

Ibero-American summit criticises US policy

Paul Mitchell
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Heads of state attending the 15th Ibero-American summit have criticised the US administration's policy towards Cuba and Venezuela.

The summit, held in the Spanish town of Salamanca and attended by 17 heads of state from Latin America, Spain and Portugal, issued a six-page declaration that included two special resolutions relating to Cuba and Venezuela.

The resolutions are a snub to the US drive against what Washington calls the "Cuba-Venezuela axis." The US campaign against this "axis" combines a decades-long drive to undermine the Castro regime—fueled by Cold War ideology and political calculations involving the Republican Party and the Cuban exiles in Miami—and more recent efforts to overthrow the Hugo Chavez regime in Venezuela and gain control over one of the world's major oil-producing regions.

The US embassy in Madrid condemned the resolutions, saying, "It would be unfortunate if these texts were interpreted as a sign of support for the Castro dictatorship."

The resolution relating to Cuba condemned Washington's "unilateral coercive measures which affect the welfare of people and obstruct integration processes." It urged the Bush administration to abide by 13 successive United Nations resolutions and stop its economic, commercial and financial blockade against Cuba. Previous communiqués have always used the less emotive term "embargo" in deference to US demands.

Recently, the Bush administration has used the imprisonment of 75 US-backed dissidents and the execution of three ferry hijackers to step up sanctions against Cuba, including the virtual halt of flights to the island.

The second special resolution called for the extradition and trial of the "person responsible" for the terrorist attack on a Cubana Aviación plane in October

1976 that killed 73 civilians. The resolution is a reference to Luis Posada Carriles, a former CIA operative wanted by Venezuela for the bombing. Recently, a US judge ruled that Posada Carriles cannot be deported to Venezuela, where he is a citizen, on the grounds that he could face torture there.

The ruling is the latest chapter in the decades-long US government protection of Cuban-exile terrorists. In this case, Washington is protecting Posada Carriles from prosecution—violating several international and bilateral treaties covering extradition, air piracy and terrorism—because his prosecution would inevitably turn into a trial of the long record of US crimes in Latin America.

Whilst the US administration protects Posada Carriles, it has overseen the systematic torture of those whom it calls "enemy combatants" in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan, and also carried out "extraordinary rendition" of people to countries like Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Uzbekistan, where torture is used to extract information sought by Washington.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez praised the resolutions, saying, "I think it's a very important step that this Salamanca summit calls things by their name—calls bread bread and wine wine." President Vicente Fox of Mexico stated that whilst he "respects" US policy towards Cuba, the commercial and economic blockade was "out of touch with reality."

Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero tried to downplay the resolutions, attempting once more to smooth the tensions with Washington flowing from the decision to pull Spanish troops out of Iraq in April 2004. He said the Cuba resolution was similar to those passed at the United Nations and that there was nothing "polemical" about using the word "blockade" to describe US policy towards Cuba.

A Spanish government spokesman also pointed out that a specific reference to Posada Carriles had been

removed and replaced by a general statement on extradition. The resolution was also later modified to allow for Posada Carriles to be tried in the US, diluting the demand for his extradition to Venezuela.

The resolutions are indicative of growing opposition to the US in Latin America. They follow on the heels of the refusal earlier this year by the Organisation of American States to elect a secretary general backed by the US.

Last year, a summit of leaders from 58 European Union, Latin American and Caribbean countries condemned the US's unilateral invasion of Iraq and expressed their "abhorrence" at the mistreatment of prisoners in Iraqi prisons. At that summit, Zapatero called for Latin America and Europe—through the auspices of Spain—to form a "common front" in an increasingly "fractured world."

Europe, along with Asia, is competing with US capitalism in Latin America and has concluded several free trade agreements in the region. The EU has become the leading donor of aid and the premier foreign investor. Between 1990 and 2000, Europe became the largest source of investment in Latin America, and Latin America became Europe's main target of foreign direct investment in emerging markets.

European corporations, notably those of Spanish origin, have taken advantage of the privatisation of utilities, telecommunications, financial services and aviation by Latin American governments.



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