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CELAC Summit in Cuba and Violence in Venezuela

by Crosby Girón

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The II Summit of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC) took place Jan. 28-29 in Havana, Cuba. Thirty-three heads of state from the region took part; however, the US and Canadian heads of states were not invited.

Two years after its creation (NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2012), CELAC has become increasingly prominent at a regional level. Dominican Republic President Danilo Medina says CELAC has put right a historical error: Cuba's suspension from the Organization of American States (OAS) on Jan. 31, 1962, in Montevideo, Uruguay.

The US government regards CELAC's increasingly salient role with mistrust because it has been seen as an attempt to displace the OAS. In fact, a diplomat from the US Department of State who requested anonymity said the US feels "let down" by CELAC's support for Cuba's "single-party system."

Cuban President Raúl Castro said one aim of the summit was to "rethink the relationship with transnational corporations and improve coordination between regional organizations." He also talked about the importance of establishing a new paradigm of integration, based, fundamentally, on greater cooperation between regional organizations such as the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), Petrocaribe, the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA).

The presidents of countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, with a total population of more than 353 million, emphasized CELAC's integrationist nature and its potential for fostering technological innovations and the development of regional markets.

**CELAC seen as way to "foster the common good"**

Historian Alberto Betancourt Posada said, "The CELAC summit was important for a number of reasons: Latin America was declared a region of peace, Cuba was reinstated as part of Latin American institutions, it practically displaced the OAS, and it created a space to discuss the way in which the region must seek its reinsertion in a globalized world."

Betancourt Posada also emphasized that during the summit a number of Latin American integration projects were discussed: Castro proposed renegotiating the region's relationship with transnational corporations; Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto regarded the region as a market and his proposal focused on improving productivity; Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff talked about technological innovation; and Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner proposed a multidimensional integration.

Political analyst Marcelo Colussi said, "An organization such as CELAC generates new perspectives for Central America and the Caribbean. For now, although it doesn't entail a radical structural
change, it creates new dynamics that can soften current neoliberal policies. CELAC wouldn't alter the political system of member states, but it would generate more advantageous conditions than the free-trade agreements encouraged by Washington.

"Basically, an alliance such as CELAC is different from other regional alliances (such as the Alliance of the Pacific and MERCOSUR) in the sense that it doesn't emphasize financial gain as the ultimate goal and focuses on 'social issues.' That is to say, there is an interest in creating trade mechanisms with a greater sense of solidarity. It is not just a question of achieving the highest possible profit, it is a question of fostering the common good. That’s the difference."

The North American Leaders' Summit, often referred to as the Tres Amigos summit, took place on Feb. 19 in Toluca, Mexico (SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014). Mexican newspaper La Jornada wrote, "Riot police from the state of Mexico intercepted a protest march in which social organizations, migrant organizations, and members of the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas as well as environmental activists were taking part. They were heading to the city center to protest against the North American Leaders' Summit headed by Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto; US President Barack Obama, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper."

**Outbreaks of violence in Venezuela**

Less than a week after the CELAC summit in Cuba, the first series of protests broke out in Venezuela. It began in San Cristóbal, capital of the border state of Táchira, on Feb. 7. The mayor of this city is Daniel Ceballos of Voluntad Popular.

The press reported that groups of students were demanding that Táchira Gov. José Gregorio Vielma Mora improve security, and they tried to set fire to his house, which led to a confrontation with the police, resulting in a number of detentions.

Then, Leopoldo López, also from Voluntad Popular, joined the protests. After López appeared, the protests headed to Caracas, and during the following days tensions rose, leaving three people dead on Feb. 12.

The police took no action during the protest in Caracas. However, when the protest ended, a group of motorcyclists fired against the protestors who remained behind and two people were killed. On the same day, another person was killed in Chacao.

By Feb. 21, eight people had been killed. Attorney General Luisa Ortega said 137 people were injured and eight killed during incidents related to the protests since Feb. 12: four in Caracas, two in the state of Carabobo (central Venezuela), one in Sucre (in the western part of the country), one in Sucre (in the east), and another in Lara (center-west).

Whereas the opposition has repeatedly blamed this outbreak of violence on "government repression" against peaceful demonstrators, the government has denied this and has accused the US of using nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to finance the protests to create political turmoil that could lead to the overthrow of President Nicolás Maduro.

**The role of the US and some media**

Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS Roy Chaderton told CNN that large media corporations were providing a "biased" version of events.
Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega told the press, "It is no coincidence that, weeks after the CELAC summit in Havana, a display of brute force should break out in Venezuela, because there is no other way of describing the actions of a political force that attempts to overthrow a democratically elected president."

CNN and the US government have denied the accusations. However, a number of cables recently published by WikiLeaks indicate that for years the US government has supported actions favoring "regime change" in Venezuela. "Venezuela is under threat from coup plotters that belong to right-wing factions in Latin America as well as the US government. There is no doubt about this and it's nothing new. Joint statements issued by regional organizations such as CELAC, UNASUR, MERCOSUR, and ALBA show that all Latin American countries admit that these forces are attempting to overthrow Venezuela's democracy and have expressed their solidarity as well as the need for dialogue," wrote Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel on Feb. 22.

John Bolton, former US ambassador to the UN during the administration of President George W. Bush, told Fox News that opposition groups in Venezuela would be unable to overthrow the Maduro administration "unless they receive help from abroad."

Ambassador Chaderton, however, told CNN that Venezuela has held "an open dialogue with the opposition" and has been open to discussing all issues, including the ones they don't agree with, which means that there is no way that the violence on the streets can be justified.

So far, the government has stated that the country has returned to normal, although the media and social networks insist that there is a growing tension.

Whereas economist Mark Weisbrot wrote in The Guardian that the US government has tried to "intervene" in Venezuela by funding the opposition, Pérez Esquivel writes that "corporate media conglomerates such as CNN, FOX, and the European media manipulate information and war propaganda in the name of peace, and hatred in the name of freedom. Their aim is to prove that they play a crucial role when it comes to overthrowing any political leader and thus receive better paybacks from the US State Department. However, we Latin Americans know that the media is just another political actor that defends corporate interests and the interests of the great powers."

-- End --