

Inter-American Dialogue Faults US for "Lack of Attention" Toward Latin America

"In the past, we used to say that the United States only paid attention to the region when there was a crisis. But now we are in a period of crisis with Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Haiti and Paraguay, and the level of attention is minimal," says Peter Hakim, director of the Inter-American Dialogue. The non-profit Washington organization's recent report, *The Troubled Americas*, reviews some of the most pressing contemporary issues in the region and the US foreign policy response. The product of research by 100 US and Latin American analysts, the report concludes that "US policy is very aggressive when it comes to trade," but characterized by "a certain indifference, a certain distance" with regard to other topics.

For former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, one of the most important points the report makes is that the US must deal with Latin America on issues beyond trade. He and other commentators maintain that while the Bush administration's push for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is welcome, Washington "is ignoring other challenges in the hemisphere."

Most of the study's findings are not optimistic. It concludes that foreign investment in the region is down, poverty and unemployment are on the rise, political institutions remain weak, and citizens are losing confidence in the political and economic reforms of the 1990s.

"Some of Latin America's new leaders, most prominently Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Colombia's Alvaro Uribe, have sparked great enthusiasm in their countries. Still, the quality of government and leadership-and, indeed, democracy-has been undistinguished in much of Latin America," the report states. "It is not surprising that more and more people are demanding political and economic changes, and that their demands are shaping public debates and deciding the outcomes of elections. Frustrated by the region's setbacks and failures, citizens and governments alike may be tempted anew by the failed models of the past-populist economic schemes, inward-looking trade and investment policies, and authoritarian solutions to political instability."

According to Lourdes Flores Nano, a former presidential candidate in Peru and a member of the Inter-American Dialogue, the report confirms what appear to be certain trends in the region: "Democracy is the only acceptable system for our countries," she says, "but more and more citizens in Latin America are losing faith in democracy or are deeply dissatisfied with recent economic reforms. They also see that relations with the US are not at their best level."

The report ends with a call for action by the United States. "In contrast to earlier periods in inter-American history," the authors note, "the United States and Latin

America now mostly share the same values and goals. That fact makes cooperation easier and more productive-and indifference and distrust less defensible."

The full text of the report is available on the Inter-American Dialogue website, www.iadialog.org