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Will Bush finally turn focus to region?

Considering President Bush's near absolute neglect of Latin America since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, some of the latest news about his top-level appointments offer a glimmer of hope that the region may not be totally forgotten during his second term.

Before we get into why the appointments of Carlos Gutierrez as secretary of commerce and of U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick as No. 2 at the State Department may be good news to the region, let's agree that the Bush administration's claims that it has never stopped paying attention to the region are hogwash.

Contrary to Bush's 2000 campaign claims that Latin America would be "a fundamental commitment" of his presidency, and his April 2001 proclamation that this will be "the century of the Americas," his administration has done



IN MY OPINION
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trade agreements with Chile and Central America. But politically, and also commercially in the case of several South American countries, the region is farther away from Washington than it was four years ago.

The second Bush administration may look closer to Latin America, if anything else

little beyond reacting to the region's crises, often too late, and too clumsily.

To be fair, Bush scored some big successes on the trade front, such as obtaining a congressional green light to sign new free-trade agreements and clinching

because there will be more high-level officials with close ties to the region.

Gutierrez, a former Kellogg Corp. CEO, is a fluent Spanish speaker who was born in Cuba and studied in Mexico. Unlike other recent Hispanic Cabinet members, he is an international businessman who has worked in Latin America much of his life.

SHAPING POLICY

But most Washington insiders say Zoellick's appointment as No. 2 in the State Department may be just as important, if not more, because he will be in a position to shape policy toward the region.

"It's great news for Latin America," said Arturo Valenzuela, a former Clinton administration chief advisor on Latin American affairs and a frequent critic of the Bush administration's Latin America policies.

"When there are no cham-

pions for the region at the highest levels of the administration, it's more difficult to put the problems of the region on the U.S. radar screen. Now, with a few prominent champions at high levels, there may be a chance to develop a more proactive, long-term policy."

Among the reasons cited by optimists:

- First, Secretary of State nominee Condoleezza Rice and Zoellick, two Bush loyalists, are likely to help restore the State Department's clout within the Bush administration's power elite. Over the past four years, Secretary of State Colin Powell was perceived by Bush's conservative White House team as too much of a solo player.

"This will strengthen the State Department," said Manuel Rocha, a former U.S. diplomat in several Latin American countries.

- Second, Zoellick, who served as State Department

undersecretary for economic affairs during Bush's father's administration before becoming the top U.S. trade negotiator, is likely to help turn the State Department into a more active player in international economic policy.

- Third, Zoellick — although not a Spanish speaker — has traveled extensively to Latin America and knows most of the region's leaders personally. For the first time in several years, the State Department's office in charge of hemispheric affairs will have somebody right next to the secretary of state who knows the region and is interested in it.

"Most people in the region feel that Zoellick has been more engaged with Latin America than any other official in the Bush administration," said Thomas "Mack" McLarty, a former Clinton White House special envoy to Latin America. "He will be a

positive force."

Will the Rice and Zoellick team replace Roger Noriega, the State Department's head of hemispheric affairs? Administration officials are mum about it. Most insiders say Noriega, a conservative, will be asked to stay for about six months.

NORIEGA SUCCESSORS

Among his possible successors down the road: White House Latin American advisor Tom Shannon, Homeland Security international affairs chief Chris Arcos, U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic Hans Hertell, U.S. Ambassador to Brazil John Danilovich and former White House Cuba and Haiti specialist Emilio Gonzalez.

The bottom line: We may see higher-level attention to Latin America in the second Bush term. Considering what we saw in the first one, that may not amount to much, but it should be welcome.

LATIN AMERICAN & CARIBBEAN BRIEFS

● CUBA

Pontiff criticizes U.S. trade embargo

From Herald Wire Services

Pope John Paul II on Saturday reiterated concern about the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba, while encouraging openness on the communist-run island.

The pope met Saturday in Rome with Cuba's new ambassador to the Vatican, Raúl Roa Kouri, and the pontiff's remarks were provided in a statement.

"The Holy See wishes ardently that the obstacles that currently impede free communication and exchange between Cuba and the international community may be overcome as soon as possible, thus consolidating, by means of a respectful and open dialogue among all, the conditions necessary for genuine development," the pope said.

The pontiff also made several references to a wish for greater dialogue on the island.

The Vatican is against economic embargoes for political purposes, including the U.S. embargo against Havana.

● COLOMBIA

REBEL COMMANDER DIES IN GUN BATTLE

BOGOTA — Government troops killed a regional Marxist rebel commander during clashes in the country's north, the army said Saturday.

Gildardo Zabala, a leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, in northern Sucre state was shot dead during a two-hour gun battle late Friday in Ovejas, some 340 miles north of Bogotá, the army said. Two other rebels were reported to have been killed in the fighting.

● HONDURAS

COURT UPHOLDS PROPERTY LAW

TEGUCIGALPA — Honduras' Supreme Court has upheld a constitutional amendment allowing foreigners to buy coastal property, rejecting a legal challenge by federal prosecutors.

Foreigners were prohibited from purchasing property within 25 miles of the coasts for more than 20 years before the Honduran Constitution was amended in 2002.

● CUBA

DROUGHT BRINGS SMALLER SUGAR CROP

HAVANA — Cuba predicted a smaller sugar harvest this year because of drought, one year after the island's harvest was down by a third.

The harvest for the 2004-2005 season in Cuba is expected to be just four months long, beginning in January and ending in April. Cuban sugar harvests usually begin in November or December and stretch into May or even June — a possible maximum of eight months.

● DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

CHILEAN LOBBIES FOR OAS POSITION

SANTO DOMINGO — Chile's foreign minister met Saturday with Dominican officials, seeking support for the Chilean interior minister's bid to become secretary general of the Organization of American States.

Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker met with his Dominican counterpart, Carlos Morales Troncoso, to promote the candidacy of José Miguel Insulza.

COLOMBIA

Extradition newest tool to promote peace talks

■ The Colombian government is increasingly using extradition to maintain or start peace talks with armed groups, with mixed results.

BY STEVEN DUDLEY
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BOGOTA — As Colombian authorities ushered leftist rebel leader Ricardo Palmira onto a U.S.-bound airplane to face charges of drug trafficking, terrorism and kidnapping, he defiantly shouted guerrilla slogans.

Apart from being a cliché, Palmira's actions last week show just how different he is from the drug suspects usually extradited to the United States. Most are silently plopped on a plane without a single word.

Palmera, in contrast, is the first guerrilla commander to be shipped to the United States, highlighting a bold new attempt by the Colombian government to strong-arm leftist and rightist rebels into negotiations to end the country's 40-year-old civil war. So far, the strategy has had mixed results.

200 EXTRADITED

Since August 2002, President Alvaro Uribe's administration has extradited close to 200 suspected drug traffickers to the United States, including former Cali Cartel kingpin Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, who landed in Miami a month ago.

But Uribe's recent decisions on Palmira, better known as Comandante Simon Trinidad of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and a right-wing paramilitary leader show how the president is using extradition as a political tool.

"This isn't just a legal measure [anymore]," said former Deputy Justice Minister Rafael Nieto. "It has widespread political and military consequences as well."

SMART BOX

TWO CASES

● Ricardo Palmira, a.k.a. Simón Trinidad:

The rebel leader is facing what many say are trumped-up charges of drug trafficking. The government tried to force the guerrillas to give up 63 hostages, including three Americans, in return for his nonextradition. The rebels never responded to the proposal and seem unswayed by the pressure.

● Salvatore Mancuso:

The leader of the paramilitaries succumbed to pressure to demobilize some 2,000 troops in order to avoid extradition. Other paramilitary leaders are awaiting the same promises before they demobilize the rest of the 15,000 right-wing troops still under arms.



LUIS ACOSTA/AFP-GETTY IMAGES

STAYING: Right-wing leader Salvatore Mancuso avoided extradition.



AFP-GETTY IMAGES FILE 2003

SENT TO U.S.: Rebel leader Ricardo Palmira arrives in Bogotá under guard in January 2003 after his arrest. He was extradited to the United States.

"The government is walking on thin ice," Nieto said. "You just don't know when that ice will crack."

Critics argue that the government's hardball tactics over Palmira may have closed the avenue for peace talks with the FARC at a later date.

"I'm very concerned that they're going to start sending people for show," said Marc Chernick, a professor of political science at Georgetown University. "The idea of sending [Palmira] is kind of a warning shot across the bow at the FARC. I think those are probably deal breakers."

SOME SUCCESS

But the government has used extradition in its favor as well, especially with regard to the FARC's arch-enemy, the right-wing United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia. Known as the AUC, the group has been negotiating peace with the government since May. Many AUC leaders are wanted for drug trafficking in the United States, including its top leader, Salvatore Mancuso. After Colombia's Supreme

Court approved Mancuso's extradition in late November, the AUC leader promptly demobilized 2,000 of his fighters. In return, the government agreed not to extradite Mancuso while he complied with terms of the peace negotiations and pushed other AUC fighters to do the same.

"Extradition clearly is one of the major sticks that the government has at its disposal to help push the paramilitaries to accept a negotiated [peace]," said Mark Schneider of the International Crisis Group in Washington, D.C. "You don't give up that leverage until there's substantial compliance with the disbanding of the command structure of the paramilitary."

More than 3,000 AUC fighters have demobilized since the peace talks began. An estimated 15,000 remain under arms, while AUC leaders wait for the government to decide on an amnesty law as well as the pending extraditions of other AUC leaders.

VENEZUELA

Government deciding whether to give company's ranch lands to squatting farmers

■ As part of a sweeping agrarian land reallocation, Venezuela is considering whether to turn over land used by a British-owned company to hundreds of already moved-in farmers.

EL CHARCOTE, Venezuela — (AP) — Government officials escorted by about 200 troops and police arrived at a cattle ranch run by a British-owned company Saturday and

began an assessment to determine whether some lands may be turned over to poor farmers as part of an agrarian reform effort.

Cojedes state Gov. Jhonny Yanez Rangel, addressing supporters who gathered at the ranch along with heavily armed National Guard troops and police, said "private property... is a right, but not absolute" and that "the collective interest" must be considered.

"We didn't come to expropriate, but to do justice," Yanez said as helicopters, which will be used to survey lands from the air, hovered overhead.

Poor farmers handed over a proposal through which they could make use of the lands. Representatives of El Charcote Ranch said they were negotiating the matter and handed over documents that they claimed showed rightful

ownership.

The vast ranch is one of many across Venezuela being eyed by authorities as they move forward on a sweeping plan to reevaluate uses of agricultural lands.

Hundreds of squatters have moved onto El Charcote and planted crops in hopes that the land will one day be declared their own. Most of the estimated 600 squatters settled here in the four years since

President Hugo Chávez signed a law clearing the way for agrarian reform.

The owner, Agropecuaria Flora C.A., is a subsidiary of the British-owned Vestey Group Ltd. and a major beef producer. The company insists it can prove ownership back to 1830 and that the 32,000-acre ranch is not "idle" as officials have said but has simply been invaded by squatters.

One manager, Miguel Espana, has said the ranch 125 miles southwest of Caracas boasted 11,000 cattle four years ago. Now there are fewer than 5,000, and the work force has been cut from about 50 to 30 as squatters' farms have expanded.

Government officials say property titles were obtained illegally and that much of the property really belongs to the state.