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Chile's President Visits Guatemala, Pledges Help With Police and Social Issues

by Mike Leffert

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Chile's President Michelle Bachelet touched down in Guatemala for a two-day visit, during which she attended the XLVIII Assembly of Governors of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and responded to a plea from President Oscar Berger for Chile to help restructure Guatemala's discredited police forces. Bachelet also used the occasion to announce her expectation that Chile and Guatemala would complete a trade agreement within three months. Chile has trade agreements in place in the region with Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Panama.

At the bank meeting, she and IDB president Luis Alberto Moreno signed an agreement establishing a fund to support the introduction, development, and implementation of modern technologies in Latin America and the Caribbean. The beneficiary countries will be Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. The fund will finance technical cooperation including grants, scholarships, assistantships, and projects in technological innovation. A press release said, "The new fund will permit the countries of the Central American region to gain access to processes of technology transfer of a high level similar to those created in developed countries, but from a model closer to their own realities, and with recognized success."

Chile's first woman president took the opportunity to encourage the advancement of Guatemalan women. Bachelet told a gathering of more than 300 women leaders that the main objective of feminist struggle is "to see that no one is left behind." The Women's Secretariat of the Presidency organized the gathering of political and societal leaders, activists, and students. Bachelet said that, thanks to women like them, there have been important advances in gender equity throughout Latin America, but the struggle is not over. "It is a good sign, but it is still seen as an exception and not the general rule," she said. "Gender parity must be something natural." Democracy will not be complete, she told her audience, "until women have the full exercise of their economic, political, and gender rights." She continued, "Women are the majority and we must not allow ourselves to exercise an incomplete citizenship, we must continue the struggle to achieve a dignity equivalent to that of men."

Conspicuously absent at the event was Rigoberta Menchu, who has announced serious plans to run for president of Guatemala. Bachelet made no mention of her, but it was reported that the two met briefly before the meeting of women took place. Menchu had been invited to the event and had been expected to attend. Some days before the Chilean president's arrival, Vice President Eduardo Stein told the media that the government would "request prompt assistance on security matters" from Bachelet. "We will solicit the presence of Chilean experts to collaborate with us in training and accompaniment" in the process of restructuring the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC).

The Guatemalan police have taken a terrible beating in the aftermath of the killings of three Salvadoran parliamentarians and the subsequent murders of four policemen charged in the case

(see NotiCen, 2007-03-01 and 2007-02-22). Any residual credibility the PNC had was lost when Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann, whom Berger had ordered to start a process of purging the police, was accused of ordering the killings. Chile to help with police restructuring On March 18, Bachelet offered "all her support" to the Guatemalan government with the police-restructuring effort. She said, "We have all the will and disposition to collaborate in something that is so important for Guatemala. It is an area that we are going to work on in detail in the bilateral commission." She said that in coming days they would determine the specifics of the help they would proffer.

The assistance would come "through the civilian police [of Chile] or through the military police such as the carabineros." Berger responded that his government's request was based on "the international recognition in security matters that Chile has had, where insecurity and violence are insignificant." Berger said that the specifics of Chile's participation in police reform would be announced next week, but Stein has said separately, "Internal control and the organized crime investigation unit are the two prime sections where we want the instruction of the Chilean experts to start, and where we expect the aid to begin." He said the way in which the Chilean carabineros was formed is the model most appropriate to the Guatemalan situation.

On the trade pact, the presidents said they would work to unblock negotiations that stalled five years ago on issues having to do with sugar and meat exports. Guatemala wants to sell more sugar, Chile, more beef. Bachelet said, "There are points of discussion that we have to continue working on. Our intention is to keep working for three months toward solutions for a common accord." She said the final agreement would be within the framework of agreements Chile has already concluded with other Central American countries. Berger said, "In three months we will conclude the negotiations so that Central America will have totally free trade with Chile."

Before leaving for the next stop on her tour, Mexico, Bachelet received an honoris causa doctorate from the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC) in recognition of "her high professional merits in the field of health, as well as for her years of political struggle against the military dictatorship, and, naturally, for being the first woman to occupy the presidency of her nation." The ceremony lauded her as well because, "One year and two months after the start of her term, in Chile they have increased the level of employment and health attention to the most vulnerable population. Also, she has supported values such as tolerance, respect, and common understanding among all Chileans."

-- End --