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Summit of the Americas Focuses on Democracy

by LADB Staff

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The Summit of the Americas, held April 20-22 in Quebec City, linked democracy to economic integration of the hemisphere. President George W. Bush stressed the importance of free trade to improve economic conditions and set democratic government as a condition for inclusion in the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). However, many regional leaders thought ending the gap between rich and poor was necessary before their peoples would end their suspicion that democracy has not put bread on the table. The FTAA was formally proposed during a 1994 summit in Miami.

The second summit took place in Santiago, Chile, in 1998 (see Chronicle, 1994-12-15, NotiSur, 1998-04-24). A major goal of the Central American leaders was to meet with Bush to press their own agendas. Bush held talks with the presidents of Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Though he made few concrete promises, Bush said he was ready to hold discussions with Central American leaders on trade, on measures to help reduce the effects of future natural disasters, and on combatting traffic in drugs, arms, and persons.

The Central America leaders also want the US to adopt more flexible immigration policies for Central Americans fleeing poverty and natural disasters like the 1998 Hurricane Mitch and the two major earthquakes that struck El Salvador this year. Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador have pressed the US to grant temporary visas to illegal immigrants from their countries, not only because of the negative economic impact their return would produce, but also because these governments depend on the dollar remittances immigrants send home. However, what Central America wants most from the US is free access to its market, and the region's presidents presented the issue as central to stabilizing democratic regimes threatened by poverty and social unrest.

A US free-trade deal with Central America appears more urgent to the region's leaders than does the FTAA.

Honduran President Carlos Flores told Notimex that the region's most pressing need is to close the gap between rich and poor. He noted that between 70% and 80% of the region's 30 million people live in poverty. In his address to the summit, Flores said it was necessary to show the poor that democracy can solve their problems. Despite the gradual disappearance of regional dictatorships, there still exists "the extraordinary burden of the old accumulation of social problems, as well as the challenge to find the means to avoid falling behind on the road to globalization," Flores said.

He posed the situation of a poor villager without access to potable water, health care, education, and land who goes to the polls every four years and asks what good is voting since nothing has changed with the disappearance of the dictatorships. The developed world sees dictatorships as a threat, Flores said, but does little to show the poor of developing countries the advantages of democracy.

The key to democracy is "to maintain credibility in the system in view of the colossal inequality of opportunities and the abysmal distances between superabundance in resources and those for whom each second of their lives is an anguished struggle for survival."

Salvadoran President Francisco Flores, speaking also on behalf on Honduras and Nicaragua, discussed their hopes for free trade between the US and Central America. "Our position here is that to save democratic development in the region, true economic liberty is necessary." Salvadoran officials believe that an open US market could stimulate exports to the extent of creating 100,000 new jobs in El Salvador alone.

Leaders approach FTAA with weak negotiating hand

Many commentators have said the Central American countries like most of the 34 summit participants approach FTAA negotiations with a weak bargaining hand. Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador want a separate free-trade pact with the US, while other states in the region, notably Costa Rica, hold back to await developments.

Honduran economist Alvaro Sarmiento, who is with the Secretariat of Central American Economic Integration (SIECA), told Inter Press Service, "At this point there is no Central American bloc in the FTAA negned April 22, posed democracy as a prerequisite for membership in the FTAA. Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said the White House wanted the democracy clause to be the central component of the final declaration, which calls for free trade in the hemisphere by December 2005. The democracy clause does not specifically bar nondemocratic states from membership, but it says that democracy is "fundamental to the advancement of all our objectives," and that "any unconstitutional alteration or interruption of the democratic order in a state of the hemisphere constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to the participation of that state's government in the Summit of the Americas process."

The document sets a goal of halving poverty in the hemisphere by 2015 but with no specifics about how to do that. Cuba warns FTAA will "swallow up" region Cuba, excluded from the summit because it lacks democratic elections, views the FTAA as a dangerous step for Latin America.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said before the summit started that "Cuba considers that the Free Trade Area of the Americas, designed according to the interests of the United States, is profoundly damaging to the interests of Latin America," and that Latin America would be "swallowed up" by the US. He said that, instead of joining the FTAA, the Latin American states should form their own trade bloc and negotiate with the US.

In a speech marking the fortieth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Fidel Castro warned that trade privileges offered by the FTAA would freeze the European Union (EU) and other countries out of trade competition and investment opportunities in Latin America. He said the US strategy was to prevent "at all costs" the consolidation of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) so that it could not negotiate with the US from a position of strength. The US prefers to negotiate individually with weak states, Castro said. "Given the total dependence on the US of the international financial organisms, some [states] are in no position to resist."

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