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Region: Meeting With U.S. Vice President Vexed By Poor Planning, Lack Of Cohesion, And Lack Of Firm U.S. Commitment

by LADB Staff

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Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias invited Central America's presidents to San Jose to meet with US Vice President Joseph Biden. Arias and Biden did not draw a full house to the event, casting some doubt on the remaining luster of the former and the relevance of the latter as the region struggles with economic issues. Arias said he was seeking to resume his 1980s role as regional spokesman, when he was credited with bringing peace to the region and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. For Biden, the visit was a warm-up for the comprehensive Summit of the Americas scheduled for April 17-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. President Barack H. Obama is expected at that meeting. Presidents Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Manuel Zelaya of Honduras replied they would not be attending. This was a significant snub. The San Jose meeting would be the first between the Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) and the Obama administration, and Ortega is the current holder of the organization's rotating presidency. Ortega said he would send one of his vice chancellors instead. The low rank of the envoy was meant to underscore, according to Ortega, US and Costa Rican failure to consult SICA in the planning. Zelaya had much the same complaint, punctuated by his choice of envoy, the very recently picked Vice President Aristides Mejia. Zelaya further revealed to reporters a letter he sent to Obama in December, advising him to abandon US policies of "interventionism" and demanding respect for "the principle of nonintervention in the affairs of other states." The diplomatic principle of tit-for-tat and strategic realignment are thought to have motivated the refusals. Arias did not attend the SICA summit in Managua a week ago, and his stand-in, Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno, did not sign the final declaration. Managua and Tegucigalpa have also associated with the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas (ALBA). But perhaps the most powerful reason is the open enmity between Arias and Ortega. Diplomatic sources told ACAN-EFE that Arias and Stagno "have informally gone around the international diplomatic sphere, bilateral and multilateral, soliciting the suspension of all aid to the government of Nicaragua while Ortega maintains power with the practices that characterize him." Whether at Arias' urging or not, the US is withholding US\$64 million, and the European Union (EU) has frozen another US\$31 million in aid, pending resolution of allegations of fraud in Nicaragua's 2008 municipal elections (see NotiCen, 2008-11-13). US nixes Dominican Republic To cap the already messy conclave planning, Arias invited the Dominican Republic's President Leonel Fernandez. The reason was obvious and simple. The country, geography notwithstanding, is an SICA associate, and, as a member of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the Dominican Republic is, for commercial and economic reasons, de facto a Central American country. The agreement is even called in many quarters DR-CAFTA. But Washington vetoed Fernandez, forcing Costa Rica's Ambassador to Santo Domingo Marta Nunez Madriz to explain that the US objected because the Dominican Republic is Caribbean, not Central American. The embarrassment extended further with the need for Fernandez to step forward to tell the world, through his Foreign Ministry, that he "in no way" felt offended by his exclusion. Press accounts of the fouled-up protocol used the Latin term *excusatio non petita* an unprovoked excuse is an obvious accusation to describe the situation. The affair did

nothing to improve Biden's reputation for gaffes, even though the mistake was not definitively his. It also took some of the glitter from the vice president's acclaimed foreign-policy credentials. In the Dominican Republic, few were buying the excuse attributed to Biden by Dominican Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso, "We were informed that the American vice president will hold regional meetings, and we were included in the Caribbean nations." A competing idea, that the disinvitation was intended to punish Fernandez, was gaining some adherents on Hispanola's east side. Fernandez recently visited Cuba and met with former President Fidel Castro for more than two hours. Fernandez also has strong ties to ALBA leader and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. The Cuba theory, right or wrong, highlights recent US denials that it would lift the blockade it has used to bully Cuba to little effect for half a century. Both Arias and El Salvador's President-elect Mauricio Funes, who attended the meeting, have announced their intentions to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba. That decision leaves the US completely isolated in the hemisphere on this issue. The problem for Biden, then, is that diplomatic relations with Cuba is the one and only issue on which all of Central America agrees and speaks with a single voice. Even the substance of the meetings reflected a lack of unity. Central America's demands of the US are those enumerated at the conclusion of the SICA meeting in Managua, the one Arias did not attend and whose final document his government did not sign. Among the demands was the seemingly endless issue of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to give some security to Central Americans living and working in the US. Central America wants the US to view the relationship differently, emphasizing social and cultural programs over trade. The region wants the US to treat migration of its peoples in the context of development, rather than as a security matter. No early relief from noxious policies The US deported 80,000 people from its territory in 2008, more than the region could reintegrate and find jobs for. As it staggers under the weight of this population, it is further stressed by the loss of the remittances that these people sent home each month. Biden could not give the presidents any assurances and instead asked them to wait for a coherent immigration reform to make its way through the government and the Congress. Biden explained in a news conference, "It's a difficult time to tell a constituency while unemployment is rising, they're losing their jobs and their homes, that what we should do is in fact legalize, and stop all deportation. We believe, the president and I, that this problem can only be solved in the context of an overall immigration reform." For Central Americans, Biden's holistic approach did not offer the immediate relief they need. The vice president was indefinite, giving no details on how or when this reform would materialize. He was clear, though, that "there will not be an immediate response to deportations." That was not what the leaders of a region that saw the money their nationals send home decline by 4% in the last quarter of 2008 wanted to hear. The remittances have grown every year prior to the downturn and are now a major source of income for the countries. Remittances have been part of the growth in the region that has permitted some of the countries to come out from under what much of Latin America has come to see as the tyranny and predatory nature of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Now, those institutions are being offered as a means of salvation. A week before Biden's arrival, Thomas Shannon, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said Biden was working on getting them loans from these same institutions. Another hint that change in the short term would be negligible was the outlook on the drug war. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently acknowledged US failure to control the demand that is the foundation of much of Latin America's domestic chaos and violence. But now, Biden is telling the isthmus that the US will be pumping even more money into the drug war on their soil by increasing the Merida Initiative money to US\$100 million from US\$65 million in 2008 (see SourceMex, 2008-06-11). And, he said, "We hope to keep it there in the coming years." Arias had said during a recent trip

to Mexico that he would be asking Biden for more drugs money and that he would remind the vice president of Clinton's remarks. He also wants a stop to US supplies of weapons that arm the cartels (see SourceMex, 04-01-09). "The cartels' weaponry comes from the United States, between 80% and 90% of it," said Arias. The Costa Rican government has submitted a treaty to halt arms to the region to the UN, but, lamented Arias, "Ironically, the chief exporters of weapons are the five permanent members of the Security Council." US still blockading itself on Cuba Pressed on Cuba, Biden told the media that the administration needs a "firm commitment" on democratic and human rights issues but that, "over the next decade, there are likely to be and need to be changes in the relationship with Cuba and the United States. President Obama and I campaigned on a platform that said we are willing to reach out, and I think you will see us reach out." For the region, it is not outreach they are looking for, it is lifting the blockade. The administration has already lifted some restrictions of former President George W. Bush's administration (see NotiCen 2009-03-12), and there have been hints of further easing before Obama has to face the whole region in Trinidad and Tobago. But these seem to be on matters more of domestic interest to the US than to Cuba or its advocates. Loosening trade barriers will satisfy the agriculture sector, including farm-state Republicans, but this, too, is largely Bush-era rehash. Only threats of presidential veto prevented these from passing as long as two years ago Some in the US Senate who are favorable to eventually removing the blockade are discussing liberalizing legislation as a step toward this outcome. Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND) is from one of the farm states eager to sell to Cuba. He said of legislation that would open this market to his state's agriculture and allow free travel to the island, "I believe that we have finally reached a new level in this matter. I think there are enough votes in both the House and the Senate to finally pass it and send it to the president." Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT) co-sponsored the bill with Dorgan and agreed with the step-by-step approach to the blockade. He thinks the present legislation can be passed over the opposition of hard-liners and Cuban-Americans in the legislature, but not a total rescission. "My feeling at this time is, that is a step too far," he said. Cuba reportedly has the same feeling. Vice Minister of Tourism Maria Elena Lopez confirmed stepped-up tourism infrastructure, including golf courses, but stopped just a tad short of saying it was all based on an influx from the US. "Cuban tourism prepares itself to respond to the market," she said, but added that the US potential is considered as just one more country. "We prepare ourselves for everyone," she added equitably. The preparations are elaborate and appear to ignore current economic conditions. There have even been changes to the law to permit nonresident foreigners to buy real estate. One project for which the law was designed is a private club that would have for sale 720 villas, apartments, and residences at prices from US\$150,000 to US\$1.3 million. Lopez said there is no plan to drop prices.

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