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Region's Presidents Meet To Integrate Police, Promote Megaproject, And Denounce A Wall

by LADB Staff

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Central American heads of state met in Tegucigalpa Oct. 3 for an "extraordinary summit" on security and other issues of mutual concern. Among the twenty-odd issues they agreed to in their final statement, the Declaration of Tegucigalpa, was a plan to create an integrated multinational police force. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to an air-travel accord that would allow commercial and private air traffic to fly between the countries as though national, rather than international flights. Mexico's president-elect Felipe Calderon attended the summit as a special guest with a special mission.

Calderon asked for, and got, support from his colleagues to repudiate the 1,125 km wall the US is building on its border with Mexico (see SourceMex, 2006-10-11). The leadership of Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, and El Salvador, all of whose countries contribute their citizens to the wave of northern migration, had already expressed their opposition to the Berlin Wall approach to immigration problems and eagerly signed Calderon's proposal urging the US Congress to implement multilateral immigration reform and reconsider the wall.

In reality, the bill has already passed both houses of the legislature and the president has said he would sign it, making the Tegucigalpa statement little more than a show of regional scorn.

Guatemala's President Oscar Berger brought up the measure, saying, "Walls don't resolve anything; their construction seems to us absurd. We don't want our people to continue being divided in search of the American dream. Let it be a Central American dream." It is clear that the Central Americans regard the horizon-to-horizon iron curtain as much an insult as a worthless exercise to stop migration.

"We need recognition of the valuable work our co-nationals do in that country, and the support it provides for the thousands of families in our countries," said El Salvador's Foreign Minister Francisco Lainez.

Charles Ford, US Ambassador to Honduras, responded that his country receives these commentaries with pleasure and would see that these views were taken into account. He said, "The government of my country has a great commitment to seek an integrated solution that would have a component of border protection, but also increases in quotas of migration and a temporary work program."

Quick response to police integration

The question of security integration was perhaps the issue most effectively dealt with, at least in terms of turnaround time. A week after agreement at the summit, police representatives from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras met in Esquipulas, Guatemala, to work on establishing a joint police force to deal with organized crime and border crime. "The fundamental objective is the creation of a trinational force, as the presidents demanded in Honduras," said Honduras police commissioner Jose Roberto Romero. "Among the goals is information and experience exchange, and the creation of combined police forces to have a direct relationship between the police of the three countries."

Crimes to be addressed collaboratively would be kidnapping, auto theft, residential burglary, extortion, and traffic in drugs and migrants. "There are criminal gangs operating on the borders and they must be combated...the creation of the trinational force will be necessary to reduce the impact of these criminal gangs," said Romero. Of particular concern is the growing technological sophistication of the criminal organizations.

"In Europe, Europol exists already, and it was before the borders were opened, because it is necessary to be on alert before something regrettable happens," said director of El Salvador's Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), Rodrigo Avila. Avila recalled that his country created in 2005 a binational force with Guatemala. He said the force has reduced the incidence of attacks on merchants and tourists. "With the opening of the borders between the three countries, organized crime takes advantage of these conditions, so it is urgent to take this kind of precaution to combat it." He said the formation of a force in the northern triangle of countries is a first step toward a Central American police force.

Security was not just on the agenda for the summit, it was also a concern at the meeting. The leaders gathered some 30 km outside Tegucigalpa, away from protest groups. But even there, a sizeable crowd blocked access to the Zambrano Country Club protesting several related issues. The Presidents arrived by helicopter direct from the Tegucigalpa airport. Mostly indigenous, the groups rallied against the presence of Calderon, whose election, they said, was fraudulent. The Consejo Civico de Organizaciones Populares e Indigenas de Honduras (COPINH) led the demonstrations.

They issued a statement saying, "We repudiate the presence of Felipe Calderon, since his designation as President of Mexico is the product of shameless electoral fraud." The group also expressed their opposition to Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), the multi-billion-dollar Mexican initiative that has been creeping along for years, but which Calderon has said he wants to re-invigorate (see NotiCen, 2005-06-16 and 2004-07-29).

The COPINH statement lashed back, "The peoples of Central America, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Colombia live in the most grotesque insecurity, product of the implantation of the neoliberal system that impels the free trade treaties and the Plan Puebla Panama, which translate into the loss of food security, jobs, labor and land rights, and a healthy environment."

Security from the people's point of view

On the question of security, the COPINH statement laments that these treaties "bring with them their component of militarization on the part of the North American armada and then, on the

pretext of offering citizen security, create the police state, converting them into the gendarmes of the transnationals and their interests." The statement said that the Central American governments' interest in creating new forms of police "will increase the repression against the peoples of the area, and state terrorism."

Rather, COPINH recommended, "citizen security must develop in an integrated manner, not with policies of death and repression like those the international financial organizations promote, but guaranteeing health, education, housing, and the right to land." Groups like this one have been moderately successful in forestalling the pretensions of the PPP project, whose tentacles seem ever ready to engulf indigenous enclaves and turn them into tourist attractions.

PPP entails a vast network of cables and generators to deliver electrical power from Mexico to Colombia, and roads to feed the need for ever-expanding markets. The fact that their presidents encourage Calderon to pick up where Mexican President Vicente Fox will leave off on Dec. 1 portends a renewed period of struggle against PPP. Before the summit, Calderon visited the presidents in their own countries to get the ball rolling again. He is promoting a package of more than 100 individual development initiatives within an overall scheme that has already consumed some US\$7 billion.

In Costa Rica he found conditional support from President Oscar Arias, currently embroiled in a push to get CAFTA ratified in his legislature while opposition clogs his streets. Arias is an avid fan of free trade, but has lately railed not only against the popular movements, but against the rich and powerful countries as well. He agreed with Calderon on relaunching PPP, but on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the greater plan for which PPP would serve as conduit, he accused the US and others of "great hypocrisy." Arias said, "there are many stumbling blocks, proving the lack of will of many of the countries, the richest, of Asia and Japan, of the European Union and the United States, which do not cede part of their privileges. We see the hypocrisy of many of these countries that speak in favor of free trade but do not practice it."

Arias was referring to the most recent meeting of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Doha Round, which broke down over First World refusal to end subsidies (see NotiCen, 2006-09-14). "The hypocrisy shown in the Doha Round is what has made one think about regional trade liberalization schemes like FTAA. But we have to take into account also that in this hemisphere there are many governments that are always demanding things that other countries can't comply with. That's why progress has been so slow," he said.

He indicated, however, that his momentary anger couldn't be taken to mean lack of support for free trade. "For the economies as small as the Central American ones, trade is vital. We have to be the Phoenicians of the 21st century. We must be, more and more, merchants." Costa Rica has much to gain from promoting the best possible relationship with Mexico.

The bilateral trade agreement between the two has been good for Costa Rica. "In general terms," said Arias, "in these four years I will do everything possible to improve this relationship. On trade, it has been beneficial. Costa Rican exports have increased 12 times, while Mexican exports have increased six times."

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