

4-16-2009

## U.S. President Barack Obama To Tread Lightly At Summit Of The Americas, Will Meet With Central America's Presidents

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "U.S. President Barack Obama To Tread Lightly At Summit Of The Americas, Will Meet With Central America's Presidents." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9694>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **U.S. President Barack Obama To Tread Lightly At Summit Of The Americas, Will Meet With Central America's Presidents**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Region*

*Published: Thursday, April 16, 2009*

US President Barak H. Obama will have a full schedule at the upcoming hemispheric meeting of heads of state, the Fifth Summit of the Americas, at Trinidad and Tobago, which begins April 17. Among the many issues he will have to discuss with his Latin American counterparts and one thing already on his schedule is a meeting with the presidents of the countries of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA). This is a make-up session for an opportunity missed when a meeting with the same cast set for San Jose, Costa Rica, came off badly. Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias intended for the presidents to meet not with Obama but with US Vice President Joseph Biden. The plans went awry, however, when Presidents Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Mel Zelaya of Honduras declined to show up (see NotiCen, 2009-04-02). The US Embassy in Managua confirmed that Obama had invited the Central Americans to a separate meeting at the summit and that the invitation observed protocol in going through President Ortega, president pro tem of SICA. Arias' failure to follow that procedure was one of the reasons for the empty seats at the Biden event. The oversight was not a small matter. Sandinista economist and former Nicaraguan minister of foreign trade Alejandro Martínez Cuenca explained to the Tico Times that it meant that the US missed a chance to create a basis for a new relationship with the region by "prioritizing personal relations with Arias over respect for Central America's institutional order." US diplomacy also erred by overriding an invitation to the Dominican Republic's President Leonel Fernández. The Dominican Republic is a SICA associate member, and US failure to recognize that recalled the same northern arrogance and ignorance that has marked relations in the past. The region is now looking for relations based on "mutual respect and cooperation," said Martínez. Obama's de facto recognition of institutional order is a step in that direction but also represents a step backward for Arias in what has been reported to be a head-to-head contest with Ortega for leadership of a unified isthmus in hemispheric affairs. The countries have long been on notice that only by acting in a unified fashion will their voice be heard in the global context. Arias was clearly looking back to an era long over, when he called Biden's visit "clear recognition of the trajectory of Costa Rica as the United States' strategic partner in the region." Still, the Obama invitation to the region must be seen more as a victory for Central America than for Ortega. The Nicaraguan president is under a cloud for undemocratic activity at home (see NotiCen, 2008-11-13), is not well-respected internationally, and will very soon rotate out of his leadership position in SICA. Kevin Casas, formerly with the Arias administration and now a foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, noted in March, "Nobody wants to be in the picture with Ortega. Having Ortega speak for Central America would be deeply embarrassing for the region." That may be. But Obama's meeting makes Casas' judgment questionable when he notes that the other countries do not "care an awful lot about what Central America has to say." Indications are that all eyes will be on Obama as he attempts to overcome the sorry history of US relations with its southern neighbors. Most reports indicate that, beyond the towering import of the recession, global warming, the fractious drug war, poverty, unbridled organized crime, and other things, the new US president's main goal is to improve his country's

shattered relationship with the hemisphere, especially after years of perceived neglect during the administration of former President George W. Bush. Cautious, respectful diplomacy Obama will touch down in Trinidad and Tobago only after stopping in Mexico to meet with President Felipe Calderon. When he gets to the islands, staffers say he will comport himself with humility and caution. "He is not going to Trinidad with a plan for the hemisphere," said former US ambassador to Mexico and Venezuela Jeffrey Davidow, now an Obama advisor. "He is going to Trinidad with the intention of listening, discussing, and dealing with his colleagues as partners." While still a candidate, Obama did not spend a great deal of time on the relationship with Latin America, but he did say that the fortunes of the US are "fundamentally tied to the future of the Americas," and he did say that his country would cease being "negligent toward our friends." There has been a good deal of speculation that many of Obama's 33 homologues will want to bring the matter of Cuba's absence at the affair to a head. Many have noted that his lifting travel restrictions was an attempt not just to begin a policy shift toward the island but also to prevent the US blockade of Cuba and its 1962 US-forced suspension from the Organization of American States (OAS) from dominating the agenda. There is every likelihood that Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez will see to it that the matter comes up, and there is some probability that the Central American presidents, who are far more favorable to the Cuban regime than their predecessors were just a few short years ago, will use some of their time to press the question. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, perhaps the most influential voice in Latin America, has also signaled his interest in seeing the US change course on Cuba (see NotiSur, 2009-04-17). Ambassador Davidow danced artfully around the issue. "It would be unfortunate if the principal theme of this meeting turned out to be Cuba," he said, but there would be no US attempt to "stifle conversation on any topic." Haiti is another Caribbean nation seeking to be noticed at the summit. US Rep. Kendrick Meek (D-FL) represents a Haitian American district and will be on hand in Trinidad to see that Haiti makes the most of the Caribbean setting. The impossibly poor country needs all the US attention it can get, and high on its list is temporary protected status (TPS) for its citizens in the US. "Haiti has to be one of the bigger discussions when the Americas come together for a summit," said Meek, pointing out one of the country's most notable distinctions. "It's the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere." Haiti will get a boost from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who will stop over in Port-au-Prince on her way to the summit. She told The Miami Herald that the administration is reviewing the Haitian deportation policy. She told the reporter, "We are reviewing the policy and we know what a great source of income the remittances are that flow from...principally the United States back to Haiti." She said the administration is sympathetic and recognizes the burden that would be placed on Haiti if it had to accommodate thousands of deportees, so they will "try to come up with some appropriate responses to the challenges posed."

-- End --