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Negotiations Underway for Sixth Summit of the Americas
by Janelle Conaway
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In an age when summitry is increasingly commonplace in the hemisphere, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez even plans to host a presidential summit of fellow cancer survivorsthe Sixth Summit of the Americas will still manage to command attention. The event, which brings together 34 presidents and prime ministers, will take place April 14-15 in Colombia's picturesque port city of Cartagena de Indias.

"This is the only forum in the Americas that includes the heads of state and government from the entire hemisphere," said Ambassador Jaime Girn, who as Colombia's national summit coordinator is chairing the negotiations leading up to Cartagena.

Unlike a number of regional and subregional groupings, including the newly minted Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeos (CELAC), the Summit of the Americas process includes Canada and the US. These meetings, held every three to four years, give the region's leaders the chance to deepen relationships and define common priorities and goals, Girn said.

Summit will emphasize areas of agreement
Of course, given the political differences among the countries, finding common ground is not always easy. With the summit theme "Connecting the Americas: Partners for Prosperity," Colombia is focusing negotiations on practical matters such as the need for infrastructure improvements in the region.

In a recent interview in his Bogot office, Girn explained his country's pragmatic approach. "Let's work on what unites us and not on what divides us. If we join our efforts, we can get something done and not be getting into political arguments," he said.

Now a well-established institutional process, the Summit of the Americas has seen its share of arguments through the years. The process began in Miami in 1994 (NotiSur, Dec. 15, 1994, and Nov. 16, 1994), and the tone of the first declaration reflected the optimism of a new post-dictatorship era: "For the first time in history, the Americas are a community of democratic societies. Although faced with differing development challenges, the Americas are united in pursuing prosperity through open markets, hemispheric integration, and sustainable development."

The Miami summit set a goal of establishing a vast Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), stretching from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle, with negotiations to be concluded by 2005. But by the Fourth Summit of the Americas held in November 2005 in Mar del Plata, Argentina, polarization held center stage, and the FTAA idea imploded.

Michael Shifter, president of the Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue, said that, although the Summit of the Americas process "has lost a lot of its luster" in recent years, it continues to have value, particularly as a point of engagement between the US and its neighbors to the south. That relationship "needs to be nurtured," Shifter said in a phone interview.
"Summits do have an effect of mobilizing attention, both public-policy attention and media attention, and showing why the relationship is important," Shifter said. Despite US President Barack Obama's personal popularity in Latin America and the Caribbean, Obama made his debut in the region at the April 2009 summit in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Shifter said many countries have been disappointed at the lack of real progress on key issues.

The new CELAC initiative, which President Chvez touts as a renewal of Simn Bolvar's dream for Latin American unity, points to a growing sense of regionalism and some distancing from the US in the last decade, Shifter said but not to widespread anti-Americanism. Most countries, he added, want to have a relationship of cooperation. "A lot of issues can only be resolved if the United States is part of the solution," Shifter said, citing immigration and drugs as examples.

Colombia, which has changed its foreign policy under President Juan Manuel Santos, is the right place for the Summit of the Americas to take place this time around, said Shifter, adding that the country "could be a bridge, potentially, between Latin America and the US."

Actual bridges are part of what Colombia has in mind. Although regionwide trade integration has not been possible, Girn said, it is important to strengthen physical integration via roads, railways, airports, seaports, virtual technology, and energy projects. "We believe that infrastructure is a key element in the hemisphere's development and prosperity," he said.

**Critics question effectiveness of summits**

Besides focusing on infrastructure and ways to increase "partnerships for cooperation" in the region, the Cartagena summit will also examine four critical problems: poverty and inequality, citizen security, response to natural disasters, and inadequate access to technology, particularly in remote areas.

Negotiations on summit documents have been underway since September, with national coordinators meeting regularly at the Organization of American States (OAS). The OAS Summits of the Americas Secretariat plays a key role in planning and implementation, which includes ongoing outreach to other international bodies, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, academic institutions, and others.

The OAS points to many successful Summit of the Americas initiatives through the years, ranging from big ideas most notably the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted in 2001 to projects such as the Inter-American Social Protection Network, established in 2009 as a vehicle for sharing strategies to reduce poverty and inequality. But critics of the summit process say that, as it has become more institutionalized, it has spawned more mandates than action.

One problem, Girn said, is that summits have often issued wordy declarations, establishing mandates and goals without allocating funding or assigning responsibility. Colombia is working hard to negotiate "brief, specific, and action-oriented documents" on each topic and to get political support from regional banks and other institutions so that funding will be forthcoming.

Last June, Colombian Foreign Minister Mara ngela Olgun Cullar told her counterparts from the region that Colombia "identifies in full" with the aims that gave rise to the Summit of the Americas process, "particularly that of forging a 'partnership for prosperity' based on democratic practice and the strengthening of democratic institutions."
The spirit of integration is still alive and well in the Americas, Girn said. "We have been an integrationist country since the time of Bolvar, and we truly believe that today the states can work toward achieving their national objectives and their regional objectives with full respect for their differences."

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