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U.S. President Trump Chastises Colombia, Deepens Rift with Latin America

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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A month after drawing heavy criticism from across the region for threatening military intervention in Venezuela ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)), and just as he began berating some of his own country's biggest sports stars, US President Donald Trump turned his attention back to Latin America, this time with a warning for the government of Colombia, the White House's principal ally in the region.

Trump suggested that Colombia is under observation and risks economic sanctions if it doesn't improve its policies in the drug war. More specifically, he said that Colombia could be "decertified," meaning it could lose its official status as a trusted ally in the international fight against drugs. That, in turn, could cost the South American country the favorable tariff arrangements it enjoys under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA).

After a series of statements by the US leader that also touched on Cuba, Bolivia, and Puerto Rico, The New York Times fired back with a strongly worded commentary, published Sept. 26 in its Spanish-language section, calling Trump an "apostle of North American anger." Several days earlier, BBC Mundo, the London-based network's Spanish-language service, had also criticized Trump, asking, "With a friend like this, who needs enemies?"

'Acoustic attacks'

With Cuba, relations that were already complicated by the Republican president's arrival in the White House have deteriorated even more due to a strange episode involving apparent hearing loss by some 20 US diplomats in Cuba. The US Department of State believes the diplomats are victims of "acoustic attacks" and withdrew them from Havana. It also expelled 15 accredited Cubans from Washington, leaving the Cuban Embassy there with just eight members.

"Beyond the step backwards that this represents after the improvements in bilateral relations during the Obama administration, this could result in other serious consequences," Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Bruno Rodríguez warned. The official described Trump's reaction as "unfounded, precipitous, inappropriate, and thoughtless" and said that the reduction of accredited personnel in the US would paralyze the system for issuing visas to US citizens wanting to visit friends or family members in Cuba. "Washington's expressed interest in reuniting families will be reduced to just words," Rodríguez added.

The US has also had its ups and downs with Bolivia, particularly since 2008, when the government of President Evo Morales temporarily expelled then-US ambassador Philip Goldberg and the delegation of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). And just like with Cuba, things have recently taken a turn for the worse.

Peter Brennan, the chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy in La Paz, kicked off the latest round of ill will by saying, "Hopefully things won't get as deplorable and lamentable in Bolivia as they are in Venezuela." The remarks riled President Morales, who responded by saying, "Neither the North

American president nor any of his underlings has the moral authority to meddle in our affairs, judge the government of Venezuela, or expel our Cuban brothers.”

The Bolivian leader went a step further on Sept. 14 by expressing solidarity with “the threatened Colombian government of Juan Manuel Santos, with which we have serious differences” and accusing Trump of being a “dangerous racketeer without any of the ethical values needed to comment on how the South American governments go about tackling drug trafficking.”

Morales also suggested that the US uses the war on drugs to control and intervene in other countries.

“They don’t want to punish Colombia for producing coca but for signing a peace accord with the guerrillas,” he said. “That’s because the US needs there to be armed groups to justify its interference in our countries. Instead of blackmailing, the US government ought to accept its responsibility as a [drug] consumer country. With at least 1.9 million cocaine consumers, it doesn’t have the authority to threaten anyone with decertification.”

Without specifying the source of his information, but using numbers that match the findings of specialized UN agencies, Morales added, “With 27 million consumers of illegal drugs of all kinds and nearly 60,000 deaths by overdose per year, the US ought to accept all of its responsibilities.”

‘A real catastrophe’

Trump also managed, in recent weeks, to ruffle feathers in the unincorporated US territory of Puerto Rico. On Oct. 3, he visited San Juan, the capital, after Puerto Rico was devastated by Hurricane Maria. And to the surprise of everyone, he used the platform to compare the effects of the natural disaster to the material damage and loss of life produced in and around New Orleans, Louisiana, by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He also criticized the “leadership ability” of Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Roselló.

With the island very much in crisis mode still, and gestures of solidarity coming in from all over the world, the US president opted to minimize Maria and its “16 or 17 victims” (in reality, 34 died) by saying that Katrina, in contrast, had been “a real catastrophe” with “hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people that died.” He also lamented that government funds being spent to help the badly damaged island have “thrown our budget a little out of whack ... because we’ve spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico.” San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto was livid.

Hovering in the background of Trump’s various antics and antagonisms is Washington’s suddenly uncertain standing with Colombia. On Sept. 13, five days before meeting in New York with President Santos and other Latin American leaders to discuss the unfolding situation in Venezuela, the US leader made his surprise threat to “decertify” Colombia if it didn’t follow US anti-drug directives within the framework of Plan Colombia, a nearly two-decade-old program through which the South American country receives massive economic aid and enjoys privileged ally status ([NotiSur, July 14, 2000](#), [Jan. 19, 2001](#), [March 9, 2007](#)).

Trump made the surprise threat during the annual White House designation of nations deemed major drug producers or transit hubs. In a statement, he said that Colombia “failed demonstrably to adhere to its obligations under international counternarcotics agreements due to the extraordinary growth of coca cultivation and cocaine production over the past three years, including record cultivation during the last 12 months.”

The day before, during an appearance in the US Senate, William Brownfield, assistant secretary of state for the bureau of international narcotics and law enforcement affairs—and a former US ambassador in Colombia (2007-2010)—suggested that in trying to end Colombia’s half-century-long civil war, Santos had taken his eye off coca production by focusing only on peace talks with the guerrillas.

‘A toxic message’

The US leader based his allegations on a DEA report suggesting that 92% of all the cocaine seized in 2016 came from Colombia. Also, in March, a report by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) found that coca production had grown to record levels, with 188,000 hectares under cultivation, enough to produce 700 tons of cocaine annually. The numbers contrast with information from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) showing that while coca cultivation has risen in since 2014, the total growing area is roughly 96,000 ha, just over half the amount reported by the ONDCP.

Colombia responded within hours of Trump’s startling accusation with an official statement from Vice President Óscar Naranjo, a retired police general who spent a decade working closely with US agents in the fight against drug traffickers.

“What’s needed, what’s really prudent, what is ethically necessary, is that the relationship with Colombia, the principal and most important Latin American ally of the US, not be fractured,” he said. “No one has to threaten us to take on this challenge [because] Colombia has a history of leadership in the fight against drug trafficking.”

Speaking along similar lines, Adam Isacson of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) told BBC Mundo that Trump’s threat “is not only an ugly way of treating an ally but also a serious mistake, because it sends a toxic message to the region.”

In a statement, the Colombian government agreed with Bolivia’s arguments that the White House has a shared commitment regarding the drugs problem. “Authorities in the consumer countries have a fundamental responsibility to their citizens and to the world to reduce consumption and take on the organizations that traffic and distribute in their own countries,” the document reads.

To emphasize Washington’s shortcomings, Colombia noted that for every 44 tons of cocaine it seizes, US border authorities only seize one. It also cited US data showing that for every two US citizens who die from cocaine overdoses, five die from overdoses of heroin or other opiates. “The drugs problem is complex and isn’t limited just to cocaine,” the document said.

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