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European Union Pledges Increased Cooperation at Meeting with Rio Group

by LADB Staff

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Foreign ministers from Rio Group countries met Feb. 11-12 in Panama City with representatives of the European Union (EU) to discuss economic, political, and cultural integration issues. Participants took advantage of the meeting to hold informal talks, especially regarding creation of a regional anti-drug trafficking center in Panama and peace efforts in Colombia. The Rio Group comprises Mexico, Panama, all South American countries except Surinam and Guyana, plus one representative from Central America and another from the Caribbean.

The Panama City conference, attended by eight foreign ministers from the EU, reviewed the effect of the EU's common currency on Latin American trade, effects of the Asian crisis on the region, and unilateral trade measures adopted by the US. The ministers also discussed sustainable development issues both environmental and economic the increase in poverty in the Americas, respect for cultural diversity, and defense of human rights.

Trade issues occupied much of the conference. Trade between Europe and Latin America increased more than 50% between 1990 and 1996, and the EU is now the second-ranking trade partner of the Rio Group. In 1997, bilateral trade is expected to exceed US\$70 billion. Latin America's trade deficit with the EU, close to US\$3 billion, was a central concern. EU vice president Manuel Marin said the deficit would be reduced through "trade liberalization" between the EU and Latin America and through a system of tariff preferences for industrial products from Central America and Comunidad Andina countries.

Marin also said the EU will continue free-trade negotiations with Mexico in March and with Chile in June. The delegates gave high priority to planning an EU-Rio Group presidential-level summit, which will take place in Rio de Janeiro in March 1999. Marin said he hoped the summit would produce "more substance and less formality," and he said further cooperation between the EU and Latin America "must be based on the participation of all."

US extraterritorial legislation criticized at conference

Meanwhile, although the US was not a participant at the meeting, Thomas E. McNamara, assistant secretary of state for political and military affairs, did attend. Most of McNamara's time was spent lobbying in support of the US proposal to create a regional anti-narcotics base in Panama (Centro Multilateral Antidrogas, CMA). McNamara was given permission to address the assembly on the issue, and he also met in private with various ministers. The regional center was first proposed at a Rio Group meeting two years ago in Quito by Panamanian President Ernesto Perez Balladares.

Last December, Panama and Washington signed a "conceptual agreement," but to become a reality, the project needs the support of other countries in the region. Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia have all

indicated interest (see EcoCentral, 01/15/98 and 01/22/98). Despite US efforts to win over Rio Group members, the conference's final resolutions included criticism of US foreign policy. In particular, the resolution rejected unilateral measures by the US to resolve problems, such as the US Helms-Burton Law that aims to force change in Cuba. "There is a position that Europe and Latin America share in rejecting the application of extraterritorial laws against specific countries," said Mexican Foreign Minister Rosario Green. Green and her Colombian counterpart, Maria Emma Mejia, also spoke out against the US's annual drug-certification process.

While the conference resolution did not refer specifically to certification, it did say that anti-drug trafficking efforts cannot be carried out unilaterally or through internal legislation that has extraterritorial consequences. Side meetings held on Colombian peace prospects & other issues In addition to the multilateral discussions, side meetings also took place between the EU ministers and Latin American subgroups, such as the Comunidad Andina (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela) and MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay).

Peace efforts in Colombia were also the subject of separate talks during the meeting. A four-nation Support Group Spain, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela has offered its assistance to resolve the decades-old war in Colombia (see NotiSur, 11/14/97). Foreign ministers from the support countries met with Colombian Foreign Minister Mejia and Jose Noe Rios, peace commissioner for the Colombian government.

The talks coincided with Colombian President Ernesto Samper's announcement that he would support talks with the guerrillas either in or outside Colombia, if the rebels show "serious and definitive" signs in favor of a peace agreement. The Support Group has offered to facilitate such talks. The rebels, however, have repeatedly said they will not negotiate with the Samper government, which they consider illegitimate and corrupt. Samper recently said he is not trying to reach an agreement with the guerrillas, but to lay the foundation for the next administration to work out a "definitive" peace (see NotiSur, 12/19/97 and 01/30/98).

Following the two-day meeting, EU vice president Marin went to Colombia, where he announced EU cooperation to improve human rights and to find peace. It is no secret "that Colombia's human rights situation is complex, and that it worries the international community," said Marin. But he added that setting conditions on development aid would not help. "We do not believe in that philosophy, nor do we believe in embargoes. We believe in political dialogue, in persuasion." Marin said that while the search for peace was an internal Colombian matter, the international community could contribute as it did in El Salvador and Guatemala. But, he said, "society itself, the military institutions, economic associations and unions...and also the guerrillas" must join the Colombian government's efforts in the search for peace. (Sources: Xinhua, 02/10/98; Associated Press, 02/11/98, 02/12/98; El Nuevo Herald, 02/12/98; Notimex, Spanish news service EFE, 02/10/98, 02/11/98, 02/13/98; Inter Press Service, 02/11/98, 02/12/98, 02/16/98)

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