OAS Experts Illuminate Success of Fourth Summit of the Americas and Discuss Future Challenges

By Claire F. Selsky*

On November 16, 2005, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States and a high-level group of experts participated in a panel discussion titled “The Mar Del Plata Summit: Results and Challenges Ahead.” The event was hosted by The George Washington University Center for Latin American Issues and by the Department of Communications and External Relations of the OAS. The Honorable José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the OAS, provided an introduction of the Summit of the Americas to the audience. Following Insulza’s remarks, the following panelists spoke: John W. Graham, Chair of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL); James C. Fendell, president and CEO of Aeropost International Services Inc. and Aerocasillas, S.A., and Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Private Sector of the Americas; the Honorable John F. Maisto, Permanent Representative of the United States to the Organization of American States; and the Honorable Rodolfo Hugo Gil, Permanent Representative of Argentina to the Organization of American States. The panelists spoke realistically about challenges facing the Americas. In addition, they provided conclusions about the summit that the United States media seems to have missed: even though the Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiations did not get the boost some would have liked, there was progress made at the Mar Del Plata Summit.
Secretary General Insulza analyzed the Summit from both an economic and political standpoint. He stated that Latin America seems to be doing well economically, citing low interest rates and the growth of investment as indicators of economic progress. The political picture he painted, however, was not so bright. Insulza stated that politically, “the mood was not as good,” and provided two possible reasons. First, several presidencies will be changing hands in the next year, which means that many leaders who participated in the summit are either working toward reelection or will not participate fully in the implementations of the commitments drafted at the summit. Second, many presidents in Latin America have not been able to finish their terms in the past decade; it would not be surprising therefore if some leaders who participated in the summit are not able to finish their terms. On a more positive note, Insulza indicated that there was unanimity among leaders at the Summit of the Americas that “the role of the state is essential to face challenges [related to job creation].” Referencing the issue of trade and subsidies which was also discussed at the summit, Insulsa stated that this issue simply could not have been resolved there, as some of the countries who would need to make concessions regarding subsidies were not in attendance. He added that at the upcoming WTO meeting, “we must show we are capable of acting as a hemisphere on trade issues.” Insulsa thus ended his presentation spiritedly, noting the importance of cooperation in the region of the Americas.

John Graham spoke about the Summit of the Americas from a Canadian perspective. He stated that he is “alarmed at what is happening to the inter-American process.” He noted that the Action Plan designed by countries participating in the Summit was “tighter and more focused than previous summits.” He praised the idea of the summit, stating that the Summit of the Americas allows heads of state to work together to solve common problems and forge personal relationships. Graham cited two major flaws in this year’s summit: an absence of forward thinking and a leadership void. He also addressed the role of the OAS in facilitating an inter-American dialogue, referring to the OAS as the “hemispheric damage-control agency.” He stressed the need for greater funding of the OAS so that it can address important problems facing Latin America, such as human rights issues and the drug trade.

James Fendell offered a perspective on the Summit from the viewpoint of the U.S. private sector. He called attention to the issue of poverty in Latin America, stressing the importance of job creation in reducing poverty. Fendell stated that job creation depends on education, good governance, transparency, trade, investment and infrastructure development. He maintained that job creation, the central theme of the Fourth Summit of the Americas, was ultimately the responsibility of the private sector. Fendell asserted that through job creation by the private sector, the benefits of democracy would be provided to the people of the Americas.
Ambassador Maisto stated that the United States judges the Mar Del Plata Summit a success. He stated that all three U.S. objectives for the summit were realized. First, the United States wanted to reaffirm the importance of strong democratic institutions to creating opportunities in the Americas. Second, the United States wanted to emphasize the connection between sound economic policies, growth, job creation and poverty reduction. Third, the United States hoped to build on the strengths of past summits and have leaders commit to job creation in their home nations. According to Maisto, these three objectives were achieved. In response to a question regarding the media attention given to the Free Trade Area of the Americas rather than to the theme of job creation and poverty, Maisto pointed out that of seventy-six clauses written at the Summit of the Americas negotiations, only one mentioned the FTAA. He encouraged the leaders of the Americas to follow through with the implementation of the summit’s mandates in their respective countries.

Ambassador Gil thought the Summit was a great success, stating that “passionate discussion” resulted from the complexity of issues discussed. According to Gil, participants in the summit discussed the importance of promoting good governance and respecting the rule of law. He addressed the success in creating a document addressing job creation and poverty in the Americas, telling the audience that “we were there to discuss how to create jobs, not free trade.” He qualified the term job creation, explaining that his goal was not to simply create more jobs, but to create more jobs of quality.

Panelists noted that questions of free trade will be revisited at the Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference, to be held in Hong Kong, from December 13–18, 2005.

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