10-31-2008

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U.S. Punishes Bolivia; Latin America Shows Solidarity

by Guest
Category/Department: Bolivia
Published: 2008-10-31

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The mere rumor, later confirmed, that the administration of US President George W. Bush would ask Congress to remove Bolivia from the list of Andean countries that receive preferential trade terms brought an unexpected outpouring of solidarity with the small South American country and, along with it, criticism of the US. "This is a flagrant case of intervention that threatens the health of the Bolivian democracy," said secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS) Jose Miguel Insulza, in a reaction that seemed to synthesize all the other reactions.

Bush's decision was made public in late September, after the White House sent his proposed action to US Trade Representative Susan Schwab. In it, the White House accused Bolivian President Evo Morales of failing to meet US counternarcotics cooperation criteria. The US rewards Andean countries that meet such criteria with the benefits of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). The countries included in the ATPDEA benefits Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia must fulfill certain requirements in the fight against drug trafficking, which, according to the White House, Bolivia has not done.

"Unfortunately," Bolivia "has failed to cooperate with the United States on important efforts to fight drug trafficking," said Bush in statements on Oct. 16, reported by the German news agency DPS. "Bolivia's done a very bad job, and its government has not made any reasonable effort to combat the cocaine trafficking despite our efforts to continue to engage," said John Walters, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, to a group of Mexican journalists. He said the country was now in the same category as such countries as Venezuela and Myanmar.

The ATPDEA tariff benefits allow those four countries to export manufactured goods textiles, wood, jewelry, and leather goods to the US duty free. Given that the normal tariff is 17%, Bolivian producers now excluded from ATPDEA benefits can no longer compete with China and other Asian countries. The US is the second-largest recipient of Bolivian exports. Data from the private Instituto Boliviano de Comercio Exterior (IBCE) shows that in 2007 the US bought US$430 million in goods from Bolivia, of which US$267 million entered the US duty free under the ATPDEA.

IBCE statistics indicate that the elimination of ATPDEA benefits will cause Bolivia to lose 50,000 jobs, "which, in addition to opening the doors to a serious social conflict will mortally wound us," said the Bolivian Camara de Exportadores. President Morales instructed his diplomats to try to find new markets in China, Iran, India, and Venezuela. In the opinion of analysts quoted by the British news agency Reuters, Walters' comments could increase tensions in the already deteriorated bilateral relations. Those tensions were exacerbated in September when Bolivia expelled US Ambassador

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Philip Goldberg, accusing him of interfering in Bolivia's internal affairs (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19). The White House responded by claiming that, for security reasons, it was forced to remove anti-drug agents operating in the eastern part of the country, the major coca-growing area in Bolivia.

Early in 2008, Morales supporters had expelled a group of US aid workers stationed in the same area, and, more recently, the government banned all US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) flights from Bolivian airspace. The US, the world's largest consumer of cocaine, says that Bolivian coca-leaf cultivation has increased 14% during the past year, bringing production from 115 metric tons to 120 MT per year.

**Latin America rallies around Bolivia**

The administration of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva announced that it would buy the products that could not be exported to the US market, and the Peruvian government expressed its "absolute solidarity with our neighboring country." Morales said that, in a telephone conversation, Lula told him that the goods that Washington does not buy, "we will make room for in Brazil, in any case."

Despite chilly bilateral relations, Peru's Foreign Relations Minister Jose Garcia Belaunde emphasized that his country would stand solidly with Bolivia. The statements of both governments had a strong impact and were released the same day that Insulza, speaking for the OAS, said that Bush's plan "would seriously harm many small Bolivian industries that survive by exporting their products to the United States, and could leave more than 50,000 Bolivian workers and their families without jobs."

US social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein focused on the expressions of solidarity from Peru, as well as those from Colombia and Mexico, countries that do not have the best relations with Bolivia. He concluded that, with measures such as the latest by the Bush administration, the US is increasingly irrelevant in Latin America.

The diplomacy of the Bush administration, he said, is going against the US's own interests. Wallerstein noted that, after Bush's decision became public, and given the serious acts of racism occurring in eastern Bolivia, which is pushing for autonomy, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet "convened an emergency meeting of the organization of the 12 South American States, UNASUR [Union de Naciones Suramericanas], to consider the situation."

The 12 presidents arrived in Santiago and unanimously gave "full and complete support for the constitutional government of Evo Morales," at the same time as they denounced any coup attempt. Wallerstein said the importance of that resolution was that it was unanimous, that even the staunchly pro-US Colombian President Alvaro Uribe signed it, and that it was backed by the Grupo Rio, which includes 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries including President Felipe Calderon's Mexico.

In addition to expressing its solidarity with Bolivia for the exclusion from the preferential tariffs, UNASUR called for an internal dialogue in Bolivia to reach a solution that would thwart the secessionist plans so that the draft Constitution could be brought to a popular referendum and
to end the acts of racism that have already taken 30 lives. The draft Constitution is the product of six months of work by the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (ANC). Morales has also called for dialogue.

"The right is stymied," wrote Wallerstein. "Its last hope was some US intervention. But Bolivia has now expelled the US ambassador, Philip Goldberg, for 'conspiring against democracy,' that is, with the Bolivian right. The United States is now withdrawing its small aid projects in Bolivia. Russia has offered to enter the breach."

Since these friends of Bolivia are not close to the Colombian government, it is puzzling why Uribe backed the UNASUR resolution. The answer, said the US sociologist, is that "no president wants to see the new tactic of secession receiving support."

**Bolivian opposition politically weakened**

The opposition groups are powerful because they control the economy of the richest region of Bolivia, but they have been weakened politically. Their strategy was to demand autonomy and threaten secession, something that they never promoted when they controlled the national government. They demanded a referendum on revoking the presidential mandate and they failed.

Morales upped the ante and proposed that the mandates of the prefects (governors) also be put on the referendum. Morales won a resounding 68% of the votes, almost 13 points more than he received when he was elected two years earlier (see NotiSur, 2008-08-15). Seven prefects were ratified in their positions, but two, both political enemies of Morales, were thrown out of office by the popular vote. In the country as a whole, including where the opposition won, Morales received more than 50% support, and up to 95% in some areas, an unheard of level of support.

Despite this politically disadvantageous correlation of forces, the right put up conditions for the dialogue and even for the ratification of the new Constitution by referendum. The government insists on signing a comprehensive agreement on autonomous regions in exchange for allowing the ratification in Congress of the date of the constitutional referendum (January 2009) to move forward.

The opposition, however, is attempting to change the entire text of the document that was drawn up by the Asamblea, whose members were elected precisely for that purpose. "They are preventing democracy from continuing its course in Bolivia. It is, at the least, a political abuse to think that the entire Constitution must be modified to serve the interests or the whim of regional political forces. You cannot win at a [negotiating] table what you lost through the vote of the people," said Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, who seconded the warning formulated Oct. 19 by Morales. "Do not continue insisting on what you are not entitled to," said the president. "The new Constitution will be put to a referendum, in any case, at whatever cost."

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