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After maintaining its diplomatic relations with the US at the same level for three years, the Bolivian government has given clear signs of wanting to repair the bilateral ties, and it has done so in a variety of ways.

President Evo Morales first showed his interest in April when he accepted US aid to control coca plantations. But he set limits. "US personnel," he said, "will not perform any concrete task; the cooperation will be strictly logistic and economic." The warning froze a dialogue that had just begun.

On June 27, Morales was explicit in asking "friendly European countries" to mediate with the goal of re-establishing ties with the US. And, he again set limits, saying, "We want to maintain good relations, but they have to be as equals."

Despite the opening, no progress was made. On July 18, the Bolivian government returned to the issue, this time through the Ministerio de Desarrollo Rural y Tierras (MDRyT), which said that Bolivia was looking for financing to destroy 907 tons of coca leaf confiscated from drug traffickers and that it would accept US help. There was no immediate response, but the press quoted diplomatic sources as saying that contacts had been made between the two governments.

But the possibility of breaking the impasse was again thwarted. The Bolivian government showed alleged proof of interference by the US Embassy and a group of Bolivian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that could be receiving US government and private funding. The government accused them of helping to organize and carry out the protest by indigenous who oppose construction of a transportation corridor that crosses a natural reserve. Environmentalists accuse the government of being at the service of Brazil, which, they say, has geopolitical and economic interests in the highway's construction.

Bolivia's poverty exposed

When Morales said on April 19 that his government was willing to accept help from the US, as well as from Brazil, to pay for equipment to verify the elimination of illegal coca plantations, it demonstrated a positive turn. But it also exposed the scarce resources of the South American country, which had to negotiate with two powerful governments to obtain just US$350,000 in aid.

The program to destroy clandestine coca fields used only US$250,000 in US support (to pay for equipment and instruments) and US$100,000 from Brazil to buy inputs and train Bolivian personnel who would participate in the eradication campaign.

Bolivia preceded the signing of that agreement with some actions and gestures particularly important for the US in its campaign against drug trafficking. Among them, the detention of Bolivia's former anti-drug chief, Gen. René Sanabria, accused of cocaine trafficking, and his later extradition to the US, where he will be tried in a Miami, Florida, court. Sanabria headed the Bolivian
anti-narcotics office between 2007 and 2009, the years when Bolivia expelled then ambassador Philip Goldberg (NotiSur, Sept. 19, 2008) and US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) personnel (NotiSur, Jan. 16, 2009).

Another 40 officers assigned to the fight against organized crime were also detained on charges of corruption and complicity. It was already known at the time that in May Bolivia would receive six Chinese K-8 aircraft for use in the anti-drug effort, for which the government would spend the significant sum of US$58 million. Those factors seemed to pave the way for conversations aimed at improving relations.

Some media ran opinions and statements from official sources indicating a certain, subtle improvement in relations. However, for the pieces on the board to be moved, it was necessary to wait until late June, when Morales asked the European countries to help fulfill a mediation role that in diplomatic language is called that of "amiable composition."

Just days later, new signs appeared, when the MDRyT announced that the government was looking for foreign financing to destroy those 907 tons of coca leaves. It was clearly an indirect message to the US Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), which, until late 2010, had partially defrayed the costs of similar operations.

A high-ranking Bolivian official explained that the NAS financed the entire process of coca-leaf destruction, including transportation from the confiscation site to the incinerators in Cochabamba in the central area of the country. On July 18, Spanish news agency EFE quoted that official who almost lamented that once again the poverty of the Bolivian state was made evident. "In 2010, [the NAS] gave us barely any help; we wanted to destroy 680 tons, but we could not, we only destroyed 445, and this year they told us that there are no more funds," he said. Only US$300,000 was needed to burn those leaves.

**Morales resumes confrontational position**

Amid so many friendly signs, each one accompanied by the sovereign limits set by the government, on July 25, just a week after the subtle request to the NAS, Morales resumed his confrontational rhetoric and said that on his trip to the US the following day—to participate in an event at UN headquarters—he would not use the official plane. "I'm afraid that, when we arrive there, they can put something, perhaps cocaine, [on board], and detain the presidential plane," he said.

The president offered no proof, either then or when opposition Deputy Osney Martínez said, "Tell us what you know, because this is a very serious allegation."

Morales never mentioned the matter again, either during his stay in New York or upon his return. If something had begun to be built, it began to fall apart in those days.

Nevertheless, in mid-August, Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca said, "We have made a lot of progress," and, without giving any details, he added that "only one word is under discussion" and the final decision "is in the US court."

On Aug. 22, Minister of the Presidency Carlos Romero, one of Morales' closest advisors, said that the only remaining difference was that "Bolivia does not accept and will not accept that the US unilaterally define the terms of cooperation, when that ought to be a joint decision."

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Choquehuanca and Romero said that the La Paz government had offered a new framework agreement based on mutual respect. On several occasions, Morales and some of his ministers have complained that the US uses the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to meddle in Bolivia's internal affairs and empower the far-right opposition that has its base in the secessionist departments in eastern Bolivia.

The announcement that "we have made a lot of progress" was made in the morning. In the afternoon of the same day, Morales threw a new time bomb. Criticizing a group of indigenous that began a 600 km march to protest the construction of a highway, the president said that the US Embassy, USAID, and "other US agencies that finance dozens of presumably environmental NGOs" were behind the demonstration.

This time, Morales did present some elements of proof. He exhibited an excerpt of phone calls the three leaders of the march received between July and August. Listed in the summary turned over by the cell-phone companies were various communications originating in the embassy and in US agencies. Chargé d'Affaires John S. Creamer, head of the US Embassy since Goldberg's expulsion, was called to the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores to receive the Bolivian government's formal complaint.

But the embassy anticipated the move and, in a communiqué, said, "We emphasize that neither the United States Embassy in Bolivia nor any other element of the US government has given any support to the indigenous march." It added, "The Embassy of the United States, like any other diplomatic mission in Bolivia and the world, maintains dialogue with various sectors of Bolivian society. Such dialogue is the daily work of diplomacy and is usual and appropriate."

Bolivia accused the embassy, USAID, the NAS (a unit of the US State Department), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), financed by the US Congress, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which received both government and private funding, the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), part of USAID, and the DEA of interfering in its internal affairs. The names of all these agencies are contained in a dossier prepared in August 2009 by Bolivia's office of the vice president and titled, "US Interference in Bolivia."

The indigenous and the environmentalists say that Brazil is behind the construction of the Manta-Manaus-Belén multimodal corridor, which will connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and cross a natural reserve (NotiSur, Sept. 9, 2011). Once finished, the biocenic corridor is expected to carry an enormous volume of Brazilian merchandise to China and Japan. The giant neighbor authorized the credit that will finance this project.

The indigenous complain that Brazil has special interests in constructing the corridor, which will enable it to send its merchandise more cheaply to China, its principal export destination.

Experts also believe that the project will allow Brazil's state oil company Petrobras to more easily develop a lucrative extraction policy. (Petrobras controls 71% of the oil sector in Bolivia.)

"Petrobras, Brazilian construction companies specializing in highways and in future binational hydroelectric megaplants, economic and political agreements, all form part of the willingness, the mechanisms, and the machinery of the Bolivian government's submission to the demands for energy and a connection with its Pacific coast by Brazil, the great emerging power," said sociologist Raúl Prada, a former Morales ally.