

US suffers Latin American rebuke at OAS meeting

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell came away empty handed from the annual meeting of the Organization of American States held earlier this week in Santiago, Chile.

Not only did the US delegation fail to push through its agenda of a unified hard line against Cuba, for the first time in its history the OAS voted against seating the US nominee for the body's human rights commission.

Dominating the OAS general assembly was a sharp divergence between Washington and the other members of the organization over what represents the greatest threat to stability in the region. Powell delivered a speech exhorting Latin America and the Caribbean to unite in a battle against "tyrants, traffickers and terrorists." Latin American and Caribbean representatives replied that social unrest fueled by increasing misery represented a far greater danger than all three combined.

The speech by the US secretary of state was an attempt to line up the Latin America governments behind Washington's campaign to topple the Castro government in Cuba, as well as the US-backed counterinsurgency war in Colombia and America's policy of military aggression around the world.

Spelling out US intentions in his speech to the foreign ministers of the other 33 American nations, Powell stated, "My government looks forward to working with our partners in the OAS to find ways to hasten the inevitable democratic transition in Cuba."

There was little receptivity to the US approach. A senior OAS official was quoted as saying that, while most of the Latin American governments opposed the recent crackdown on US-financed "dissidents" in Cuba, few were willing to line up with the Bush administration's attempts to cast the Castro regime as a fourth member of the "axis of evil." He added that there is strong opposition to the US trade embargo against the island nation.

"It is difficult to take a position when Cuba is not here and cannot defend itself," the official said. "Almost everyone disagrees with the embargo." He added that popular sympathy for Cuba and hostility to the war in Iraq and global US bullying made it difficult for governments in Latin America to be seen as falling into line behind Washington.

The US attempt to cloak its long-standing campaign of aggression against Cuba in the language of human rights received a stinging rebuff in the vote to exclude the US from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

In addition to rejecting the US portrayal of the Cuban question solely in terms of human rights, the Latin American delegations reacted to the Bush administration's contemptuous choice of a nominee. It had tapped Rafael Martinez, a Cuban-American

Republican Party official from Orlando, Florida, to sit on the commission.

Martinez is the brother of the administration's housing and urban development secretary, Melquiades R. Martinez. Together, the two brothers played a key role in the Republican Party's campaign in Florida during the 2000 US election to force a halt in the vote recount, including the organization of a mob that threatened Miami election board officials.

Latin American representatives questioned Martinez's qualifications to serve on a human rights commission. He made his fortune in Florida as a medical malpractice lawyer, working together with his brother, who specialized in personal injury lawsuits.

The general assembly was the first by the OAS since the war with Iraq and the aborted United Nations Security Council vote on granting the US authorization to invade. The two Latin American members on the council—Chile and Mexico—had both signaled their intention to vote against Washington before the Bush administration abandoned its attempt to get a resolution through the UN body.

The US retaliated by putting a bilateral free trade pact with Chile on the back burner, and rebuffing Mexico's efforts to get an agreement on normalizing immigration and the status of its nationals residing in the US. These actions, however, were in line with the indifference, if not outright hostility, the Bush administration has exhibited toward the region as a whole over the recent period.

The Inter-American Dialogue, a generally conservative Washington think tank that brings together former Latin American leaders and US corporate representatives, pointed in its most recent report to the undeniable deterioration in US relations with the region.

"...[T]he view is widespread that Washington has lost interest in the region," the report stated. "Latin Americans were disturbed by what they perceived as Washington's indifference to the collapse of Argentina's economy last year. Many were also troubled by the Bush administration's willingness to countenance the April 2002 military coup against Hugo Chávez, the rapid decline in US policy attention to Mexico after 9/11 and then-Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's criticism of the region's economy." It added that most Latin American governments opposed "Washington's single-minded emphasis on the battle against terrorism" and the unprovoked war against Iraq.

Powell's description of his trip to Argentina following the OAS meeting as "diplomatic garden-tending" did not improve matters, recalling as it did Washington's tendency to treat Latin America as its "backyard."

The consensus opinion expressed at the OAS meeting was that the relentless deepening of poverty and social inequality posed a severe

threat to the stability of existing governments in Latin America. The theme of the assembly was “Democratic Governability in the Americas.” The title raised the implicit question of whether the Latin American ruling classes will be able to weather the mounting storm of economic crisis and social conflict without resorting to a new round of military dictatorships, or, alternately, be swept away by social revolution.

Canada’s Foreign Minister Bill Graham made the point explicitly at a recent OAS ministerial meeting: “There is a danger that if economies fail, the people will look outside democracy for solutions.”

As the document from Inter-American Dialogue noted: “Since our last report in November 2000, we have watched circumstances in nearly every country in the region deteriorate. Growth has come to a standstill, foreign investment has dropped sharply, and unemployment and poverty have worsened.”

Similarly, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, a UN agency known by its Spanish acronym CEPAL, reported a 0.5 percent negative growth rate for 2002 and a fall in the per capita gross domestic product by 1.9 percent. Inflation doubled to 12 percent on average, while real wages fell by 1.5 percent.

The promise of neo-liberal ideologues that the so-called “Washington Consensus”—a program of privatization, free reign for foreign trade and investment, and drastic fiscal and interest rate policies—would revive the region’s economies has proven a monumental deception.

For the masses of Latin American working people, income levels have been in permanent decline for the past two decades—ever since the eruption of the region’s foreign debt crisis. Structural adjustment programs have exacerbated poverty and unemployment for the vast majority, while creating an ever-wealthier elite through lower taxes and decreased labor costs combined with fewer restrictions on transferring profits abroad.

About 43 percent of Latin America’s 520 million people live in poverty, while 92.8 million live in indigence, according to CEPAL. According to another estimate, fully 70 percent of Latin Americans live on no more than \$5 a day, while 40 percent of the region’s population eke out an existence on less than \$2 a day.

The continuation of economic austerity policies under these conditions has provoked a wave of upheavals throughout the continent. Even as they met at the OAS assembly in Chile, a number of governments were facing serious crises and confrontations at home.

In Peru, the government of Alejandro Toledo imposed a state of siege in the face of a nationwide strike by 300,000 teachers combined with protests and strikes by students, farmers and other sections of the country’s workforce. In neighboring Ecuador, teachers struck along with oil workers, who paralyzed the country’s principal source of export earnings and forced the government to back off from plans to open up the state-owned petroleum industry to privatization.

In Brazil, 20,000 public employees demonstrated against the plans by the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to slash pensions in line with an IMF-dictated austerity plan. In Costa Rica, 40,000 teachers and 10,000 electrical workers walked out.

The growing social unrest was reflected in the uneasy statements by representatives of Latin America’s ruling elite about the catastrophic effects of neo-liberal policies that they have all promoted. César Gaviria, the former Colombian president, who is the secretary general of the OAS, told the assembly meeting: “Clearly we live in a time when not only has our economic growth been seriously hampered, but also more questions are raised about how our governments should act

to overcome such obstacles.” He added, “It has surely been a mistake to have believed that development is determined solely by economic factors.”

In the end, however, none of the Latin American governments are capable of answering such questions or posing any consistent alternative to the free trade policies promoted by Washington. While the election of Lula in Brazil, Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador and now Néstor Kirchner in Argentina has been described as a continental shift to the left, the reality is that all of these leaders have pledged to continue the same fundamental economic policies as their predecessors.

One critical area where the US faced defiance during Powell’s trip was the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), the linchpin of Washington’s policy toward Latin America. The Bush administration wants to see this agreement—forming a continent-wide free trade zone—implemented by 2005. One of its primary objectives is to align Latin America with US capital in opposition to Wall Street’s rivals in Europe. Many of the region’s governments see little incentive to sign onto the pact, however, given that existing US agricultural subsidies and other trade barriers would remain, barring most Latin American exports from US markets.

In his side trip to Argentina, Powell reiterated the 2005 target for signing the accord. However, Argentina’s foreign minister, Rafael Bielsa, issued a carefully crafted statement noting that the negotiation of a free trade agreement between the US and Chile had taken 12 years. He said Argentina would “proceed by the same route and try to see that the results are truly beneficial for our population.” The remark was generally interpreted as a warning that the Argentine government is in no hurry to sign on to the US pact.

Just one day after his meeting with Powell, Kirchner flew to Brasilia to announce together with da Silva plans to strengthen and broaden the Southern Cone common market, a trade block known by its Spanish acronym Mercosur. The plan, which was said to include the creation of a regional parliament and a common currency, was seen as a direct challenge to the US trade proposal. Brazil, whose ruling elite has had the most intense trade conflicts with Washington, has urged Argentina to adopt a go-slow attitude toward talks on the FTAA.



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