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Mexico, European Union Join U.S. In Human Rights Vote Against Cuba As Dissatisfaction With Process Grows

by LADB Staff

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Just when its relations with Cuba were on the mend, the European Union (EU) voted for an unfriendly resolution against Cuba at the 61st meeting in Geneva of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). There is some speculation that the yearly exercise has become so politicized that there may not be a 62nd session.

Although the resolution on Cuba was generally described in the US press as a condemnation, it was simply a two-paragraph request that Cuba allow UNCHR representative Christine Chanet to review human-rights conditions in Cuba. The vote was 21 in favor, 17 against, and 15 abstentions (see NotiCen, 2004-21-05). This was the same kind of resolution passed in 2004. Cuba has been roundly criticized for categorically refusing to accept any UNCHR visit that results from US pressure.

However, this year Cuba has been able to turn the criticism against the US for deflecting a UN request to investigate allegations that prisoners are tortured on the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. UN special rapporteur on torture, Manfred Nowak, made the request in June 2004, and renewed it in early April. But the Associated Press reported that the US refused permission for Nowak to talk to detainees in private as he has insisted. A State Department spokesman confirmed that Nowak had not been invited to Guantanamo and that the department was "examining the request."

Votes mirror political shift

Rather than a factual review of human rights conditions in Cuba, the annual vote has become a measure of the US's ability to round up support for its resolutions. As such, the vote reveals more about changing political alignments in the struggle for influence in Latin America than about human rights in Cuba. Votes by the Latin American members of the commission reflect current political trends in which much of South America is moving closer to regional unity and to Cuba while Mexico and other northern countries stick with the US.

This year, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico voted with the US, while Argentina, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru abstained. Only Cuba voted "no." A review of previous votes shows how the alignment has shifted. Argentina consistently sided with the US until the end of President Carlos Saul Menem's 10-year term in office (1989-1999) and has abstained since 2003 when President Nestor Kirchner took over.

Meanwhile, Mexico has gone in the opposite direction moving closer to the US starting with the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Mexico cast its last "no" vote in 1990, abstained in 2000 and 2001, and voted with the US against Cuba since 2002. The tone of

these resolutions has also shifted as various countries have tried to get resolutions against the US for human rights violations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, and to include in the resolutions on Cuba some mention of hardships caused by the US blockade of the island. Consequently, the US has had to avoid outright condemnation in the wording to get its resolutions passed, even with less than a majority of the 53-member body.

The 2002 resolution included a roundabout reference to the blockade, acknowledging Cuba's accomplishments in the area of social rights "despite an adverse international environment" (see NotiCen, 2002-05-02). Chanut, the representative the US wants to review human rights violations in Cuba, submitted a report to the UNCHR criticizing the blockade. "It is impossible," wrote Chanut, "to ignore the disastrous and lasting economic and social effects compounded in 2004 of the embargo imposed on the Cuban population over 40 years ago, as well as its impacts on civil and political rights."

A member of the US delegation disagreed with Chanut, saying that because the blockade allows humanitarian exceptions for food and medicine, "the facts that are raised in this allegation are not grounded." Mexico reignites feud with Cuba Mexico's vote sparked a round of invective from Cuba as it did in past years.

In 2004, President Vicente Fox Quesada's government recalled its ambassador from Havana, in part because of harsh criticism from Cuba over the Geneva vote (see SourceMex, 2004-05-12). The Cuban government is now treating Fox as if he had fallen into a deep hole by following in the wake of US policy. President Fidel Castro called Fox a "little sheep" of the US and advised him to resign. Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque advised Fox to look after his own human rights issues, especially the unsolved murders of hundreds of Mexicans near the US border, to which "the Mexican government has become an accomplice."

Besides Mexico's behavior in Geneva, Cuba is also incensed that wanted terrorist Luis Posada Carriles (see NotiCen, 2004-09-16) apparently passed through Mexico on his way to the US without being detained by Mexican immigration officials. Posada Carriles is seeking political asylum in the US. Unlike the diplomatic trauma of 2004, Cuba and Mexico have kept their ambassadors in place.

Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez responded to the harsh advice and insults from Havana with much greater restraint this year, declaring that Mexico's hand was extended to Cuba in friendship. "I dare say that the Mexican government is in no way disposed to see our relations with Cuba sink again to the levels of last year," Derbez said.

The Mexico City daily La Jornada speculated that Derbez's restraint was because Cuba is holding a winning hand 40 hours of videotape acquired from Mexican fugitive Carlos Ahumada, arrested in Cuba in 2004. The tapes are believed to contain material embarrassing to the Fox administration in its efforts to block Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador from running in the 2006 presidential election (see SourceMex, 2004-07-21). Perez Roque flatly accused the Fox administration of voting with the US in exchange for US support of Derbez in his race for the office of secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS).

If there was a deal, Fox got nothing out of it. Facing massive popular protests against his attorney general's attempts to jail Lopez Obrador, Fox backtracked. He accepted the attorney general's resignation and Derbez's withdrawal from the OAS competition, leaving the election to the Chilean candidate, socialist Jose Miguel Insulza (see NotiSur, 2005-05-06). Insulza is on record favoring a review of the US-engineered expulsion of Cuba from the OAS in 1962.

Cuba is also framing its critique of Mexico in terms of long-range historical shifts in Latin America. Perez Roque pictures a Mexico moving against "the winds of [regional] integration." EU threatens Cuba dialogue The EU delivered a double blow to Cuba, first voting against a Cuban resolution to condemn the US for human rights abuses at Guantanamo. It then voted with the US on the resolution against Cuba. All EU members on the commission Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom sided with the US.

When Brussels announced in January that the EU would soften its sanctions against Cuba, it promised to review its overall policy in June (see NotiCen, 2005-04-07). But Perez Roque is now questioning the EU's sincerity and independence from Washington and warning that Cuba might resume its own policy of limiting diplomatic contacts with the EU. Perez Roque suggested that the EU was "an ethical and moral midget," and that the EU vote meant that the rapprochement of just three months before was now "almost shipwrecked."

Rights commission under scrutiny

In closing remarks at the session, UNCHR High Commissioner Louise Arbour found it remarkable that resolutions were passed only against Belarus, Cuba, Myanmar, and North Korea. "There is something fundamentally wrong," Arbour said, "with a system in which the question of the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms in any part of the world is answered by reference to just four states."

Declaring the current system "not credible," Arbour recommended adoption of reforms recently suggested by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Annan has proposed eliminating the UNCHR in favor of a Human Rights Council whose members would be selected by the General Assembly. Under the current system, commission members are selected by regional groupings. Some critics say this system places human rights violators like China and Sudan on the very commission which is supposed to pass judgment on their records.

Cuba, of course, has repeatedly charged that the world's biggest violator of human rights is the US, which has been off the commission only once in 15 years. Cuba opposes the Annan reforms on grounds that they would do little to alter the power imbalance that gives the US and its allies a preeminent voice in UN affairs.

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