1-22-2015

Costa Rica Gears Up to Host Largest Summit in Its History

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The summit meeting of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), to be held this month in Costa Rica, sets a major challenge for this country: it is the largest international meeting ever organized in the nation’s history.

Despite the austerity the present government works with in general, all logistics have been covered, organizers told NotiCen. This ranges from welcoming the 32 national delegations at the Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaría—named after one of Costa Rica’s most important national heroes—to security for all participants, some of whom pose a major problem in this field—particularly Presidents Raúl Castro of Cuba and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela.

It also includes 6,971 meals for everyone from presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers, to police, traffic cops, intelligence agents, and volunteers—boy scouts, members of civil society organizations, university personnel, among others. Covering all expenses, the budget is just more than US$4.3 million, a high figure for a developing nation.

The meeting will mark the closing of Costa Rica’s exercise of the yearly rotating presidency of CELAC and the start of Ecuador’s term.

**Benefit of consensus**

In Costa Rican Foreign Minister Manuel González’s view, "This is a quite young process, since this will be only the third summit," but it has provided sufficient time to realize that consensus is the instrument to solve common problems—setting divisive issues aside.

"There are different needs and problems in the countries making up this community," González told a Jan. 14 press conference held with his Ecuadoran counterpart Ricardo Patiño. "But, with the effort made, it has been possible to identify those on which there’s consensus, and that the problems are the same, that the weaknesses are the same. And we’ve understood that it’s only through unity, dialogue, consensus, and joint work that those weaknesses can be more efficiently attacked and overcome."

Within this context, CELAC is "a bridge through which Costa Rica is able to interact, to hold talks more efficiently than through bilateral relations or as a member of other international organizations," said the minister. "That's the value added we see" in the community. "It's the potential for integration, exchange of experiences, exchange of good practices, exchange of problems, addressing each other, leaving aside other issues—including the perception of what the political system or the economic system should be like. It allows us to institute this dialogue in an honest way, in a direct way, and to know, first hand what those positions and those needs of other countries are."

His Ecuadoran colleague, who referred to other regional blocs, since CELAC is "precisely a new space for political dialogue and integration," said, "It’s important to look after it, so it won’t make the mistakes other spaces have made. One of them is the distraction of its capabilities and its
strengths, which marks the need to prioritize CELAC’s issues and realm of action, so we can offer our region and our peoples, five years from now, 10 years from now, concrete results."

The third CELAC summit is also the fifth meeting of the bloc’s top leaders. The community was created in 2010 in Mexico and launched the following year in Venezuela.

The Cumbre de la Unidad de América Latina y el Caribe, held Feb. 22-23, 2010, at Playa del Carmen, a Caribbean resort in southern Mexico, was the stage for the Grupo de Río being replaced by CELAC. The Grupo de Río was founded in 1986, in Río de Janeiro, on Brazil’s Atlantic coast, by 25 countries, as a Latin American and Caribbean mechanism for consultation and agreement.

The 2010 meeting in Mexico was the Grupo de Río’s 21st—and last—summit, and it marked CELAC’s emergence as a mechanism for "solidarity, cooperation, complementation, and political agreement of the Latin American and Caribbean countries," as the new community stated then.

**Strong opposition to Cuban embargo**

CELAC met again the following year, on Dec. 2-3, in Caracas, where the bloc formally got going. The Declaración de Caracas and several communiqués, issued during the meeting’s closing session, contained a strong rejection of the embargo the US has imposed on Cuba since 1962—and this month began to ease off—and statements in defense of democracy and institutional order in the community’s member countries (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011, and NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2012).

The declaration defined the embargo as a measure that not only violates international law but affects Cuba’s sovereignty as well as that of the other nations in the region. The communiqués underlined the need to defend democracy and institutional order, referring to the bloody coup in June 2009 (NotiCen, July 9, 2009) that toppled Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009)—now a deputy for the center-left Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE) that he co-founded following his return to Honduras after exile (NotiCen, June 19, 2012).

CELAC leaders decided that the bloc "will strongly respond to all forms of constitutional breaching in any of its members," to prevent such events from repeating themselves after Honduras, one of the communiqués stated.

The first CELAC summit came on Feb. 27-28, 2013, in Santiago, immediately after a two-day meeting of CELAC and the European Union (EU), the first venue of its kind, attended by top government officials as well as private-sector and political leaders (NotiSur, Feb. 15, 2013).

Participants in the first CELAC-EU talks focused on topics such as investment in the environment and sustainable development, investment for development of small and medium enterprises, and investment for the development of human capital.

At the end of the CELAC summit, Chile’s President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014)—an admirer of that nation’s ruthless dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990)—handed over the bloc’s yearly rotating presidency to his Cuban counterpart Raúl Castro.

In Havana, Cuba hosted CELAC’s second summit, at the end of which Castro passed on the community’s temporary leadership to President Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014), Costa Rica’s first woman president (2010-2014) and a member of the social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)—now in the opposition.
Last year’s presidential election in Costa Rica, won by the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), put Luis Guillermo Solís—a historian, political scientist, and university professor—at the helm, where he inherited CELAC’s presidency, which he has to hand over at the end of the third summit to leftist Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa.

This month’s summit comes preceded by the much-heralded first meeting early this month in Beijing of the People’s Republic of China-CELAC Forum, created last year (NotiSur, Jan. 23, 2015). The gathering was presided by Solís, during his official visit to China, Jan. 5-10, and Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.

Two days after returning from China, Solís told the weekly government press conference at the Casa Presidencial that holding the meeting was "the most important achievement of Costa Rica’s pro tempore presidency in CELAC, positioning the forum with China as one of the fields of work" of the community.

The forum was established in July 2014, during a meeting between the leaders of the CELAC Quartet and Xi in Brazil. The Chinese president was in Brazil attending the sixth summit of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the five biggest emerging economies worldwide, known as the BRICS group. Xi’s presence in the BRICS Summit made possible the China-CELAC Quartet meeting.

The quartet is made up of the country presiding over the bloc—in this case, Costa Rica; its immediate predecessor—presently, Cuba; its immediate successor—now, Ecuador; and the country heading the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)—presently, Antigua and Barbuda.

Shortly after returning from the Brazilian capital, Solís told NotiCen that the forum is a landmark in international relations and that, for the Latin America-Caribbean region, historically linked to the US and Europe, the China-CELAC tie means joining an emerging power with a long-term, worldwide perspective. In the president’s view, the forum marks a historic high point parallel to the Monroe Doctrine.

"Opening the China-CELAC forum is, and sets, a landmark in international relations in my judgment, a landmark as important as the Monroe Doctrine got to be in its time," Solís said. This is so, because the forum "establishes, for Latin America, a realm of action that’s not traditional in its international policy. Latin America’s traditional relationship was, at first, with Europe, particularly so with Great Britain, France, and Spain."

"In a second moment, it was with the United States, a power with which it developed—mainly in the 20th century, and especially after World War II—a relationship with an overwhelming economic, political, and military dependency," Solis said. "And now it establishes the CELAC-China forum, which becomes a new realm for the region’s international action."

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