

The Third Ibero-American Summit: another exercise in rhetoric

The third meeting of Ibero-American heads of state ended without coming to any concrete agreement on how to confront the many problems facing the region —among them the problem of extreme poverty, which was the summit's central theme.

Meeting on July 15 and 16 in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, the leaders of 21 of the region's nations recognized that the economic policies of "structural adjustment" which have been applied in recent years have had negative effects on the living standards of the majority of the region's inhabitants. They underlined the necessity of reformulating social development policies in order to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of the population, especially those sectors that live under the poverty line (more than 300 million people in Latin America, according to CEPAL's calculations).

Topics at the summit

Among subjects addressed in work sessions were: the need for concrete actions to respond to the population's social needs; the defense of democracy; rejection of the developed countries' protectionist policies; and the importance of reforming the UN in order to permit greater participation by Ibero-American countries in the UN's decision-making process.

Colombian president César Gaviria stated that the "neo-liberal" economic system, which has been



The central theme of the summit was the problem of extreme poverty.

central to political and economic discourse over the past decade, has worn itself out and needs to be modified so that the population's most urgent needs can be attended to. He noted that the main topic for the future must be how to reform governments in order to strengthen their social welfare functions and broaden democratic participation in decision-making.

Cuban head of state Fidel Castro attacked the neo-liberal policies that have been imposed on Latin America with the aim of overcoming the region's economic crisis: "There is talk of a decade of hope because some indicators, such as those relating to inflation, budget deficits and capital inflow, have improved. But we shouldn't fool ourselves; there have never been as many poor and marginalized people in Latin America as there are today.... Almost half the Latin American

population lives at critical poverty levels, unemployment has grown, and real wages have fallen."

Venezuela's representative recognized that neo-liberal "adjustment" programs have underestimated the magnitude of the social and political problems facing the region. Referring to the fall in living standards and the increase in social violence in his country, he remarked: "We are mistaken if we believe that good economic results will have an immediate impact on social problems."

A range of opinions were expressed in debates on the role of government in guiding the economy and the social responsibility of the state. Spanish president Felipe González and Argentine president Carlos Saúl Menem spoke in favor of the free market and rejected any government participation in economic affairs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Fidel Castro defended the role of the state in organizing economic production, noting the Cuban government's achievements in the fields of health, science and sports.

An intermediate stand was taken by Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who said that market forces and the state must complement each other in promoting economic development together with social justice. The representatives of Brazil, Colombia and Chile spoke against extreme views on this issue and in favor of a measured interpretation of the role of government in economic life.

Among the significant proposals put forward—which were not concretized in the summit's final declaration—was President Salinas de Gortari's advocacy of a joint project aimed at reforming the UN in order to broaden the active participation of all nations and democratize the decision-making process. The Cuban president also spoke in favor of such reforms.

The proposals of the Venezuelan delegation, as well as those put forward by Spain's Felipe González, did not find a place in the final declaration either. The Venezuelans suggested freezing a small part of Latin American countries' foreign debt and investing the resulting resources in educational programs for children and young people, under the

administration of the Inter-American Development Bank. González spoke of using 10% of taxes collected on GNP for social programs.

Fidel Castro's call for aid to Cuba was received with declarations of solidarity from a number of countries, but no formal commitments were made. Bolivia's president Jaime Paz Zamora, whose term in office was about to end, spoke against all forms of intervention and stated that the U.S. blockade is no solution to Cuba's problems.

The summit's final document includes a paragraph rejecting the unilateral application of economic and commercial sanctions by any state against another. While it does not explicitly mention Cuba, this passage was viewed as favorable to the island nation.

The *Declaration of Salvador*—the official document signed by the 21 heads of state, consisting of 73 articles—lays out the multitude of problems besetting the region. Upholding the principle of democracy, the document calls on governments to commit themselves to promoting economic and social development while making the eradication of poverty a top priority. It condemns drug trafficking, corruption, terrorism and racism and calls for greater participation in the United Nations. The document also

criticizes protectionism and trade barriers and states that the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round of GATT trade negotiations is an unpostponable task, without which Latin American nations' economic projects cannot be made viable. Nevertheless, nobody seemed interested in having the document include concrete action proposals on how to translate words into deeds.

Thus, the Third Ibero-American Summit demonstrated participants' concern for avoiding confrontations and making unanimous declarations, even though this meant not making joint decisions that would commit their respective nations to taking positive action.

The widespread skepticism as to the relevance of these conclaves was most clearly expressed in Fidel Castro's remark that "it seems there is still insufficient clarity about what the overall strategic purpose of our meetings should be." Spain's representatives stated their opposition to signing development programs which do not have real possibilities of being put into practice. For his part, shortly before the summit Uruguayan president Luis Alberto Lacalle said there was no point in meeting each year for the sole purpose of talking.

The question which remains in the air is whether the Ibero-American governments believe there is a real possibility of carrying out coordinated regional actions. If they do not, the usefulness of these annual meetings will remain in doubt.

The stage and the actors

The 21 heads of state chose the perfect place to symbolize their joint commitment to making the struggle against poverty a priority: the Colonial city of Salvador de Bahía.

Located in the north of Brazil, it was the capital of that country until the middle of the 18th century. Salvador was the headquarters of the *Pelurinho*, the 16th-century Colonial



Carlos Salinas and Fidel Castro.



The Declaration of Salvador calls for greater participation in the United Nations.

Portuguese tribunal charged with punishing Europeans who broke the law. The standard punishment was whipping, which sometimes caused the malefactors' death. However, moneyed whites could avoid punishment by having a black slave whipped in their place.

Today, slavery and whippings have been replaced by poverty, which finds its expression in unemployment, violence, hunger, prostitution, and the thousands of homeless children, particularly among the black population.

However, summit participants enjoyed a city free of beggars, street children, prostitutes and criminals. According to press reports, a few days before the visitors arrived the Brazilian army took over the city, carrying out raids and evictions and temporarily relocating street children and beggars about 15 miles outside the city limits.

Their place was taken by soldiers equipped with bayonets and automatic weapons; sharpshooters with high-powered precision rifles, dressed in black and with their faces covered by woollen ski-masks; trenches, jeeps outfitted with non-recoil artillery, and armored helicopters.

As was the case at the two previous summits, the main protagonist was Cuban president Fidel Castro, due to the U.S.-imposed commercial blockade which is strangling Cuba's economy as well as to the criticisms of those who call his government a

dictatorship. Castro arrived at the summit prepared to defend Cuba's right to carry out its internal affairs without foreign interference. According to the press, on this occasion Castro got his own back, making up for the harassment he received during the 1991 summit, held in Madrid.

Presidents Felipe González of Spain and Carlos Saúl Menem of Argentina were unsuccessful in pushing their openly anti-Castro stand. Menem, viewed as a spokesman for the United States government since George Bush's presidency, openly criticized the Cuban regime, stating that "it is intolerable that in today's world there are dictatorial regimes which destroy man's dignity and ability to work." Yet Menem failed in the attempt to have harsh sanctions against Cuba's government included in the official document adopted by the summit.

Before the Salvador conclave, rumors abounded that there might be a meeting between Castro and Menem in which the two presidents would discuss the possibility of Argentina playing the role of mediator in the conflict between Cuba and the United States, but such a meeting did not materialize. Faced with the Argentine government's hostility, the Cuban delegation stated that it did not need intermediaries in order to establish a dialogue with Washington.

Castro's presence led to tensions due to rumors that an attempt would

be made on his life; but he received an outpouring of support from Salvador's population, the majority of which backs Brazil's Communist Party.

Another difference overcome during the summit was that between the meeting's host, Brazilian president Itamar Franco, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori, over Franco's declarations that he would not allow his government to become the sort of authoritarian regime headed by Fujimori. The Peruvian president threatened to cancel his trip to Salvador de Bahía, but ended up attending in order to defend his *autogolpe* ("self-made coup d'état"), stating during a press conference that the *Fujimorazo*, as his takeover is popularly known, is not intended for export to other countries.

Former heads of state who were striking for their absence provided another key feature to this summit. Ex-presidents Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil and Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela naturally did not put in an appearance, since both have been charged with corruption and removed from office thanks to the mobilization of the populace of their respective countries. Also absent was the Guatemalan Jorge Serrano Elías, who failed in his attempt to carry out an *autogolpe*. The removal of these three rulers is considered a small victory in the fight against corruption and an advance in Latin American governments' efforts to regain credibility.

Since prognoses on the region's future are far from promising, participants at the next summit—slated to be held in Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia—must seek to confront the diversity of interests at play, making concrete proposals for regional collaboration. This is the only way these meetings can begin to play a useful role. ❧

Elsie L. Montiel
Assistant Editor.