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Representatives of the governments of Bolivia and the US have been meeting to attempt to reduce tensions surrounding alleged US support for subversion and espionage within Bolivia. In July, Bolivia's President Evo Morales met with US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon to discuss claims that US-funded aid agencies were giving illegitimate support to opposition groups and that US Embassy officials were coordinating espionage within Bolivia against Cubans and Venezuelans living in the country (see NotiSur, 2008-02-29, 2008-04-04).

The US accuses Morales of supporting rioters who attacked the US Embassy in La Paz after reports surfaced that the US had granted asylum to former Bolivian President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) and his former defense minister, who are accused of committing human rights crimes (see NotiSur, 2008-06-20). "Agenda of mutual trust" amid accusations of conspiracy Bolivia and the US agreed to establish a "bilateral agenda to rebuild mutual trust," state news agency ABI reported on July 23.

Still, Morales handed Shannon what he called evidence of US involvement in an apparent conspiracy against him, ABI quoted Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca as saying. "We agreed the only conspiracy that's going to exist in our bilateral relations is one against poverty, inequality, and social exclusion," ABI quoted Shannon as saying.

The US State Department recalled Ambassador Philip Goldberg to Washington after about 20,000 protesters threw dynamite and fired pepper spray at police at the embassy in La Paz on June 9. Morales later praised the protesters for rallying against the US for granting asylum to the exiled former government officials.

Bolivia wants to extradite former defense minister Jose Carlos Sanchez Berzain and ousted President Sanchez de Lozada. Bolivia alleges they were responsible for the deaths of 67 people in October 2003 riots against a plan to export natural gas through a port in Chile, Bolivia's historic adversary. Both men have denied the charges and live freely in the US.

Goldberg returned to Bolivia in early July and Shannon arrived in Bolivia on July 22 in his effort to mend relations with the Morales administration. Upon his arrival at the El Alto Airport in La Paz, Shannon told the press, "We are here to talk with the government and the people of Bolivia, to build a positive agenda in our bilateral ties."

Morales seeks to oust USAID from Bolivia

In June, Morales had expressed support for expelling the US Agency for International Development (USAID), claiming the body was supporting opposition parties in Bolivia under the guise of aiding local people. Foreign Minister Choquehuanca said Morales raised his allegations with Shannon during their meeting.
"Regarding the conspiracy issue, President Morales addressed, during the course of twenty minutes and with the aid of documents, the political operation carried out and being carried out by the US Embassy in Bolivia. The Bolivian government, President Morales himself, has requested the United States halt its political conspiring in Bolivia and instead has proposed working together to conspire against poverty."

Bolivia's Ambassador to the US Gustavo Guzman said the Morales-Shannon meeting was "a step forward, a new point of departure for the agenda that we have proposed to the US government to develop in the coming months." Guzman said that one could "talk about an important moment" in bilateral relations because "it is not a small thing" that a high-level official like Shannon would visit Bolivia.

Morales and Shannon also discussed possibly broadening the preferential trade the US concedes to Andean countries under the Andean Trade Preference and Drug Enforcement Act (ATPDEA), which expires at the end of this year. Planning and Development Minister Graciela Toro said that, thanks to the trade preferences, Bolivia's trade balance has been positive since 2003, with Bolivia importing US$278 million of goods and exporting US$378 million.

Morales also asked Shannon to reconsider offering asylum to Sanchez Berzain and Sanchez de Lozada and called on the US government to act on their extradition. Guzman told the press that the extradition request had been translated to English and would be sent to US judicial authorities in August.

**US will continue aid to Bolivia**

On July 24, Shannon said the US would continue to provide aid to Bolivia. The US government is committed to constructing a lasting relationship based on shared interests and values, said Shannon. "The importance of my visit and of the dialogue with President Evo Morales and with the members of the government is to seek a way of understanding," he said. "We have a very good understanding of the concerns of Bolivia and the common interests we have," Shannon said at a press conference in Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia.

Shannon had also met with the most prominent opponent of the Morales administration, Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas. Shannon refuted the allegations against USAID after a meeting with Morales on the morning of July 23. He said USAID, which was accused of supporting Bolivia's opposition parties under the guise of aiding local farmers, is not a politically motivated group and its only aim is to help eradicate poverty and social inequality.

Relations between Bolivia and the US have been erratic since Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, took office in 2006, promising to be "the worst US nightmare." A former head of the coca-growers union, Morales has regularly accused the US of aiding his political opponents and seeking to destabilize the country's political scene, particularly as regions in the country's wealthier east have pushed for greater autonomy in a bid to break away from the central government (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16, 2008-07-04).
US calls for dialogue after recall referendum

Following President Morales' win in a recall referendum on Aug. 10 (see NotiSur, 2008-08-15), the US government congratulated him and called for dialogue between the president and his opposition. More than two-thirds of the Bolivian voting public had called for Morales to remain in office, while four of six regional governors opposed to him also retained their seats.

The US government said it backs efforts by the Organization of American States (OAS), the Roman Catholic Church, and others to facilitate "a frank dialogue" in the Andean nation, which has badly splintered as conflicts between Morales and the opposition have grown. "We reiterate our support for Bolivia's unity and territorial integrity, and remain committed to be a good partner in Bolivia's journey to a more democratic, prosperous future," said State Department spokesperson Robert Wood.

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