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Andrés Gaudán

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Bolivia’s Morales Has Influential Allies Regarding Drug Policy

by Andrés Gaudín

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For the eighth year in a row, the US government has condemned the Bolivian government’s anti-drug fight. The move has sparked a global debate, with The New York Times and the European Union (EU) supporting President Evo Morales’ immediate and logical reaction against the US action (NotiSur, Sept 17, 1991, and Sept 23, 1994).

While Morales argued that the White House “lacks the ethical and moral stature to judge” his country, The Times and the EU denounced the inefficiency of the anti-drug trafficking model pushed by the White House and implemented by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). In contrast, they praised Bolivia’s approach and its policy of dialogue, which they described as more effective that the US approach, one basically sustained with repression. The problem for Bolivia is that—beyond the possible political impact of the US action—a negative certification has an immediate economic consequence, because it keeps it on a list of countries excluded from tariff benefits under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA).

On Sept. 12, the Obama administration formally notified Congress that Bolivia and Venezuela had demonstrably failed in the fight against production and trafficking of drugs. Thus the US put both countries, as well as Myanmar, on the dreaded black list that brings on (or perpetuates) sanctions. That same day, El Nuevo Herald, a Spanish-language newspaper in Miami, reported that Venezuela has been on the White House’s annual report since 2007 and Bolivia since 2008, perhaps not coincidentally the same year that the La Paz government expelled US Ambassador Philip Goldberg and the US DEA mission, accusing them of “meddling in internal affairs.” The newspaper explained that the administration is required by law to submit a list of countries involved in either the production or trafficking of illicit drugs and not in compliance with US standards; the list is used to write the budgets for the fight against drug trafficking and the distribution of aid to allied countries.

Newspaper backs Morales

Even before the Bolivian government reacted, it was The New York Times that stepped up to criticize the Obama Administration in an editorial published in its online Spanish-language edition. “The yearly condemnation of Bolivia has been futile,” it wrote. “So far, that country’s experience with its drug strategy is showing more promise than Washington’s forced-eradication model. Over the past decade, the Bolivian government has sought to gradually curb the cultivation of coca—the plant processed to make cocaine—by establishing a tightly regulated market for its consumption as a nonnarcotic stimulant. (Bolivians have been chewing coca leaf and using it to make tea for generations.) The government eradicates unauthorized crops after negotiating with, and finding alternatives for, growers.” In the editorial, published on Sept. 14, the daily reiterated that the Bolivian approach, “which has been supported and financed by the European Union, has shown significant results.”
According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the cultivation of coca in Bolivia has dropped substantially during the past five years. In its latest report, issued on July 5, the UNODC indicated that in 2015 there were 20,200 hectares under cultivation, a drop of 1% from 2014, where the area under cultivation was 20,400 ha. The 2015 figure is the lowest since 2003, when the UNODC began monitoring coca fields in the Andean country. The United States government, however, puts the area under coca cultivation in Bolivia at 35,000 ha.

The Bolivian strategy, The Times points out, has been “hailed by scholars and some Western officials because they place a premium on the rights and needs of farmers in poor areas. Coca growers who have voluntarily registered with the government are given title for small parcels of land and are authorized to grow a limited amount.”

The Times continued, “This stands in stark contrast to the strategy the United States has long financed in the region—a combination of aerial herbicide spraying, manual eradication, and the prosecution of drug kingpins in the United States. The inadequacy of this approach is most obvious in Colombia, which has been Washington’s closest ally in Latin America on counternarcotics.”

This year, in the midst of the negotiations that on Sept. 26 led to the signing of peace with the guerrillas, the Colombian government was the object of protests by poor farmers and had to suspend the practice of aerial spraying of glyphosate, a powerful herbicide produced by Monsanto and declared a potential carcinogen by the UN World Health Organization (NotiSur, July 15, 2016).

**The Morales reaction**

In two stages, first in La Paz on Sept. 14 and later at the UN headquarters in New York during the General Assembly meeting, Morales reacted in his head-on style. “To be recognized by the United States, one has to be neo-colonialist, pro-capitalist, and pro-imperialist. This report from the US Department of State is ridiculous. Before judging Bolivia for its anti-drug campaign, they should lift the bank secrecy [laws] and eliminate the tax havens where drug money is laundered.”

Morales added that as the biggest consumer in the world, the US “does not have the moral authority to disqualify the actions of others.” Morales argued that the fight against drug trafficking is successful in sovereign countries, adding, “Where the empire intervenes with its military bases or with the DEA, drug trafficking, violence, and arms trafficking increases.”

On Sept. 22, speaking before journalists at the UN, Morales said that a recent investigation determined that during the years DEA agents operated in Bolivia, they divided the drugs they seized, “incinerating half and taking the other half to sell.”

Before Morales headed to New York, he and the EU ambassador to Bolivia, León de la Torre Krais, inaugurated the headquarters of the organization charged with the fight against drugs in Bolivia, the Consejo Nacional de Lucha contra el Tráfico Ilícito de Drogas. At that time, he also criticized the US and the DEA and spoke about the support and financial contribution Bolivia had received from the European organization—US$162 million in the past decade—which he said had been “given without strings or blackmail.”

For Bolivia, the seemingly ceremonial event had enormous political value because the EU representative, with the limitations diplomacy establishes, praised Bolivia and indirectly dismissed US criticism. De la Torre said that the European Union “applauds Bolivian efforts in the fight against drugs that is based on dialogue and not on clumsy repressive measures that don’t go anywhere.”
In another public act during these particularly dynamic days triggered by Obama’s report to Congress, Bolivian Minister of the Presidency Carlos Romero also spoke about the “lack of moral and ethical credentials of the men in the White House, the State Department and the DEA,” and offered information that Bolivians themselves were unaware of. He said that up to 2008, the United States had provided US$85 million a year in the fight against drug trafficking, but had ignored the problem since then. And he added, “Meanwhile, to address the fight against this drama that affects the whole world, the Bolivian state, a poor state, has earmarked a sum of US$400 million each year and added planes and helicopters that allow us to reach inaccessible areas.”

Romero said that Obama’s report to Congress is “full of malicious mistakes” and wondered how it is possible that Colombia, the main South American ally of the United States, was “certified positively when it has 61% of the coca crops in the region and sends more than 90% of the cocaine it produces to the United States.” He argued that in the US, where he said 1.6% of the population is addicted to drugs, “the government does not know how, or it isn’t interested in taking care of is people.” In Bolivia, 0.3% of the population consumes drugs, the lowest percentage in the region.

Beyond the political fight that ensued, the “bad grade” the US gave Bolivia frustrated the expectations of the manufacturing sector, which had imagined that after UNODC’s positive certification, the doors of the American market would reopen. The inclusion of Bolivia in the ATPDEA benefits is vital to many sectors of the economy. The ATPDEA allows tariff-free entry for manufactured goods—textiles, wood, jewelry—from the four Andean countries included in the agreement (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru). The rate without ATPDEA is 17%, making Andean production unable to compete with imports from Asian countries.

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