

VI IBEROAMERICAN SUMMIT TWENTY-THREE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT AGAINST HELMS-BURTON

Twenty Latin American countries, Spain and Portugal attended the VI Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State and Government November 10 and 11 in the Chilean city of Viña del Mar.

The summit called for deepening the process of democratization in Latin America and debated different positions on regional economic integration.

The official topic, "Governability and democracy," sparked polemics, particularly due to the always controversial presence of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who was forced to sign a declaration explicitly defining democracy as a pluralist system in which elections and competition among political parties are prerequisites.

"The Declaration of Viña del Mar" signed by all the participants includes three documents: one about democratic governability; another about multilateral cooperation on cultural, educational, indigenous policy, science and other matters which had been discussed in the five previous summits; and a third dealing with political issues, including topics of particular interest to the region, like the fights against poverty, drug trafficking and terrorism.

With regard to democratic governability, the declaration emphasizes a critique of the Cuban regime, particularly the points raised by the presidents of Argentina, Carlos Menem, and Spain, José María Aznar, who urged Castro to take steps toward establishing a multi-partisan system in his country. However, another current of opinion, headed up by, among others, President Ernesto Zedillo, sought to broaden the concept of democratic governability to include social, economic and cultural changes that would diminish inequality and marginalization. To consolidate Latin America's emerging democracies, then, "poverty, corruption, terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering and all forms of organized crime" would have to be overcome. President Zedillo's speech criticized resorting to violence as the alternative to political action and called for fighting the illicit arms market.

Another topic which dominated the scene and around which a consensus was reached was the controversial Helms-Burton Act, rejected unanimously by the participants. The heads of government made a statement defending free trade agreements and condemning "unilateral corrective measures adverse to the growth and stability of Iberoamerica." They also expressed their demand for unrestricted respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination and independence for all countries, and urged the United States to rescind Helms-Burton since it "violates the principles and norms of international law and the U.N. Charter and contravenes the norms of the World Trade Organization."

Other agreements were reached which demonstrate regional unity and aim to propose joint policies vis-à-vis the United States, particularly the call for establishing policies to aid coca leaf growers to substitute these crops, especially in Colombia. The participants decided to support Colombia's proposal of making the fight against drug trafficking multilateral and calling for a special session of the United Nations to discuss the topic in 1998.

For the first time, the Iberoamerican governments discussed the issue of corruption, the scourge of many participating nations. Their final statement emphasizes that "integrity, responsibility and transparency must be consolidated as an essential characteristic of public service, and [governments] must work toward equity, social spending and equal opportunities."


Amidst demonstrations by the Chilean people both in favor and against the presence of Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader took the opportunity of his first visit to the country in 25 years to visit the grave of his friend, Socialist ex-President Salvador Allende, assassinated in 1973 in a coup d'état headed by General Augusto Pinochet. The visit was significant because, among other things, it led Pinochet, still commander-in-chief of the Chilean army, to abandon the capital. Twenty-three years later, 23 heads of government and state from 22 countries —Fidel Castro being the only participant who had been in power at the time— gathered to discuss democracy and governability. 



Photo: The President's Press Office

Diego I. Bugeda Bernal
Managing Editor