7-4-2013

Guatemala Hosts 43rd OAS General Assembly

Louisa Reynolds

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

Recommended Citation


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.
Guatemala Hosts 43rd OAS General Assembly

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Region

Published: 2013-07-04

The drug problem should be tackled not as a security issue but as a public health question with policies for "prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation," delegations from the 34 countries participating in the 43rd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed.

The theme of the three-day meeting, which opened on June 4 in the city of Antigua, Guatemala, was "For a Comprehensive Policy Against the World Drug Problem in the Americas."

The final Declaration of Antigua said the drug problem should be fought "with an integrated, strengthened, balanced, and multifaceted approach, with full respect for human rights and individual liberties, incorporating public health, education, and social inclusion."

However, the assembly ended without including the themes of decriminalization or legalization in its final Declaration of Antigua, as some countries had hoped.

Also, despite the agreement that the issue should be addressed from a public health standpoint instead of the law-enforcement approach used in most countries in the region today, the declaration does not include concrete actions or a road map for the future. This was to be expected though, since Guatemalan Foreign Minister Fernando Carrera had warned during the inaugural press conference that the purpose of the assembly would be "to produce a framework of ideas that will redirect drug policy and produce inputs that will make it possible to work out a new hemispheric strategy."

Political scientist Eduardo Vergara, director of the Chilean think tank Asuntos del Sur, said the Declaration of Antigua is a watershed in the region’s war on drugs. "Progress has undoubtedly been made. We’ve turned the page without looking back, and, based on this consensus, many doors can be opened to move toward anti-drugs policies that are fiscally responsible, based on solid evidence and respect for human rights. That is a great achievement for American states. Substantial progress has been made since the Cartagena summit was held a year ago. Although member states haven’t put forward specific reform proposals, at least they have agreed that the current policies are not working," says Vergara.

The declaration also features a pledge to combat the illegal arms trade. This is highly significant given that the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) says that 70% of all weapons confiscated by Mexican authorities between 2009 and 2010 came from the US. This has led Mexican authorities to accuse the US government of double standards as it demands that Mexico impose hard-line policies to fight drug trafficking while the US has done nothing to curb the supply of illegal arms to Mexican drug cartels (SourceMex, Jan. 16, 2013, and March 20, 2013).

The inclusion of a human rights perspective is also new and constitutes an admission that civil liberties have been grossly violated as part of the region’s war on drugs.

The declaration also includes a pledge to adopt policies that specifically address women’s rights. The Transnational Institute (TNI) says that 70% of Latin America’s female prisoners have been...
detained for small-scale, nonviolent drug-trafficking offenses in inadequate prison facilities where they are often vulnerable to sexual abuse, extortion, and other violations of their basic rights.

Call for follow-up meeting

What proved to be a more contentious issue was the follow-up mechanism that should be implemented. Fourteen countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Uruguay, Honduras, Mexico, Chile, Haiti, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Saint Lucia) proposed that the OAS Permanent Council call an extraordinary General Assembly in 2014 in Antigua, with the aim of moving forward the debate on new strategies to combat drug trafficking and the design of an action plan for the 2016-2020 period.

Under this proposal, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) would be in charge of preparatory work for the meeting. But 20 other countries were opposed to the proposal, including the US, which favors continuing to debate the drugs issue but is against an extraordinary assembly and CICAD involvement. In the end, these countries agreed that an extraordinary assembly should be held in 2014, but there was no agreement on the evaluation mechanism.

Decriminalization not on the agenda

Vergara said that US Secretary of State John Kerry's participation in the meeting shows that the US is taking the OAS more seriously and also reflects the US government’s growing concern about "China’s incursion in Latin America both as a business partner and a political ally."

Kerry admitted that the US has not managed to curb its appetite for drugs and acknowledged that the fight against drugs is "a shared responsibility." Nevertheless, he made it clear that the US is against legalization even though 18 states have allowed the use of cannabis for medical purposes and voters in Colorado and Washington have approved initiatives to legalize, regulate, and tax cannabis.

Panamanian Foreign Minister Fernando Núñez Fábrega also spoke out against legalization. "That is not the most viable solution to reduce drug use and the trafficking of illegal substances. On the contrary, it would make the problem far worse," he said.

Although the issue was not discussed explicitly, official speeches make clear the different perspectives in the region and how countries are beginning for form blocs around those perspectives.

Mexico is one of the countries that has been most affected by drug-related violence. Although President Enrique Peña Nieto has tried to distance himself from the repressive policies implemented by his predecessor President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), which resulted in 83,191 drug-related killings during his term, Peña Nieto said, in May, that Mexico is not considering legalization as a viable option (SourceMex, April 11, 2012).

In Central America, Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina is the only head of state who has openly backed legalisation as an alternative to the region’s prohibitionist policies but to date he has yet to propose a bill that would decriminalize and regulate drugs (NotiCen, March 1, 2012), as other countries, such as Uruguay, have already done (NotiSur, Aug. 3, 2012).

Carmen Rosa de León Escrivan, director of the Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES), said that, if Pérez Molina wants to be credible, he must now put forward
concrete policies to further his legalization agenda. "It’s fine to tell other countries what to do, but if we’re seeking a paradigm shift let’s start by putting forward a national program that can act as a pilot project. If the president is talking about legalization, we must begin by diagnosing what effect drugs are having within our country, how drug users are being treated, and how many people are serving prison sentences for drug possession," says De León Escribano.