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Bolivian Government Expels USAID as Relations with U.S. Hit New Low

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After a long process of misunderstandings and deteriorating dialogue that had reduced bilateral diplomatic relations to their bare minimum, on May 1, during the International Workers' Day celebration, Bolivian President Evo Morales announced that the government was expelling the US Agency for International Development (USAID) mission.

Two weeks earlier, on April 18, the president had said that he would have to seriously analyze USAID's presence in the country as well as "the US Embassy's presence, because relations with the US are desirable but not at the cost of allowing the intolerable interference of its agents in the country's internal affairs."

To date, the only US reaction has been from a State Department spokesperson who expressed regret at the Bolivian decision, but US President Barack Obama has given no official response. The classic retaliations have so far not happened this time.

While the critical phase of bilateral relations had begun in September 2008, when Bolivia declared Philip Goldberg, the last US ambassador to Bolivia, persona non grata (NotiSur, Sept. 19, 2008), and two months later ordered the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to cease activities in the country (NotiSur, Jan. 16, 2009), what precipitated the most recent action were some remarks by US Secretary of State John Kerry. During a hearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives, Kerry described Latin America as "our backyard," a choice of words coined during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt and his "Big Stick" policies. In the region, the phrase brings to mind those times in the 20th century when US military interventions were rife. Morales said that the US secretary of state's remarks were "a provocation, one more form of the US establishment's disrespect and hatred for Latin America."

The most recent Workers' Day celebration in Bolivia was atypical. Since 2006, President Morales has taken advantage of the massive concentration of factory workers, miners, teachers, other employees, and indigenous to announce the newest nationalizations that have been the hallmark of his administration. In the public celebration that year, the government announced "the end of the looting by multinational businesses and the beginning of a process of recovery of the country's natural resources." He thus made known the government's decision to renationalize the petroleum sector, exploited by a handful of US and European companies (NotiSur, May 12, 2006, and Nov. 17, 2006).

The following year, the state took back control of potable-water services, which in the 1990s—the years of savage neoliberalism—had been turned over to the French Lyonnaise des Eaux. In 2008, telephone service, controlled by Italian firm Telecom, was renationalized. In the three subsequent years, Morales announced the nationalization of the firm that distributed fuel to airports (NotiSur, April 19, 2013), then in the hands of British Petroleum (2009), the initiation of the process to take over the energy sector (2010), and the culmination of the transfer of assets of the Spanish electric companies (NotiSur, May 18, 2012) to the state (2011 and 2012).
"No more USAID!"

This year, the announcement was the expulsion of the US agency. "No more USAID, USAID is leaving Bolivia, never again USAID. [The agency] cannot continue its political and economic manipulation (NotiSur, Sept. 9, 2011). In exchange for its handouts, it can no longer continue using our brothers and sisters, indigenous leaders, and workers," said the president in a clear reference to the interminable wave of strikes, roadblocks, and sit-ins in public buildings instigated by groups that sprang up overnight to confront the government with demands never before raised or attempted to negotiate through dialogue.

After making the announcement, Morales quipped, "The government information folks told me yesterday that journalists and business people were hovering around, asking what we were going to nationalize today. Well, today we tell them that we are only going to continue nationalizing and strengthening the dignity of the Bolivian people."

That was not the only novelty this year. At the beginning of the ceremony, the president, his Cabinet, and the tens of thousands of participants sang The Internationale, the anthem of workers' movements worldwide since 1888, when it was first sung on the streets of Lille, France.

Longstanding Bolivian complaints of US interference

Since 2009, the Bolivian government has been denouncing actions by the US Embassy, USAID, the DEA, the Strengthening Democratic Institutions (SDI) program, and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive government and private funding from the US and European countries, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), to finance "conspiratorial activities that threaten national integrity and security."

In 2009 the Bolivian government shut down the SDI's activities. In August of that year, a report prepared by the office of the Bolivian vice president said that "historically, nongovernmental agencies and organizations have used various institutions to fulfill their objectives: departmental-level civic action, propaganda and media control, control of traditional populations and politicians. Its interference has consisted of having full control of the successive administrations, the judicial system, universities, unions, political parties, local leaders, the Catholic Church."

The report went on to say that "one recent action took place in Santa Cruz [in eastern Bolivia, on the border with Brazil, where at the time an aggressive secessionist campaign was going on] and for that they used organizations that brought together business people from that department and young people, all ideologically formed under a racial vision of Bolivian reality."

The day of the USAID-expulsion announcement, German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) published the comments of State Department spokesperson Patrick Ventrell, who said that the US "deeply regrets" the expulsion and that "the baseless allegations" show that the Bolivian government is not interested in "a relationship based on mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperation."

The spokesperson was expected to announce a retaliatory measure or issue a warning, but neither occurred. Bolivian Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramón Quintana said, "They have surely realized that we are not easily cowed, and they don't want to replay the sad role when they cut
off our access to the ATPDEA." He was referring to the sanction applied after the expulsion of Goldberg and the DEA, when the US took Bolivia off the list of beneficiaries of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act.

Quintana said that, between 2004 and 2008, when the ATPDEA was in force, Bolivian exports to the US market were valued at US$1.98 billion, while between 2009 and 2012, without those tariff benefits, sales increased to US$3.78 billion. "What's more, the US government attempted to punish us, classifying us as a 'dangerous' country, but the result was that US people didn't listen, more US tourists than ever came to Bolivia," the minister added, without giving specific numbers.

On May 23, the US government gave an indication of things to come when William Brownfield, assistant secretary of state for the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), said that, by 2015, "It is my intent to close down our section [of the INL, the agency in charge of the anti-drug program of the US Embassy in Bolivia] in a reasonable and orderly fashion." During a hearing of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs' subcommittee, he said it was time for the INL to go.

In recent months, the winds have consistently blown against US diplomacy in Latin America. On March 5, the same day that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez died, the Venezuelan government declared military attaches Deblin Costal and David Delmónaco personae non gratae and expelled them. On April 12, the foreign ministers of member countries of the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA)—Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—recommended the expulsion of USAID delegations on the grounds that "their presence and actions are a disrupting factor that threatens the sovereignty and political stability of our countries."

On May 9, the Ecuadoran government warned 26 NGOs that are funded primarily by USAID and Democratic and Republican party foundations about their future in the country. If the organizations do not quickly produce up-to-date information on their funding sources and their activities—annual operating plans, project fiches carried out in the last year, and an evaluation of their work in Ecuador—"based on a case study and reasoned decisions, their activities in the country may be terminated," said President Rafael Correa.

Earlier, in November 2012, the judiciary in Peru reopened an investigation into the role of USAID and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in carrying out a plan in the 1990s under which 330,600 women and 25,590 men were forcibly sterilized with the approval of then President Alberto Fujimori (NotiSur, Dec. 21, 2012).

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