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Mexico Deals With Several Contingencies During One-month Term As President Of U.N. Security Council

by LADB Staff

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Mexico assumed the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of April, with the Mexican Senate and others urging President Felipe Calderon's administration to use its leadership in this body to bring arms trafficking to the top of the agenda. By all accounts, these efforts failed, as the issue was missing from the main agenda items. Instead, the council placed a high priority first on a rocket launch by North Korea, which many thought was an early test of its nuclear-launching capabilities, and then on the outbreak of the H1N1 virus, also known as swine flu, in Mexico.

During its one-month tenure as head of the council, Mexico also raised the possibility of eliminating its long-held restriction on Mexican forces serving as UN peacekeepers. The Mexican Senate will debate this proposal sometime this year. Mexico's assumption of the Security Council presidency was a function of procedure rather than merit. According to UN rules, the 15 members of the Security Council take turns chairing the body in alphabetical order of the country's English names. Each president holds office for one calendar month. Mexico has been a member of the council since January 2009, when it began its two-year term for 2009-2010. This is the fourth time since the inception of the UN that Mexico has been selected to be a nonpermanent member, having previously served in 1946, 1980-1981, and 2002-2003 (SourceMex, October 10, 2001).

The 10 nonpermanent members each serve for two years alongside permanent members Russia, China, the US, France, and Britain. At present, Mexico and Costa Rica are the only countries from Latin America on the council, with the Central American country's tenure due to expire this year. Control of weapons trafficking not on agenda Shortly after Mexico took up the leadership mantle, the Mexican Congress and Cabinet officials in the Calderon government, including Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora, suggested that the Security Council would be the ideal forum to address arms trafficking. Mexico and the US agree that the unrestricted flow of high-caliber weapons from the US into Mexico has contributed significantly to an explosion of drug-related violence in the country (SourceMex, November 28, 2007, March 05, 2008, and April 01, 2009).

The proposal to use the Security Council to discuss the weapons control was promoted especially by the Mexican Senate, which is pushing for the issue to be discussed at all levels, including bilateral encounters between Calderon and US President Barack Obama. The Senate also received a request from the Chamber of Deputies to move up the interparliamentary meetings between US and Mexican legislators, scheduled for June 4-5, so that arms trafficking could be addressed promptly. "The Mexican Congress was seeking to bring this issue to the top of the agenda of the UN Security Council while Mexico was presiding over this body," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. But the issue apparently did not come up for formal discussion in the Security Council. Security Council communiques and reports did not mention arms trafficking as an issue for discussion during April. Instead, Mexico's UN Ambassador Claude Heller, who presided over the body during April, acknowledged that Mexico had greater responsibilities as

Security Council president beyond promoting its own agenda. "We believe that the Security Council presidency should be conducted with a sense of balance and that we must seek agreements based on negotiation," Heller told the Spanish news agency EFE.

The council addressed several important issues during Mexico's one-month tenure, including a demand for an end to violence in the Central African Republic, a push for resolution of pending issues resulting from the 1990 Gulf War in Iraq, a call for constitutional law to be restored in Fiji, and a request that unification talks be restarted in Cyprus. But the biggest issue facing the Mexico-led council in April was the controversy generated by North Korea's decision to test a long-range missile, which some believe is another step to building up its nuclear-weapons capabilities. Heller immediately called a closed-door meeting of the Security Council, amid strong differences of opinion on how the body should respond to the situation.

The US and other council members wanted to consider some punishment against North Korea, but permanent members China and Russia adamantly opposed any new sanctions against that country. Given the urgency of the matter, Heller said, the council decided to continue a series of meetings during the next several days. In the end, the council agreed on Resolution 1718, which demanded that North Korea, formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK, not conduct any further nuclear tests or launch a ballistic missile. "The Security Council demands that the DPRK not conduct any further launch," said a statement read to reporters by Heller. The statement expressed the council's desire for a "peaceful and diplomatic solution to the situation" and welcomed efforts by UN members to reach a "comprehensive solution through dialogue."

Mexico was also faced with another urgent situation near the end of its tenure, this one inside its own borders. The outbreak of the H1N1 flu virus prompted a rapid response from the UN. Even though the Security Council did not have direct input on the UN's reactions to the outbreak, the governing body still had to remain alert to the situation. Most directives related to the H1N1 outbreak came from the World Health Organization (WHO), which issued several warnings and directives but had not declared a pandemic as of early May (SourceMex, April 29, 2009).

Mexico considers participation in peacekeeping forces

During its time as president of the council, Mexico also brought up another issue that had been controversial back home: the possibility that it would contribute members of its military to the UN Peacekeeping force, specifically to a current UN mission in Haiti, which was sent to that country following the ouster of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (NotiCen, June 03, 2004). Because of constitutional constraints, Mexico has not contributed forces to UN peacekeeping missions, although the Senate has debated whether this policy should be changed with an amendment to the Mexican Constitution (SourceMex, May 05, 2004). The issue is expected to come up soon in the Senate, which has jurisdiction on treaties and other matters related to foreign policy.

Sen. Adriana Gonzalez Carrillo, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), said she planned to introduce an initiative in the upper house that would eventually allow Mexican forces to participate in the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy, Gonzalez said Mexico should not ignore its responsibilities

to the global community, particularly in light of the higher profile the country has acquired in Latin America and around the world. "It is essential that we review this issue without the mistaken interpretations, myths, and fallacies that normally surround it," said Gonzalez Carrillo, who is secretary of the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the Senate.

Mexico is facing pressure from countries like France to reconsider its participation in UN peacekeeping operations. During a recent visit to Mexico City, French President Nicolas Sarkozy urged Mexico to consider participating in the Haiti mission. But critics say Mexico must not ignore Article 89 of the Mexican Constitution, which contains a clause prohibiting intervention in the affairs of other countries. This principle is based on the Estrada Doctrine, which has been in place since 1930. The doctrine named after former foreign relations secretary Genaro Estrada states that Mexico respects the right of self-determination of other countries. "In the case of peacekeeping missions, it is not sufficient to say that Mexico must participate because our country has responsibilities to global peace," said Jose Contreras, a columnist for La Cronica de Hoy. "We must not forget that our foreign policy is based on the principles of nonintervention and free self-determination of other countries. Any military participation by Mexico in another country would clash with these principles."

Beyond the question of constitutional principles, Contreras raised concerns that participation in a peacekeeping force could subject Mexico's military to the policies of other countries. "Before making this decision, one has to ask who really controls the peacekeeping forces and whether they can be used to legitimize an intervention by a country like the US in a sovereign state," the columnist said. Calderon administration officials, meanwhile, raised the possibility that Mexico could participate in the UN Haiti mission with nonmilitary personnel. Deputy foreign relations secretary Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo recently told reporters that the Mexican government is considering sending civilians to assist with some projects, such as elections.

Mexico also left US economic blockade of Cuba off agenda

Other questions were brought up about Mexico's one-month tenure in the Security Council presidency. Some critics suggested that the Calderon government dropped the ball by not using its position to promote greater debate in the UN body about ending the economic blockade against Cuba. Ricardo Valero, who served as deputy foreign relations secretary during the administration of ex-President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), noted a lack of advocacy on behalf of Cuba during the PAN administrations of former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Calderon (SourceMex, May 05, 2004). "There was a time when Mexico was considered a leader on certain key positions, such as pushing for international solidarity with Cuba," said Valero. Mexico was very outspoken in its opposition to US policies against Cuba during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was in office (SourceMex, November 25, 1992 and September 25, 1996).

At the recent Summit of the Americas in Trinidad, Calderon declined to condemn the economic blockade against Cuba but openly backed US President Barack Obama's more open policies toward the island nation. Obama has lifted some restrictions on Cuba imposed by his predecessors (NotiCen, March 12, 2009) and has expressed willingness to dialogue with Cuban leader Raul Castro,

but he has said he will not end the economic blockade until Cuba meets certain conditions related to human rights (NotiCen, April 23, 2009).

In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma before the summit, Valero suggested that Mexico at times seemed to take leadership in areas that defied recent trends in Latin America. "At times, Mexico seems like it wants to become a leader of the Latin American right, fighting for this distinction with the Colombian government," noted the former official. Still, although Calderon's economic policies are very similar to those of Fox, there is a marked difference in style. Calderon prefers behind-the-scenes mediation and negotiation, while Fox openly sought confrontation. At the last Summit of the Americas in 2005, Fox openly feuded with Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Nestor Kirchner of Argentina regarding differences in trade and economic philosophies (SourceMex, November 16, 2005). And some experts suggest that Fox's style has hampered Calderon. "The Vicente Fox presidency was no doubt harmful to Mexico's foreign policy," said columnist Maria Cristina Rosas in the monthly magazine Etcetera. "We not only lost prestige but also credibility." Rosas said, therefore, that Calderon's decision to work behind the scenes is understandable. "The path has not been easy. Domestic problems have garnered all the attention of this government, and foreign policy appears to have taken a back seat," said the columnist. "Certainly, some concrete steps have been taken in normalizing relations with Venezuela and Cuba. But in both cases, [the Calderon government] has had to repair the damage that occurred between 2000 and 2006."

Others see a useful role for Mexico in the second half of the Calderon administration, especially given Obama's willingness to engage more closely with the region. "Mexico already has an extraordinary relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean," Jorge Montano, who served as ambassador to Washington during the administration of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), said in an interview with Reforma. "Our country could become a very important intermediary in the relationship between the US and the rest of our hemisphere."

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