela and Colombia.

The Cuban Communist Party newspaper Granma asked why none of the intended victim states had complained about destabilization efforts and whether sending Cuban medical teams and teachers to Guatemala, Honduras, and other countries constituted acts of destabilization. Granma pointed out that Noriega's accusations followed closely on the US State Department's announcement that the US would pull out of the bilateral immigration talks because of Cuba's "intransigence." On Jan. 5, the State Department said the current round of talks, scheduled for Jan. 8, could not be held unless Cuba showed "a real interest in finding those very important aspects to achieve an orderly, legal, and safe flow of immigrants."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher explained in his Jan. 7 press briefing that the talks were suspended because Cuba had not complied with US requests to discuss such matters as establishing a deep-water port in Cuba that would allow the US Coast Guard to land Cubans picked up at sea, and other matters. "These are merely new pretexts to aggravate tensions between the two countries," the Cuban Foreign Ministry (MINREX) replied. "Cuba reaffirms that it has been and is willing to seriously debate, with the required depth and time, all the issues mentioned by the US authorities." The statement added that the real obstacles to normal immigration came from the US policy of encouraging illegal immigration, reducing the agreed-upon number of visas for Cubans, and failing to return all Cubans picked up at sea.

MINREX also responded to a Jan. 6 State Department announcement that it had expelled Cuban diplomat Roberto Socorro Garcia, third secretary of the Cuban mission in Washington, for "criminal activities." This was the twentieth Cuban diplomat expelled in just over a year. MINREX denied the charges and accused the State Department of leaking an unfounded accusation that Socorro was involved in drug trafficking.

Bush puts Castro on summit agenda

The next week, Bush went to Monterrey, Mexico, to attend an Organization of American States (OAS) extraordinary meeting, which the administration had hurriedly called although there was no clear agenda. No OAS summit had been scheduled for this year, which led to speculation in Cuba that the Monterrey meeting was an election-year gambit to keep Bush's tough anti-Castro rhetoric in the news and win votes in the Florida exile community.

Bush used the occasion to attack Castro and call for help from the delegates to end the Castro regime. "We must all work for a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba," he said. Little such help can be expected of Argentina, however, since President Nestor Kirchner, smarting from Noriega's criticisms, said his country would no longer automatically support US policies as it had in the past. The White House had said that a major theme of the summit was a hemispheric response to terrorism. But the administration had already taken unilateral steps in that direction the previous month by ordering the fingerprinting of passengers arriving in the US from Latin America and other countries.

In retaliation, Brazil imposed the same requirement on passengers arriving from the US. The administration had also arranged with Mexican President Vicente Fox to place US federal agents in Mexican airports to beef up security. Opposition-party leaders objected to that and to the US decision to prevent a Mexican airliner from landing in Los Angeles in December because of unspecified risks of terrorism (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14). Bush's call for united action against Castro was another indication that the agenda had more to do with his Cuba policy than pressing issues in the hemisphere. The call was simply a reiteration of the theme pressed without results in two recent regional meetings.

Last June, OAS delegates ignored Secretary of State Powell's request for help in "hastening" Castro's downfall (see NotiCen, 2003-06-19). Another of Bush's proposals in Monterrey to kick countries with corrupt governments out of the OAS was dead on arrival. The Bush administration has not made progress either in promoting anti-Castro policies in the hemisphere or in promoting its other priorities such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Brazil had led the opposition at the ministerial meeting last November in Miami, and a weak declaration to continue advancing was all Bush got out of it (see NotiSur, 2003-12-05).

Bush's only accomplishment in Monterrey was to smooth things over with President Fox, who drew administration anger last spring by opposing the US invasion of Iraq. The friendlier atmosphere in Monterrey was made possible by Bush's recent plan to establish a guest-worker program and to legalize the status of some undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the US (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14). Nevertheless, Fox refused Bush's invitation to enlist in his crusade against Castro and Chavez. Instead, he said that Mexico's relations with Cuba once in shambles were on a sound footing and that the internal affairs of Venezuela were in the hands of Venezuelans.

The final declaration contained only one paragraph on FTAA, which promised to "advance" on the goal of launching it in 2005. Destabilizing US policy When the Bush administration talks about a Cuba-Venezuela axis spreading destabilization, there is some truth in the claim. As Argentina, Brazil, and other countries strengthen ties with Cuba and follow Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's leadership against US trade policies a position Cuba has taken for decades the region threatens to destabilize US hemispheric influence.

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