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## Guatemala's President Visits Cuba, Offers Extraordinary Apology

by LADB Staff

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President Alvaro Colom turned a page in Guatemala's annals on Feb. 17 when he apologized "as president and head of state, and as commander in chief of the Guatemalan Army." In a speech at the Universidad de la Habana, he told his audience of academics and officials, "Today I want to ask Cuba's forgiveness for having offered our country, our territory, to prepare an invasion of Cuba." In begging pardon for his country's participation in the US's failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, Colom was unstinting but precise: "It wasn't us, but it was our territory." The April 17, 1961, operation to overthrow the Fidel Castro government, grim in intent and design but a joke in bungled execution, was the opening salvo in a half century of US policy long condemned by the international community as misguided. Colom said that his apology was meant as "a sign of solidarity," and that "times are changing." The times have changed rather much since early 1960, when US President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) project to train Cuban exiles for the invasion, and Guatemalan President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes allowed the use of Guatemalan territory, in Retalhuleu, for a training camp. The ragtag 2506 Brigade landed at Playa Larga at the Bay of Pigs. Less than 72 hours later, at Playa Giron, Castro's forces snuffed the never-to-be-repeated episode. The independence Cuba exercised in the face of overwhelming northern hegemony has come only lately to Guatemala, to the very obvious appreciation of its current president. "Cuba deserves its own destiny, a destiny you all built with this revolution of fifty years," Colom told the crowd, and, perhaps unnecessarily, exhorted them, "Defend it. Defend it like you have always done." A long applause followed. There was perhaps a hint of regret in Colom's energetic call. His country did not defend its 1944 revolution when Eisenhower's government toppled the government of President Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954) in 1954. Arbenz had beaten Ygidoras in a landslide to become president. And there was no one to save Ygidoras from the same fate in 1963 when he approved the return from exile of the author of the 1944 revolution, ex-President Juan Jose Arevalo (1945-1951), to run again for president. That would have been too much for the US, then governed by President John F. Kennedy. So the US allowed Ygidoras' overthrow, opening the door to three more decades of the devastating Civil War that might never otherwise have happened. If Colom had some envy for the Cuban Revolution, he also had gratitude. The subject of the speech in which he apologized was Social Development in Guatemala, and in it he recounted the substantial help Cuba has given in medical aid that includes more than 2 million medical procedures in the most rural areas of the country that Cuban doctors have done over the years. These included more than 40,000 ophthalmologic operations. At present, Cuba has some 400 physicians working in Guatemala. Colom's compatriots also have benefited from Cuban aid to education and literacy and aid to energy projects. Conservatives infuriated Colom's gesture of thanks brought down upon him a torrent of vehement repudiation back home. He conferred upon former President Fidel Castro the Order of the Quetzal, the highest honor Guatemala can bestow upon a noncitizen. The private sector, although eager to do business of any kind with the island, is also ideologically of the right, and outrage was swift. The intention to bestow the honor was made known in advance of the trip to Cuba, and some from the business community elected to stay at

home rather than be party to honoring the Cuban ex-president. "Nobody's going. We prefer not to go because we are not in agreement with giving the Order of the Quetzal to that tyrant," said Carlos Zuniga, president of the Camara del Agro. "It's a political visit, not a commercial one," said an apparently disillusioned Tomas Dougherty of the Camara de Industria. "I don't know what criteria the government followed to bestow the distinction. We don't know what he has done to receive the Order of the Quetzal," said Armando Boesche of the Asociacion de Azucareros de Guatemala (AZASGUA). If it was any consolation to these commentators, Colom never got to see Fidel; he gave the medal to President Raul Castro, to pass on. If the private sector did not know what Fidel has done, humanitarian organizations did. "I have been shocked by such aggressive language, a language appropriate to the 1970s, when in Guatemala a war was going on and human rights were being violated by the army and clandestine paramilitaries," said rights leader Mario Polanco. Polanco was reacting specifically to Castro being called a "tyrant," and his response was apparently aimed at the private sector's unified support of the Guatemalan state during the period. He ripped the business sector for its "intolerance," reminding them that Colom, from a long line of social democrats (see NotiCen, 2008-07-24), lost family members to the war. Fernando Barillo, Colom's spokesman, had much the same take on the private sector's reaction. "It is a display of ingratitude to the Cuban people and government, which has been much more in solidarity with the country than many other sectors," he said. While there is little question that many members of the business community remain committed to the Cold War way of looking at things, it is also the case that their fortunes have been linked to maintaining solidarity with US policy on most issues. They are very reluctant to rattle the country they see as benefactor and trade partner. So they were additionally discomfited to hear their president hold forth on the subject of the US blockade of Cuba. Immediately upon arrival at Jose Marti International Airport, Colom told welcoming diplomats and reporters of his disapproval of the nearly 50-year-old blockade, calling it unjust and anachronistic. The trend is his friend Analysts and onlookers do not see Colom's moves as particularly risky. The administration of US President Barack Obama in Washington is universally expected to be different and more tolerant than was the administration of President George W. Bush. And Colom is scarcely alone in his overtures to Cuba. He is only the fifth head of state to visit in the last six weeks, preceded by Presidents Martin Torrijos of Panama, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner of Argentina, and Michelle Bachelet of Chile. Colom has cast his lot with these and has spoken of the advantages of doing so. He said he would seek even more doctors from Cuba, if he could get them, and would look to form a partnership with Panama, if not all of Central America, to buy vaccines from Cuba at a reduced price. He said that Torrijos, during his visit to Cuba, had broached the idea with authorities there. The president said that the business community's last-minute refusal to go to Cuba hardly amounted to a boycott; 24 ended up going, most of them in the pharmaceutical and medical-equipment field. Looking to improve trade, he said that Cuba is interested in Guatemalan meat products and also that there is a plan to link Cuban and Guatemalan tourism. Flores, in the Peten, is the gateway to Mayan ruins and is only an hour and a half from Havana. Colom has big, though seriously controversial, plans to develop those sites (see NotiCen, 2008-09-11). Colom said the banking sector in Guatemala is frightened of US reprisals if it facilitates financial links with Cuba, but Credito Hipotecario Nacional (CHN), a full-service institution, has broken away and is interested in taking the risk. As for the Quetzal flap, Colom found it useful and instructive. He told Prensa Libre, "Honestly I believe it was a moment to evaluate where we are still polarized, because Guatemalan history says many things. I said upon leaving Guatemala that I have already overcome the bile of the past: I had four family members killed. We have to overcome the past. Our generation has to carry with them the tragedy of the

past; we must not pass it on to new generations because if we do, Guatemala is not going to move forward. I respect their position [the businesspeople], and, as a citizen, I understand it very well. I believe what it indicates is that there is a lot of work to do for the unity of the country and harmony between sectors. It is part of the work that we all must do."

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