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## Relations Between Bolivia, U.S. Appear to Improve

by LADB Staff

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Eight months after Bolivia and the US each declared the other's ambassador persona non grata, the two countries seem inclined to establish a new bilateral dialogue to restructure diplomatic relations, recently marked by a lack of trust, and, above all, by very serious accusations from both sides.

On May 20, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon arrived in La Paz for a 48-hour visit. During those two days he and Bolivian President Evo Morales and other high-ranking Bolivian officials exchanged expressions of good intentions, generous words of recognition, and even some praise that, although modest, had seemed impossible even in the improved climate following President Barack Obama's election.

The primary objective for both sides during the visit of the top US diplomat for Latin America was to foster a climate of detente, and everything indicates that was achieved, despite some comments by President Morales seemingly aimed at putting conditions and a strict limit on the new bilateral relations.

### *Morales operating from position of strength*

The resumption of dialogue is occurring as the Morales government is showing new signs of strength more than 60% of Bolivians say they are willing to re-elect him in the Dec. 6 elections. Moreover, in April, per capita GDP grew an annualized 6.2%, the highest monthly increase in 23 years. It is also occurring against the backdrop of current or recent events that, in one way or another, led to the break in relations and reinforced the idea that, behind them, the US has been and is a protagonist in the shadows.

Most important was dismantling an armed group "terrorist cells," according to the La Paz government that operated in the eastern part of the country, where under the autonomy banner a strong movement has been created that, in reality, seems bent on separatism. The government alleges that personnel from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have actively intervened in internal politics in eastern Bolivia, especially in Santa Cruz department.

Then, two days before Shannon arrived, former President Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) and several members of his Cabinet during his brief second term went on trial in absentia on charges of crimes against humanity. Sanchez de Lozada, raised in the US and educated at Harvard and a solid ally of former US President George W. Bush, is living in exile in the US, as are the other defendants.

Shannon's visit was preceded by a visit by former US President Jimmy Carter, whose leadership of the Carter Center, his foundation for democracy development, has affirmed the prestige he gained

as an independent observer during the most important and most conflictive electoral processes in the region (Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia).

Carter was received by Morales as a distinguished visitor, and he met with political leaders from all sectors. His comments to the government were published by all the media amid all the polemic his presence caused in the country. "We have been made aware, we know, that there are elements who want to have a divided country and not a united country. They need to understand clearly that the US is going to oppose any separatist movement," said the former president in a clear reference to the leadership in Santa Cruz and the other four departments in the eastern region.

In Bolivia the impression was that such an affirmation responded to the lines of a new relationship between the White House and Latin America and to existing sentiment in important sectors of the US political establishment. Shannon's visit an improvement over 2008

In his previous visit to Bolivia in September 2008 (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19), Shannon's welcome was less than warm, although Morales met with him briefly at the unusual hour of 5 a.m. Days before, Vincent Cooper, State Department security attache in Bolivia, had been declared persona non grata after Fulbright scholar John Alexander Van Schaick said the official had asked him for information on the number of Cubans and Venezuelans he crossed paths with during his work in rural Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2008-08-22).

Later, in a brief statement, Ambassador Philip Goldberg said that Cooper "spoke incorrectly" to US citizens carrying out academic and humanitarian work in Bolivia (some with the Peace Corps), and "regretted" what he called "a misunderstanding." Shortly after that, the Bolivian government expelled Goldberg, a diplomat who had been chief of mission in Kosovo during the conflict in the Balkans, which raised suspicions that he was supporting the separatist movement in Santa Cruz and the rest of the eastern region.

On this visit, Shannon was not slighted as he had been earlier. After long conversations with Foreign Relations Minister David Choquehuanca and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, his statements had an effect on the government. After receiving a proposal for a framework accord drawn up by Bolivian authorities, the US diplomat said, "We are here to set a new direction in the complex diplomatic relations that we have had recently," adding that the Bolivian proposal was "a very valuable document that will serve to begin to correct the injustices of the past, a very good beginning for this new dialogue."

Morales was not to be outdone. "We welcome the new dialogue," he said, but then immediately set down conditions. "Cooperation must not be conspiracy, as it was during the Bush administration. All unconditional cooperation is welcome to solve the social and economic problems of this country of ours. We are a small country, but now with much dignity, so those relations cannot be ones of submission, subordination, or political interference." The president said there is no room in the new relations for agencies like USAID, NED, and the DEA, "which will never again set foot in Bolivia."

Garcia Linera agreed that the signs were good for the new dialogue. "We have high expectations for the government of President Obama and the signals we are getting, which show us that in the US

there is now a reflexive reading and, to a certain extent, self-criticism about how to advance relations between two sovereign countries," the vice president told Spanish news agency EFE as quoted by the Brazilian daily Folha de Sao Paulo.

During a joint press conference with Shannon, Foreign Minister Choquehuanca said that the Bolivian government hoped that this first meeting would begin to correct the injustices of the past, based on a framework accord of four points and 10 basic principles. He said the four points on which the new dialogue must be based were: 1) respect for sovereignty; 2) no interference in internal affairs; 3) transparent cooperation; and 4) abstention by the US from any form of support to opposition sectors a direct reference to the justification Bolivia gave for expelling Cooper, Goldberg, USAID, NED, and the DEA.

### *Two sides to meet in Washington*

On an as-yet-undetermined date in the near future, the dialogue will continue in Washington. Shannon and Choquehuanca will have much to overcome when they meet again. Recent and still unclarified events weigh heavily on bilateral relations. After Shannon's departure, independent researchers Eva Golinger and Jeremy Bigwood made public the contents of 14 declassified documents they obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

The documents contained details of USAID's actions in Bolivia. Golinger, a Venezuelan-US lawyer, and Bigwood, a US researcher, said that USAID annually invested US\$85 million in Bolivia in what was billed as a democracy-building program, which included aspects about which they raised serious objections. The agency's objectives are explained on the Web site [www.usaid.gov/about\\_usaid](http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid). The objectives refer to policies of decentralization, autonomy, and actions of opposition political parties that the researchers and the Bolivian government consider covert forms of intervention in internal affairs.

What the declassified documents make clear is that, beginning in 2004, USAID's work was focused on the eastern region, precisely Santa Cruz, the department where Gov. Ruben Costas is the visible face of the separatist movement that has pulled in authorities from neighboring departments in the region called the Media Luna.

As if to reinforce Bolivians' historic distrust of everything coming from the US, Golinger and Bigwood confirmed that the documents leave no doubt that "USAID in Bolivia was the 'first donor to support departmental governments' and 'decentralization programs' in the country, proving that the US agency has been one of the principal funders and fomenters of the separatist projects promoted by regional governments in eastern Bolivia."

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