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## **Caribbean Nations Meet to Discuss Integration, Tourism, Banana Quotas**

*by LADB Staff*

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Heads of state from 25 nations in or bordering on the Caribbean met in the Dominican Republic April 16-18 to formulate joint positions on trade, transportation, tourism, responses to natural disasters, and other issues. The final communique the Declaration of Santo Domingo included resolutions affirming national sovereignty and condemning the US embargo against Cuba.

This was the second summit of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), which was organized in 1995. The association has talked about creating a free-trade zone, which, if it ever came about, would be one of the world's largest trading blocs. ACS states have a combined population of 216 million and an annual regional GDP of US\$560 billion. However, in the four years since the first summit, most ACS commissions that were supposed to study the specifics of integration have issued no progress reports.

The diversity of member states slows progress toward a large-scale trade alliance. Mexico and Venezuela are tied to non-Caribbean trade groups. Colombia, Central America, and Venezuela are powerful competitors with tiny Caribbean banana producers like St. Lucia and Dominica that recently lost their advantage with the European Union (EU) market (see NotiCen, 1999-04-15).

Regarding tourism, the leaders signed an ancillary Declaration for the Establishment of a Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Zone. It recognized that "sustainable tourism will substantially contribute to the development of our peoples." The delegates also agreed to work on cooperative air and maritime agreements. Leaders criticize US Cuban policy and globalism. Besides economic matters, the region's leaders agreed on political statements attached to the Declaration of Santo Domingo. They condemned the projection of extraterritorial laws, such as the Helm-Burton Act, and called on the US to lift the embargo against Cuba.

Although the US has pressed the region hard for cooperation on anti-drug trafficking measures, the summit shifted the focus from agreements with the US to a "global focus" that would ensure "strict respect for the principles of international law, in particular those of sovereignty and territorial integrity." The resolution was a clear reference to the US policy of annual certification that countries are cooperating with US drug policies, which many leaders in the region see as heavy-handed.

In a speech inaugurating the summit, President Leonel Fernandez of the Dominican Republic called on member states to present a united front on "fundamental questions" before all international forums. "In the reality of a globalized world, only unity will do." Touching on a theme first presented by Cuban President Fidel Castro and recently endorsed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Fernandez warned against the "casino economy" of short-term speculative movements of

cash around the globe. He also warned that, without policies promoting better social and economic conditions, the region could erupt in social protest endangering democracy and governability.

### *Summit declaration weak on trade issues*

Aside from promises to work toward a regional tariff union, the summit made no special progress on trade. Some member states prefer to sign bilateral agreements rather than press ahead with a regional trade bloc.

The final declaration does little more than encourage members to seek both regional and bilateral agreements as they see fit. In the working sessions, calls were made for loosening US restrictions on Caribbean textile imports and extending North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) benefits enjoyed by Mexico to the entire region.

### *No solution found for banana dispute*

Among the most urgent trade issues discussed at the summit was that of banana exports to the EU. On April 6, the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruled against an EU import- quota system that favored ACS members that belong to the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group. Suriname President Jules Wydenbosch singled out the WTO ruling to show how globalization helps stronger nations and hurts weaker ones. The banana war, he pointed out, was fought between the EU and the US without the involvement of the small banana-producing states.

But the summit did not propose any resolution since such member states as Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica are large exporters that could benefit from the WTO ruling. In a closed-door session, Castro called the WTO "a fearful instrument of recolonization and world exploitation." The best the summit could do was express hope for a solution to the banana dilemma.

In apparent recognition of the helplessness of tiny island producers facing the global system, Haiti's President Rene Preval said, "We hope the decision in the hands of the World Trade Organization offers Caribbean countries happy solutions." Fernandez's view was that the association should stand united on such thorny trade issues and "protect rights acquired in traditionally favorable markets."

A day after the summit, the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) issued a statement calling the WTO ruling "the single most dangerous threat to the economies of the Caribbean banana-exporting countries." The statement said that "severe social and economic dislocations" could result in the small producing islands if the ruling stands. In light of the destruction caused by Hurricanes Georges and Mitch in some Caribbean states (see NotiCen, 1998-11-12), the ACS adopted a resolution for a Regional Accord on Cooperation on Natural Disasters. The accord would promote cooperation on tourism initiatives through regional agencies and create a regional telecommunications network. During the summit, Castro gave no public speeches and ducked out of the final press conference, giving the spotlight to Hugo Chavez.

Delivering the meeting's closing speech, Chavez chided the leaders for excessive summitry and called for more action on social programs for the region's poor. He said he had been to six summits since taking office in February. "We go from summit to summit, but our peoples go from abyss

to abyss," said Chavez. In his address, Chavez went well beyond the modest proposals of the Caribbean leaders, envisioning a Bolivarian united continent with a "Congress of the Americas" located in Panama.

Besides the plenary sessions on the ACS agenda, the various heads of state held bilateral meetings and mini-summits on subregional issues. Colombian President Andres Pastrana and Chavez held a private meeting on their differences regarding the Colombian guerrilla war, and Honduran President Armando Calderon Sol discussed with Castro the possibility of commuting the death sentences of two Salvadorans convicted of terrorist bombings in Cuba (see article in this issue).

[Sources: Xinhua, 04/13/99; Dominican Republic One Daily News, 04/15/99; Agence France-Presse, 04/15/99, 04/17/99; Notimex, 04/16/99, 04/17/99, 04/17/99, 04/18/99; Associated Press, 04/17/99, 04/18/99; El Pais (Spain), 04/17/99; Listin Diario (Dominican Republic), 04/18/99; Reuters, 04/16/99, 04/18/99; The New York Times, 04/19/99]

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