

US shows OAS delegates American democracy in action

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In his speech to the Organization of American States (OAS) extolling the benefits of US-style democracy, President George W. Bush declared Monday that Latin Americans “need to see that in a democratic society, people can walk in the streets in safety.”

Unfortunately, for those who traveled to Fort Lauderdale, Florida for the OAS general assembly, such democratic comforts were in short supply. Rather, the atmosphere surrounding the inter-American meeting was that of a police state, and those walking the streets—officials and protesters alike—were subjected to systematic harassment and the threat of detention.

Massed federal, state and local police from 26 separate agencies imposed such intense repression that the OAS is itself reportedly preparing a formal protest to the US government.

Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega was compelled to publicly apologize to the body. “I wanted to express our regrets for some of the problems that some of the delegates and members of the civil society have encountered with transportation and security,” he said at the beginning of his speech.

Multiple checkpoints were erected on all routes in and out of the Broward Convention Center, where the meetings are being held. Cars bringing foreign officials to the conference have been stopped and subjected to searches by bomb-sniffing dogs and cops with metal detectors. In many cases, vehicles have been turned back because drivers were not deemed authorized to enter the secure zone.

Forced to proceed on foot, the visiting Latin American statesmen were again stopped at checkpoints and in some cases turned back once again.

On the floor of the convention, journalists have been treated like criminal suspects. Reporters are allowed to

approach foreign officials only when escorted by State Department minders.

A Venezuelan reporter, Lyng-Hou Ramírez, filed a complaint with the OAS after she was detained by Secret Service agents and other police.

According to an account published in the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, the reporter, who was officially accredited to cover the meeting for a press group representing several prominent Latin American dailies, was detained for over an hour and threatened with deportation.

“I am not a terrorist, I am a journalist,” she was quoted as telling a mob of 20 agents who came to interrogate her after she was grabbed by local police while leaving the convention center.

The Mexican newspaper quoted a State Department official who defended the detention on the basis of “tight security,” and added that Ramírez was “not the only one” detained.

Ramírez said that the agents refused to contact the OAS to confirm that her credentials were legitimate. “They don’t make the rules, we do,” they told her.

The incident began after cops searched her bag and found an OAS document on human rights, which apparently made her an immediate suspect.

Several hundred protesters turned out for the OAS meeting, but were confined to a “free speech” zone far from the convention center, where they were outnumbered by riot police.

Calling the security measures “draconian,” Carol Sobel, an attorney who filed a lawsuit on behalf of the protesters, declared, “Convening diplomats will be able to talk about democracy, but they won’t get to see it practiced.”



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