

## **Ibero-American Leaders Meet in Costa Rica**

Education, bananas are among the issues discussed

Despite poor attendance and a strong earthquake that shook the host country on the final night of the proceedings, Latin American heads of state and officials from Spain and Portugal, including Spain's King Juan Carlos, met in San José, Costa Rica on November 19-20 for the XIV Ibero-American Summit. The main outcomes of the meeting included a proposal to swap foreign debt in exchange for investment in education, plans to name an Ibero-American Secretary, and a pledge by Spain to lobby the European Union not to raise its tariff on Latin American bananas.

In keeping with the summit's theme, "Education for Progress," regional leaders reaffirmed their commitment to education and called on international financial institutions to forgive part of poor countries' external debt to offset increased education spending. Costa Rica's president, Abel Pacheco, told his country's newspapers that representatives of the summit countries will meet with multilateral lenders next year to discuss the issue.

The participants also agreed to create an Ibero-American Secretariat whose mission will be to transform summit accords into "concrete projects," according to Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The Secretariat will be based in Spain, which has agreed to finance 85% of its operating costs. The first Ibero-American Secretary General will be named at a meeting of foreign ministers in Portugal in April.

Spanish officials also promised to intercede in the European Union to avoid higher tariffs on bananas imported from Latin America. The EU is expected to raise its tariff on this commodity from 75 to 230 euros per metric ton in January 2006. Guatemalan President Oscar Berger complained that the steep increase "would take Latin American countries out of the market."

A brief controversy erupted early in the summit when Cuba insisted that the final declaration condemn Panama for pardons it issued to four Cuban exiles who tried to assassinate Fidel Castro when the summit was held in that country in 2000. Former Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso granted the pardons in the final days of her term, leading to a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. After a compromise brokered by Spain, the final summit document featured toned-down criticism that called the pardons incompatible with the fight against terrorism.

Cuba also managed to push through a reiterated condemnation of the Helms-Burton Act as a “unilateral and extraterritorial application of laws and measures contrary to international law.” Another jab at the United States came in the form of a renewed pledge to “the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter, respect for sovereignty and juridical equality among states, the principle of non-intervention, prohibitions on the threat or use of force in international relations, respect for territorial integrity, the peaceful solution of conflicts, and the protection and promotion of all human rights.”

This year’s meeting had the poorest attendance of any Ibero-American summit in history, due in part to its overlap with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Santiago, Chile. Several heads of state—Vicente Fox of Mexico, Néstor Kirchner of Argentina and Antonio Saca of El Salvador—stopped in San José only briefly on their way to Santiago, while Alejandro Toledo of Peru and Ricardo Lagos of Chile did not attend at all. Also missing were Brazilian President Luis Inácio da Silva, who was hosting a visit by his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin; Fidel Castro, who was recovering from broken bones he suffered in a fall in Cuba; Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, who canceled the trip after the assassination of a government prosecutor in Caracas; and Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio, who was ill.

Sources:

La Nación (Costa Rica) [www.nacion.com](http://www.nacion.com)

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