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Cuba Signs Agreement With Bolivia; Third Leg Of Revolutionary Triangle Is In Place

by Mike Leffert

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Reports of the failure of Che Guevara's 1966 attempt to revolutionize Bolivia may have been premature. The recent visit of Bolivia's President-elect Evo Morales to Cuba resulted in an agreement between the two nations that links them in the near-term inexorably, in a way never thought possible by Cold War ideologues. The visit came in the midst of Cuba's celebration of the 47th anniversary of the revolution.

More than an exercise in Che Lives! dogma, the visit resulted in a substantive agreement between the two nations that will aid Morales in trying to pull his most precarious of nations together and, with Venezuela, bring to three the number of nations seeking to offer Latin America an alternative to neoliberalism, the Washington Consensus, and hegemonic intrusion from the north. In point of fact, Morales is no Che.

His party, the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS), is rather more moderate than that. Morales temporarily lost some support last year when he declined to go along with calls to nationalize the oil industry by other more radical parties. At the time, he preferred renegotiating contracts to return more of the profits to the country (see NotiSur 2005-05-27). But he is not a pushover, either.

Seated beside Cuban President Fidel Castro at a meeting with Bolivian students studying medicine on the island, Morales told them and the world, "Together, all united, we are going to change the history not only of Bolivia, but of all Latin America and free ourselves from North American imperialism." Referring to the meeting in Havana as a "meeting of two revolutions," he added, "The struggle of the Cuban people, above all that of Che, has not been in vain. They produced the seed, and now there is fruit in all of Latin America."

Morales seized the moment to outline his new policy toward the US. "If they want bilateral diplomatic, commercial, relations, let them do it, but without submission, without subordination, without blackmail. They told us recently that, if you don't approve immunity for US soldiers in the Congress, Bolivia is going to suffer economically. The dignity of Bolivians is not negotiable."

The eleven-point agreement

The meeting with the students was occasioned by the terms of the agreement between the countries, which emphasized Cuba's commitment to fulfilling the medical needs of the underserved Bolivian poor. Cuba also agreed to help Bolivia overcome illiteracy and meet its energy needs. The eleven points of the agreement are as follows:

1. The countries will establish a nonprofit Cuban-Bolivian entity with the mission of providing high-quality ophthalmic surgery free of charge to all Bolivian citizens unable to afford the extremely high fees associated with such services, thereby avoiding a situation in which every year tens of thousands of poor Bolivians could lose their eyesight or suffer serious and often incapacitating vision impairment.

Cuba will provide leading-edge technology equipment together with the ophthalmologists needed for the initial stage; these specialists, supported by young Bolivian doctors trained at the Latin American School of Medical Sciences (ELAM) as residents, or other residents and doctors from Bolivia and other countries, will provide care of the highest quality to the Bolivian patients.

3. Cuba will pay the salaries of these specialists.

4. Bolivia will provide the facilities required for these services, which may be premises already in use for medical purposes or adapted for such.

5. The National Ophthalmology Institute, recently equipped by Cuba for eye surgery and staffed partly by Cuba with ELAM-graduate Bolivian specialists and residents who have already performed surgery on 1,536 Bolivians, will have two additional surgical facilities, in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz respectively. The La Paz Ophthalmology Center will have a capacity of 100 operations daily, while the Cochabamba and Santa Cruz clinics will each handle half that number. These facilities combined will be able to perform eye surgery on at least 50,000 people annually. This overall capacity may be increased should Bolivia decide to offer ophthalmologic services to poor patients in neighboring countries near the Bolivian centers.

6. Cuba offers Bolivia 5,000 full scholarships for training doctors and specialists in comprehensive general medicine and other medical disciplines: 2,000 during the first quarter of 2006, who are already undergoing basic preparation in Cuba; 2000 in the second half of the year, and 1,000 in the first quarter of 2007. In later years, the quotas thus established will be filled by new candidates. The numbers mentioned do not include the 497 Bolivian youths already studying medicine at medical science faculties in Cuba.

7. Cuba will provide Bolivia with the know-how, teaching materials, and technical facilities needed for a literacy program covering the entire relevant population. The two nations will work together to complete the program within 30 months, beginning July 2006.

8. Cuba will provide Bolivia with details of the experience with its energy-saving program.

9. Cuba will provide its full support for the development of sports in Bolivia, in those disciplines of interest to its people.

10. The parties will seek ways to maximize academic, scientific, and cultural exchanges between the Bolivian and Cuban peoples.

11. Other forms of beneficial, useful, and constructive cooperation between the two countries will be considered.

Speaking to the 400 young Bolivian medical students, all of whom are under full scholarship (see NotiCen, 2005-08-25), neither Castro nor Morales spelled out the details of the literacy program,

but Cuba has provided similar programs to other countries, including to the second leg of the revolutionary triangle, Venezuela. Cuba usually sends advisors with educational materials to work with local teachers who then teach reading and writing to the population. This follows a pattern carried out in Cuba in the first years after the 1959 revolution of sending young teachers into remote and otherwise underserved areas.

The quick agreement between the two leaders is not the result of momentary mutual opportunism. Castro and Morales have known each other for years. The 46-year-old Morales clearly sees himself as a member of a new generation in a venerable project of Latin American revolution. He described his visit as "a meeting between two generations of fighters for dignity and independence."

Castro's chance to test the new alliance

For Castro, the election of Morales creates not only the third leg of the triangle, but also the opportunity to test the notion of social cooperation that he and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez have long been planning. As the Venezuelan analyst Alberto Garrido put it, "This close, years-long relationship between Fidel, Chavez, and Morales is going to be, as Morales has anticipated, a headache for Washington, which has a corporatist government with oil-company directors who appear to be more concerned with counting the formidable profits of the oil lobby than with figuring out what will be the positioning of this new left that now incorporates indigenismo and a new methodology for the taking of power [through elections]."

Garrido is author of several books on the development of this movement. A historian and journalist, he is thought to be among the most nuanced of Chavez critics. He has said the motor of the new movement is Venezuela with the premier oil and gas reserves in South America, now teamed with Bolivia, which has the second-largest gas reserves. "The thesis of the energetic ring that Chavez is continuing to develop with Petroamerica as its formal base now definitively incorporates gas, and, from there, very important countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile will become dependent upon them," he explained, fleshing out the dimensions of the US headache.

Beyond the gas reserves, Morales adds to the revolutionary project first conceived by Fidel, "the indigenous force that has been underestimated for centuries, and which has re-emerged in a spectacular fashion." He predicted that the "Morales effect would spill over onto Peru and Ecuador, where there is a powerful indigenous movement, the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE), which has a political arm, the Pachakutik party." Pachakutik in turn forms part of the Congreso Bolivariano de los Pueblos, a fierce opponent of the US-inspired Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). They also stand against the transnational oil companies and Plan Colombia.

Garrido said he thinks that the accord between Castro and Morales, and other agreements that include Chavez, are the outcome of "a political idea whose motor is the final confrontation, not necessarily in the short term, with the United States, which is thought of as the imperium. Chavez has been the spearhead of all this, just as Fidel has been the head of the revolution. Chavez has said a thousand times, as has Fidel, that he has a process of revolutionary fusion with Cuba." He pointed

to the many bilateral agreements between the two countries that involve nearly all aspects of life in the two countries. "Now," he said, "Bolivia is incorporated as well."

For Garrido, the Cuban-Revolution-cum-Bolivarian-revolution is set to break out of Latin America to include a tactical alliance with Spain and strategic links with Iran, China, and Russia. He said a new multipolarity is forming that encompasses the Middle East in pacts that will make global-energy predictions extremely difficult. If the analyst is even partly right, Castro emerges from the Bolivian elections with an enhanced global presence that will require more than an embargo for the US to deal with.

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