CLAI Panel on Special Summit of the Americas
Draws a Full House, Prompts Spirited Discussion

by Megan Doscher and Jamie Foster

An overflow crowd attended the panel discussion co-hosted by The Center for Latin American Issues (CLAI) and the Office of External Relations of the Organization of American States (OAS) on Thursday, January 22, 2004. The event, titled “Special Summit of the Americas: A Post-Summit Assessment,” examined the accomplishments of the summit held in Monterrey, Mexico, the second week in January.

Panel participants included Rodolfo Gil, permanent representative of Argentina to the OAS; Gwen Kutz, Canada’s alternate permanent representative to the OAS; John Maisto, permanent representative of the United States to the OAS; and Miguel Ruiz-Cabañas, permanent representative of Mexico to the OAS. Jane Thery, Principal Summit Specialist at the OAS, moderated the panel.

Gil discussed Argentina’s preparations for the Summit that his country will host in 2005, and commended the accomplishments of the Monterrey Summit. However, he said, “by no means is the whole job done. [The Summit] is just a launching pad” toward helping solve problems in the hemisphere. He emphasized economic inequality, social justice, and cleaning up corruption as issues of particular urgency.

Kutz discussed the rationale behind the Special Summit. “The idea was not to form a new plan of action,” she said. Instead, the hope was that leaders would help develop concrete steps to fix problems already identified. A key benefit of the Summit, Kutz noted, was that it enhanced personal contact among leaders in the Americas, improving communication among the countries.

Ruiz-Cabañas called the Summit in his home country “a complete success.” He said attendance was very high, with only three leaders not attending. A declaration that was “finally adopted by consensus” included concrete commitments with deadlines. Ruiz-Cabañas also pointed to the transparent, open meetings of the summit as a vast improvement over other forms of high-level engagement, as citizens could see what their leader was discussing.

Maisto read parts of the declaration, noting three strong themes: reducing poverty, social development, and democratic governance. “There are no silver bullets that come out of summits,” he said, but added that the fact that Summits occur at all and bring world leaders together is a success in itself.
Attendance at the panel discussion was so strong that the event had to be moved from its original venue to the much-larger Jack Morton Auditorium in the GW Media and Public Affairs building.

Keynote Address

Following the panel discussion the group reconvened in the GW Marvin Center for a luncheon featuring keynote speaker Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

Echoing the sentiments of the morning’s panel discussants, Noriega gave high praise to the Summit, saying that it had been an excellent opportunity for hemispheric leaders to contend with social, economic and political problems in a “positive, constructive, proactive way.” He emphasized that the “soaring rhetoric” of Summit pronouncements is needed to let the people of Latin America know that leaders throughout the Americas have a commitment to making societies better by strengthening the rule of law, fighting poverty, improving justice systems, and promoting economic growth and democratic governance.

The ideals presented were not without substance; Noriega praised the Summiters for creating an “explicit agenda for action” between now and the next Summit of the Americas, in Argentina, in 2005. A statement on corruption shows a common commitment to respond to that social ill as a community. Indeed, he averred that the present commitment to reducing corruption is comparable to the hemisphere’s commitment to democracy. Economic development efforts include promoting private sector involvement in development and a recommitment to create an FTAA by the 2005 deadline. On social policy, the Summit focused on education and health. Noriega praised the Inter-American Committee on Education, which he said will help improve the effectiveness of education systems. HIV/AIDS is taxing the healthcare systems of many nations, and $200 million will be used for education and treatment of the disease.

Noting that it is in the best U.S. interests for Latin American nations to succeed, Noriega pointed to several specific U.S. efforts to support these hemispheric initiatives. The Millennium Challenge Account will reward nations for effectively restructuring their economic systems. The United States has signed a free trade agreement with Chile, and is engaged in talks with Central America and the Andean nations to create free trade areas with them as well. Noriega also praised the work of the OAS in helping to establish and promote a common agenda of the Americas. The OAS is one of only two multilateral organizations to which the United States increased its contributions this year.

Delta Air Lines, the Hellenic Republic, and the U.S Department of Education provided funding support for the January 22 program.

To view video clips of the speakers’ presentations, visit http://www.oas.org/OASpage/videosondemand, on the OAS Web site.