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UNASUR Condemns U.S. Use of Colombian Bases; Little Else Accomplished

by LADB Staff

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When Colombian President Alvaro Uribe traveled to Argentina to participate in a Union de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) summit where Colombia's agreement to allow the US to use seven military bases (air, sea, and land) would be discussed, he was well-aware that he would be playing the role of villain and receiving the blows of his 11 homologues (see NotiSur, 2009-08-21).

What he did not imagine, or at least what was not written in analyses prior to the meeting, was that not only would he succeed in neutralizing the inevitable declaration condemning the bases but that he would take home a triple prize: aborting the proposals of Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Evo Morales of Bolivia; keeping in check Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's desires for leadership; and, especially, getting this regional body that he still grumbles about to produce a document condemning the actions of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN).

At least that is the assessment of many political commentators and analysts in the mainstream media. It is clear, however, that, during the seven-hour meeting on Aug. 28 in the winter tourist resort of Bariloche, against a background of frozen lakes and snowcapped Andean peaks, Uribe had to listen to criticisms from the other leaders, more annoying perhaps than the effects of the H1N1 flu virus, which his doctors diagnosed after he returned ill to Colombia. Nevertheless, he might have thought, "Paris is well worth a mass," as Henry IV did in 1593 when he renounced Calvinism and converted to Roman Catholicism, a condition imposed by the Church of Rome for obtaining the French crown.

US use of Colombian bases condemned by all

The summit host, Argentine President Cristina Fernandez, opened the meeting. "We reject those bases," she said. "Living in a climate like this is unacceptable. We have to set mechanisms allowing us to work through differences to safeguard a body as valuable as UNASUR." Chavez produced a document attributed to the Pentagon's Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and said that the Colombian bases would be an instrument of US military strategy to threaten neighboring countries, not to help Colombia fight drug trafficking.

Correa picked up on Chavez's reference to the SOUTHCOM White Paper Air Mobility Command Global En Route Strategy and expressed his indignation that "the US continues treating us as its backyard and establishes these bases not to fight drug trafficking but to facilitate the mobility of its planes." Correa also proposed inviting US President Barack Obama to "explain to us why [the US] wants those bases in Colombia."

Morales went even further and asked participants to sign a document prohibiting the installation of foreign bases and also calling for a continental plebiscite so that "people can express their

repudiation of President Uribe's behavior." Lula, who had already asked Obama for "explanations," opted for sarcasm.

After the Colombian president said that the bases dated from 1952 and that the US would use them to help Colombia end "drug trafficking and terrorism," Lula said, "If, as my friend Uribe says, the bases have existed for more than half a century, with great affection I want to tell him that, if they didn't solve the problem, together we must think about other things we can do."

Then Lula took a page from Chilean President Michelle Bachelet and proposed creating a continental agency to be called the Consejo de Combate al Narcotrafico. Earlier, Bachelet had looked at Uribe's then vacant seat to condemn Colombia action regarding use of the bases and asked for "convincing and explicit guarantees that they will not have extraterritorial scope." Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo expressed respect for the principle of self-determination but emphatically supported his homologues' request that Colombia produce the text of the agreement negotiated with the US.

Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez also defended peoples' right to self-determination and the principle of nonintervention but rejected, with surprising emphasis, the installation of foreign bases anywhere in the region. Presidents Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana and Ronald Venetiaan of Suriname concurred with Vazquez.

But it was Peruvian President Alan Garcia who surprised his colleagues. He and Uribe are the South American presidents most closely allied with the US and both have strained relations with the same three countries: Ecuador, which broke off relations with Colombia in March 2008; Venezuela, which froze trade, stopped supplying subsidized fuel in border areas, and is now threatening to break off diplomatic relations with Colombia; and Bolivia, with which both presidents are engaged in an ongoing duel of accusations.

Suprising comments from Peruvian president

Nevertheless, Garcia, whom everyone expected to be the only one to side with Uribe, was the first to demand that the Colombian president "put his cards on the table and explain what the US aid to Colombia consists of."

At another point in the meeting, Garcia interrupted Uribe to tell him to "stop beating around the bush and see that we get a copy of the agreement so we know what we are talking about and whether it warrants our support or our rejection."

However, Garcia helped his friend out by bringing up an issue that turned the discussion toward military spending in the region. Uribe stands his ground A little was good enough for Uribe. Knowing himself, and above all feeling cornered, he opted to go into a shell and ignore the criticism. At times, he seemed removed from the debate, perhaps feeling the first flu symptoms, and did not even promise to think about giving his colleagues the text of the agreement in the future. He stressed Colombia's right to grant the use of the bases, saying that his country was "fed up" with receiving statements of solidarity "but never concrete gestures of help like we are receiving" from

the Pentagon. He defended the agreement, saying, "It is a practical help in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism, and it is limited exclusively to our territory."

Without wanting to, or without specifically intending to, in that short sentence, Uribe admitted, for the first time, that the US would participate in the internal fight against the guerrillas. That is, as the other presidents pointed out and Evo Morales reiterated, "US troops will violate the nonintervention principle defended by South America."

But if that was a mistake, Uribe was very confident when he took up the matter of arms acquisition raised by Garcia. In that discussion, it became known that Venezuela would rearm in Russia, that Ecuador would do so in China, that Chile had greatly increased its military budget, and that Brazil was about to launch its own nuclear submarine.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that the countries of the region increased their military budgets by 50% in the last decade and that their more than US\$34.5 billion in arms purchases in 2008 were 6% higher than in 2007. Seven hours after President Fernandez's strong opening words, the meeting ended, with little accomplished.

Unity difficult to attain

Colombia remained almost isolated, but the 11 countries making up the majority were barely able to agree on a document that "conditions" the presence of extraregional military forces, avoids mentioning the military pact between Colombia and the US, and ends up with a five-point wish list: 1) to strengthen South America as a region of peace; 2) to reaffirm the commitment to the war on terrorism; 3) to reaffirm that the presence of foreign military forces must not threaten the sovereignty and integrity of any South American nation; 4) to continue analyzing the SOUTHCOM Air Mobility Command (AMC); and 5) to instruct each country's defense and foreign relations ministers to hold a special meeting to continue analyzing the issue.

In the closing press conference, two of the ogres who planned to devour Uribe ended up admitting reality: "I think that we have come to a good ending, we established an interesting roadmap," said the host. "Because of the lack of technological resources, it will be very difficult to control US planes if they engage in espionage," added Correa. Uribe returned to Colombia a winner.

The UNASUR final declaration said nothing that affected him. The creation of an advisory mechanism to make decisions regarding differences among member states was quickly forgotten. The proposal to demand explanations from Obama was not considered. Morales' blunt requests were not even recorded in the minutes. The Consejo de Combate al Narcotrafico envisioned by Lula and Bachelet was not mentioned by any other president. The demand that Uribe make available the agreement with the US was left in the far corners of memory. Among so many successes, Uribe even scored an unexpected and unusual victory the summit was transmitted live on TV.

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