

The Summit of the Americas in Cartagena

The sixth Summit of the Americas which brings together the Presidents of the 34 countries of the continent will be held in Cartagena, Colombia, on April 14 and 15, 2012.

The process of bringing together in a summit the hemispheric heads of state developed in the context of the Cold War. It was initially limited to some countries and controlled by the Organization of American States, OAS, under the leadership of the U.S. The first two summits of 19 heads of State were held in Panama in 1956 and Punta del Este in 1967. These gatherings laid the groundwork for the creation of the Inter-American Development Bank and the strengthening of the US Alliance for Progress Initiative.

In more recent times a Summit was held in Miami in 1994 in order for the U.S. to launch a proposal for a free trade area of the Americas (FTAA). The OAS sponsored the event publicized as the main “political forum in the region.” A second summit took place in Santiago, Chile, in 1998; a third in Quebec in 2001. At a fourth Summit in Mar del Plata in 2005 the FTAA proposal was definitively buried. A fifth meeting was held in Trinidad & Tobago in 2009.

Although Summits up to the Mar del Plata gathering included topics such as education, strengthening of democracy, integration, poverty, human rights, and other proposals that reflect themes of relative consensus, the organization leading up to the Summits and official summary statements at the end of each one were marked by the absolute predominance of the United States stand on free markets, hemispheric security and democracy. With regard to economic issues the focus was the aggressive promotion of the consensus of Washington and the implementation of FTAs beginning with the FTAA. In terms of security the U.S. promoted their war against drug trafficking, terrorism and backed the predominance of the Inter-American Treaty of reciprocal assistance and the Inter-American Defense Board. With regards to democracy, it was the consistent U.S. position to exclude Cuba from the Summits and to extend legitimacy to all right-wing governments in the region.

The Mar del Plata Summit revealed the differing positions of several hemispheric governments with the U.S. agenda. In Trinidad 2009 dissent reached the point that no final statement was issued. In anticipation of a similar lack of consensus in Cartagena 2012 a “brief, concrete and action-oriented” final statement has been announced, in all probability one that will circumvent any of the profound discussions under way among the States of the region.

The summits of the Americas have actually been used as an opportunity for the United States to extend its policies throughout the hemisphere. Agreements on other topics are more rhetorical than meaningful and usually support the pillars of US policy, deeply challenged in recent years.

The Summit in Cartagena 2012 is entitled "Connecting the Americas: partners for prosperity", and its objective is to "define the agenda" of the Americas for the coming years. A similar announcement preceded the Summit of Trinidad 2009, attended by the newly elected President Barack Obama, who in his speech promised a new kind of relationship with Latin America. The theme of the Summit was "securing the future of our people by promoting human prosperity, energy security and environmental sustainability".

Without a doubt Obama frustrated expectations, advanced in the militarization of the hemisphere, supported the coup d'etat in Honduras and continues to support the illegitimate regime of Porfirio Lobo. Obama further radicalized the "war on drugs", did not eliminate sanctions against Cuba, nor proposed changes in immigration laws. The U.S. President has continued to pursue Washington's hegemonic approach, thus his efforts to strengthen the OAS, entrench strategies of military dominance in the region and sabotage the efforts of bodies such as ALBA, Unasur, and the Organization of Latin America and Caribbean States (OEALC) to integrate independently of the United States.

For all these reasons, the sixth Summit of the Americas 2012, is an opportunity to question the nature of the relationship between the United States and the region which has not been based, as promised by Obama, on "mutual respect and cooperation." It is also an opportunity for the OAS to acknowledge that countries which have taken greater economic and political distance from the United States have obtained better results in terms of development and general social welfare.

The hemispheric social movements must organize in Cartagena their own gathering to demand of their governments a thorough and complete change in their relationship with the United States.

We must demand the removal of military bases and the stoppage of joint military exercises and Fourth Fleet patrol missions. We must demand an end to war against drug trafficking and its replacement by a comprehensive, multilateral policy and with an emphasis on public health measures.

The Governments of the continent, in response to the expressed will of their peoples, must unconditionally restore the right of Cuba to belong to the multilateral system and remove sanctions against that country. Hemispheric governments must also question a free trade based on the export of commodities; set up controls over foreign investment which will preserve the capacity of national development, respect human, economic, social and cultural rights; protect the environment, biodiversity and the conditions of decent life for the population; and push forward with autonomous processes of hemispheric integration.

In preparation for the Cartagena Summit the social movements of the continent will have an opportunity to discuss and develop a joint position on hemispheric relations and the role of U.S. policy, present our demands to governments, require that our positions be addressed at the Summit, and denounce the militaristic policy of the United States.

Organizationally we need to form an International Committee to prepare a parallel Summit of the Peoples with its own positions, which will deal with the logistics of the Alternative Summit and issue a call for the governments to enter into a dialogue with the continental movements.

In Colombia, it is necessary to include the Summit on the agenda of the social movement, set up a National Committee and a Cartagena Committee which can start with a Workshop that will analyze integration processes, the role of United States in the continent, and the position of the Santos government towards the North American super-power.

Other specific themes will depend on other recent and future developments, i.e. the ratification of the Colombia and Panama FTAs in the Congress of the United States, the upcoming U.S. elections, the Durban Summit on climate change, and the evolution of Colombian internal affairs with regards to foreign investment, free trade, the new “land laws,” etc. It is important that Colombian internal agenda items become visible in this broad hemispheric context, stressing their relationship with global developments, so that they allow an understanding of current interests and current challenges of U.S. policies in Latin America.

For the Alianza Social Continental, this Summit is an opportunity to convene and energize the Afro-descendants’ movement, which has a strong presence in the Atlantic coast region of Colombia and nearby countries.