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Ibero-american Summit Supports Trade, Democracy

by Patricia Hynds

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Leaders from Latin America, Spain, and Portugal met Oct. 8-9 on the Venezuelan resort island of Margarita for the Seventh Ibero-American Summit, under the banner "ethical values of democracy." The 21 heads of state backed a controversial proposal supporting the rights of citizens to "truthful" information, over strenuous objections from press organizations. The most important results, however, took place outside the formal meetings, especially efforts to encourage the peace process in Colombia. The issue that received the most attention at the meeting was the proposal of Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera to require the press to provide "truthful" information (see NotiSur, 10/31/97). Latin American newspaper owners and journalists had come out strongly against the measure, which they said is the forerunner to repressive laws against freedom of expression and a green light to violence against journalists. Caldera insisted he had no desire to curb press freedom. "I have said a thousand and one times that I am not proposing any law or any coercive measure," said Caldera. "But no one can change my deep conviction that one of the ethical values of a free democracy is that information be truthful." After several governments including Mexico, Spain, El Salvador, and Uruguay expressed concern that governments might use the guidelines to restrict the press, the proposal was modified, adding the words "without any censorship or restrictions" to the text. Strong support emerges for Colombian peace efforts. Informal meetings produced some significant results in regional affairs. The unofficial "Group of Friends of Colombia" Costa Rica, Spain, Mexico, and Venezuela met to advance the cause of peace in the continent's longest running guerrilla war. The four countries are committed to supporting an OAS-backed effort to achieve peace in Colombia. Recently, Colombian presidential candidate Juan Manuel Santos presented a plan in Spain to negotiate with the guerrillas without the participation of President Ernesto Samper. However, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar said that each step of the Colombian peace process requires the participation and initiative of that country's government. During the summit, Samper outlined a list of concessions he was offering to bring the rebels to the negotiating table. He said he would grant amnesties to guerrilla leaders and withdraw the army from certain areas of the country if the rebels showed a clear desire for peace. Samper also called on Cuban President Fidel Castro to help end the war. As a former guerrilla, Castro "knows armed struggle well," Samper said. "His authorized opinion may prove a strong argument to convince the armed groups." Caldera said that involving Castro in the efforts could be crucial, as he "probably maintains a major political and moral influence" on the guerrillas. Castro responded to the invitation, saying, "If it were in my hands to do something for peace, I would do it as a basic duty." The response by the Colombian rebels, who deny that they receive military or financial backing from Cuba, was cool. "Fidel Castro has undoubted merits as a revolutionary and a statesman....He is still the beacon of freedom in Latin America, but the FARC has never considered that a foreign power can direct the situation in Colombia," said Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) spokesman Marco Leon Calarca in Mexico City. "We would like to thank other countries for their interest in the problems in Colombia, but they must not allow themselves to be manipulated by Samper, who is using the banner of peace for his personal benefit." Few concrete results emerge from meeting. Meanwhile, in a repeat of last year's summit, leaders criticized Castro for refusing to bring democracy to his country. "Castro is like a fly in a cup of milk, because we are all democratic and there is freedom

in all of our countries as there has never been before," Salvadoran President Armando Calderon Sol said in a television interview. "He's the only fly here. I think Castro is out of place, his time has passed, and he should understand that he should resign." Castro dismissed the criticism and underlined Cuba's commitment to its form of government. "In Cuba there was, there is, and there will be a revolution based on principles that are not for sale," Castro said in his address to the opening session. Later, Castro said, "Sometimes I have the impression that our debates are unreal. It's as though the US didn't exist, as though the empire and its hegemony didn't exist." The leaders also looked at the ongoing problem of poverty, often described as the principal problem in the region, affecting 60% of the population. "If we do not find effective ways to combat poverty at the core...we will soon find ourselves again in conflictive situations," said Guatemalan Foreign Minister Eduardo Stein. The summit was long on traditional speeches, leading to a final document that was mostly a list of good intentions. In the Margarita Statement, the leaders pledged to strengthen unity, implement democratic principles, and serve the common good of their citizens. The final statement also reiterated a "firm condemnation" of the Helms-Burton Act, a US law that seeks to punish nations doing business with Cuba, and called on US President Bill Clinton to consider revising the legislation. The next Ibero-American summit will be held in Oporto, Portugal, with the theme of "challenges of globalization and interregional cooperation." [Sources: Clarin (Argentina), CNN, El Nuevo Herald, 11/06/97; Inter Press Service, 11/06/97, 11/07/97; Agence France-Presse, Deutsche Press Agentur, Spanish news service EFE, The Miami Herald, 11/08/97; Associated Press, 11/08/97, 11/09/97; Reuter, 11/05/97, 11/07- 10/97]

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