



COPA ELECTORAL OBSERVATION MISSION IN PARAGUAY

A delegation of six parliamentarians of the Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas (COPA), headed by Ms Edda Acuña, 1st Vice-President of COPA and senator of the province of Buenos Aires in Argentina, observed the general elections of April 20th 2008. The COPA delegation also included: Ms Silvia Caballero; Member for the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mr. Ernesto Angulo Milla, Member of the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador; Mr. Mario López Valdez and Mr. Eduardo Nava, Senators of the Congress of the Mexican Union; Mr. Alexandre Cloutier, Member of the National Assembly of Québec; and four electoral advisors. The members of the delegation noted that the ballot took place in a calm environment, respectful of the electoral laws in force during these elections.



On election day, the members of the delegation went to the capital, Asunción, and to the Central Department in order to observe balloting in almost fifty polling stations. In spite of a few irregularities, the members of the delegation noted that the electoral process was respected and that the vote was held in an orderly way. "I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the electors and their willingness to participate in this important electoral event", declared Senator Acuña. In addition, the members of the delegation underlined the rigour with which the electoral personnel, as well as the representatives of the political parties, accomplished their task.

Upon arriving on April 16th, and in addition to the electoral observation conducted in the polling stations, the members of the COPA delegation held important meetings with the country's presidential candidates, leading authorities of the Congress and of the Electoral Justice, as well as with representatives from the civil society, all with the aim of obtaining information on the situation prevailing in the country.

This was the 7th electoral observation mission by the COPA which has established its strategic importance in the consolidation of democracy by taking an increasingly active role in election monitoring throughout the Americas. Founded in Québec City in 1997, this organisation brings together over 300 parliamentary assemblies of unitary, federal and federated states, as well as the regional parliaments and interparliamentary organizations of the Americas.

Source: COPA Democracy and Peace Committee



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## VENEZUELA TO MAKE MAJOR INVESTMENTS IN CUBA



Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez signed 14 agreements with Cuba which will translate into major investments in Cuba's industry at a time when Raúl Castro's government is considering the Cuban people's appeals for a revitalized, more efficient economy. The cooperation agreements are more specifically aimed at developing the chemical and petrochemical industry in the

cities of Ciego de Ávila, Nuevitas and Sagua la Grande.

The signing of these agreements will allow the brand new Cienfuegos refinery to increase its production from 65,000 to 150,000 barrels per day, improve its storage capacity and reactivate the oil pipeline linking it to the super-tanker port in Matanzas. Other agreements focus on gold, copper-zinc and chromium mining development and lime production, while

still others deal with joint projects in 55 plants and workshops in the pharmaceutical, garment, leather and publishing sectors.

Under yet another agreement, Venezuela is to provide funding for the construction of a thermal power plant in Holguín and the purchase of two Panamax-type ships by the Cuban-Venezuelan firm Transalba. *Source: Prensa Escrita, Costa Rica*



## PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Dominican Republic is a representative democracy with three branches of power: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The President appoints the members of the Cabinet, enforces the laws enacted by the legislature and acts as commander in chief of the armed forces. The President is directly elected by universal suffrage for a four-year term.

A presidential election will be held on May 16, 2008. The three main candidates are:

**Leonel Fernández** – Dominican Liberation Party (PLD)

Lawyer, aged 54, President of the Republic from 1996 to 2000, re-elected in 2004.

**Electoral platform at a glance:** Throughout the electoral campaign, Fernández, who led the government at a time when the country's economy was weakened by a severe financial crisis, has emphasized the highlights of his economic management.

**Miguel Vargas Maldonado** – Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD)

**Electoral platform at a glance:** Maldonado promises to lower taxes to stimulate the economy and invest more to help the disadvantaged. He promises that, if elected to the presidency, he will be closer to the people and encourage a more inclusive society.

**Amable Aristy Castro** – Social Christian Reformist Party (PRSC)

**Electoral platform at a glance:** Castro promises to create a fertile environment for investment by cutting red-tape, inject 4% of the gross domestic product (GDP) into the education system, as provided for in the General Education Act, and make cities safer by providing police officers with better equipment, better training and better pay.

### Other Candidates

**Guillermo Moreno** – Independent Movement for Unity and Change (MIUCA)

**Eduardo Estrella** – The Fourth Way

**Pedro de Jesús Candelier** – Popular Alliance Party (PAP)

**Trajan Santana** – Independent Revolutionary Party (PRI)

On May 13, 2008, the Cibao Economic Centre published the results of its last poll before the May 16 election. The poll put Fernández in the lead, at 50.2%, followed by Miguel Vargas, with 39.1% and Amable Aristy Castro, with 7.1%.

The poll's most striking finding is that Fernández just barely cleared the 50% mark. With the poll's margin of error at 2.6%, this means popular support for the PLD candidate could peak at 52.8% but could also dip to 47.6%, which would force a runoff vote.

The poll was conducted among Dominicans aged 18 and over throughout the country.  
Source: BBC Mundo (in Spanish)

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## THE STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY IN BOLIVIA



Although the conflict in Bolivia over demands for autonomy may at first glance appear to be a new threat to the country's unity, the struggle for autonomy or federalism goes back more than a century. Since its creation, Bolivia has been a unitarian, centralist state all of whose various constitutions have established a central government. In practice, political, administrative, economic and social decisions have always been handed down by the central authority, first from Sucre, and since 1899 from La Paz, where the seat of government was moved after a conflict between federalists and supporters of a unitarian state.

Santa Cruz began to prosper in the 1940s and reached its heyday in the 1970s. By the 1990s, Santa Cruz had become Bolivia's richest region and demands for autonomy began to mount. Advocates of autonomy say they want to break with the strong centralization that has characterized the Bolivian State to date. The May 4, 2008 referendum on Santa Cruz's autonomy was held despite President Evo Morales' opposition. Morales has called the referendum illegal and has asked the Organisation of American States (OAS) not to recognize the referendum results.

The May 4 poll was the first of a series of four referendums. The other three are to be held in the departments of Pando, Tarija and Beni.

Of the votes cast in the May 4 referendum, 85.82% were for the department's proposed new status while 14.18% were against; 34% of registered voters abstained. It is this last figure that led Morales to declare the referendum on autonomy a failure as abstentions, "no" votes and blank or cancelled ballots accounted for close to 50% of the total registered voter base. Under the country's referendum legislation, a poll is valid only if the registered voter turnout is higher than 50%, a threshold that was attained in this case according to the Departmental Electoral Court.

Since the referendum, the Santa Cruz prefecture has embarked on the immediate tasks of putting in place a universal health insurance plan and setting a departmental minimum wage to be agreed on between private enterprise and labour.

Carlos Dabdoub, the director responsible for autonomy-related issues within the Santa Cruz prefecture, has announced that an election will be called to choose the members of the new Departmental Assembly within 90 days of Monday, May 26, the date on which the official referendum results are to be published by the Departmental Electoral Court. A new revenue allocation system will also come into force. Under the new system, 50% of the department's revenues will be transferred to the producing provinces, 40% to the non-producing provinces and the remaining 10% to the indigenous peoples.

Most observers saw the victory of the "yes" side in the May 4 referendum as a serious political blow for Morales, probably the worst since he came into power.

### AUTONOMY

The May 4 referendum sought approval for a set of autonomy statutes that include such far-reaching measures as:

- Creating "La República Camba", the collective dream of the majority of the people of Santa Cruz;
- Appointing judiciary, electoral and fiscal authorities;
- Framing a policy on the redistribution of departmental lands and resources;
- Recognizing only those ethnic groups from Bolivia's easternmost department;
- Electing representatives to the Departmental Assembly; and
- Setting a departmental minimum wage.



In view of the state of affairs in Bolivia, President Evo Morales promulgated a law on May 12, 2008 to hold a recall referendum on the mandates of the President, the Vice-President and the departmental prefects. The referendum is to be held next August 10.

Bolivians will be asked the following question: "Are you in favour of continuing the process of change spear-headed by President Evo Morales Ayma and Vice-President Álvaro García Linera?"

Under the new law, for the two heads of government to be removed from office, the "no" votes must add up to more than 1,544,374 or 53.74%, these figures being the number and percentage of votes that carried the pair into power in the December 2005 elections. The Bolivian Information Agency indicated that, in the case of the departmental prefects, the number of "no" votes must be higher by at least one vote than the percentage and number of votes they got in the last elections. *Source: La Razón, Bolivia*



**CUBA-MÉXICO TRADE UP 70%**



Stimulating and intensifying trade and business between Cuba and Mexico is the goal that was set at the 15th session of the Cuba-Mexico Business Committee held in Cuba recently and attended by 200 or so business executives from the two countries. The two-day meeting was held at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, in Havana. The President of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce, Raúl Becerra, noted that trade between the two countries in the first quarter of the year was up by at least 70% compared with the same period in 2006.

The Mexican entrepreneurs at the meeting represented a wide spectrum of sectors such as the food, steel, energy, tourism, consumer goods and computer industries. Luz María de la Mora, head of Economic Relations and Industrial Cooperation of the Chancellery of Mexico, indicated that her country imports a variety of goods from Cuba, including rum, tobacco, chemical products, medications and copper products, and that the total value of those goods hovered around \$16 million in 2007, while the island imports farm and industrial products from Mexico to the tune of close to \$190 million. At the meeting, the Mexican National Bank of Foreign Trade (Bancomext) and the Cuban National Bank signed an agreement to boost import and export trade between the two countries. Source: *Granma Internacional*.

**EUROPEAN UNION NOT GIVING IN TO TRADE PRESSURES FROM COLUMBIA AND PERU**

Member countries of the European Union (EU) and the Andean Community are continuing their negotiations for a major integration agreement that would create platforms for political exchange and technical cooperation and lead to the creation of a free trade area for the two blocs.



The talks held so far have highlighted the divergent views within the Andean Community as to the terms of any future trade agreements. Columbia and Peru are pushing for a free trade zone to be up and running as soon as possible, while Ecuador and Bolivia are against the proposed scheme as it is incompatible with their left-wing policies. Columbia and Peru, whose leaders are for free trade, have asked that negotiations continue without their neighbours but the EU Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, has ruled that out. "What we would like is to negotiate region to region, bloc to bloc, and that is what we intend to do," said Ferrero-Waldner at a meeting with journalists in Quito, while the Andean countries were flinging accusations at each other over the political will to reach an agreement with the European bloc. Ferrero-Waldner explained that the EU will insist on the agreement being multilateral as long as there is a glimmer of hope that that can be the case, but she acknowledges that the differences of opinion among the Andean partners on political and trade issues could turn out to be an insuperable obstacle.

The EU's goal is to reach an agreement in the last six months of the coming year. Ferrero-Waldner has warned that if that goal is jeopardized, the EU might consider granting Columbia's and Peru's request. To date, the EU and the Andean Community have held three rounds of negotiations. The next round is scheduled for July 7 to 11, 2008 in Brussels. Source: *El tiempo*, Columbia

**CANADA: SPECIAL RAPORTEURS LAUD THE ADOPTION OF A MOTION IN FAVOUR OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES**

Three United Nations special rapporteurs welcomed the adoption by the House of Commons of Canada of a motion calling for the implementation of the standards contained in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In a statement they issued, the rapporteurs said they are convinced that the principles set forth

in the Declaration will constitute a useful road map for Canada's future laws and policies with regard to Aboriginal peoples and will improve the human rights situation in the country.

They added that the Canadian Legislature's commitment to putting the provisions of the UN Declaration into practice sends a strong signal to indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world.

The UN Declaration adopted in September 2007 by the General Assembly urges States to establish a new relationship with indigenous peoples, one based on the principles of equality, self-determination and respect for the rights of all. Source: *UN News Centre*



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