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FOCAL at the OAS General Assembly 2002

FOCAL attended the 32nd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Barbados on June 2-4, 2002 as an accredited civil society organization. Through its special guest status, FOCAL gained access to sessions of both the OAS General Committee and the General Assembly. There were three thematic topics on the agenda: the Multi Dimensional Approach to Hemispheric Security; Follow-up and Development of the Inter-American Democratic Charter; the OAS, Democracy, and Trade.

The logistics were splendidly executed. The leadership of the meeting, provided by Ms. Billy Miller, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Barbados, was firm and balanced. The interventions of many small island states such as Belize and Guyana were the surprise highlights of the General Assembly. They were brisk and several were refreshingly auto-critical. There had clearly been some protective advance orchestration across CARICOM.

The pertinent points delivered were the following: the rising vulnerability of small states to drugs and organized crime; the precariousness of livelihoods and with rising pollution, corrosion of coral barriers, expected worsening of natural disasters; and, the prospect of rising sea levels.

On June 3, the General Assembly adopted by consensus the Inter-American Convention against Terrorism. All but four of the 34 states represented at the meeting signed the convention: Canada, Dominica, Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago were unable to do so pending relevant modifications to their domestic legislation. Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham did indicate that Canada would sign the Convention in the near future. The convention will come into force 30 days after the sixth ratification instrument is deposited with the OAS.

The adoption of the terrorism convention was the main issue of interest to the Assembly. The Convention text appears to go further than previous documents in limiting the right to political asylum and in its wording on the issue of terrorism by stipulating that “no democratic state can be indifferent to the clear threat that terrorism poses.” The emphasis placed on terrorism was at the expense of other issues of which many are more urgent for the region, such as the economic crisis in Argentina, and the fragile democracy in Venezuela.

The proposed resolution (which was not adopted) called on the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to accept OAS mediation in dialogue with the opposition, following the unsuccessful coup of April 11-13, 2002. OAS members

congratulated themselves on the application of the Charter following the coup in Venezuela. Venezuela – with much reason – congratulated them, expressing a new faith in the Charter as one of the foremost pillars of the OAS. The unspoken or to voice views of some was that while validating the Charter in this case was right, saving Chavez was a disagreeable necessity. The issue of course, runs well beyond Venezuela and Haiti. There is some concern that if the present disenchantment with the democratic process in many parts of Latin America deepens – if the equity equation and the corruption quotient and quality of life gets worse – then the democratic remedies that the Charter has been crafted to apply may no longer be appropriate. There are many variables from one culture to another that qualify our generalization.

Criminal violence is rising in most countries in the region, with it comes a greater level of tolerance for the abuse of human rights by police and military. There were also some missed signals about the Charter itself. Not surprisingly some insisted that it be interpreted legalistically with continued emphasis in the protection of the walls of sovereignty. One delegation expressed concern lest the Charter be used to intimidate small states. Some associated the weakness of democracy in the region with conditions imposed by the major powers.

The Caribbean pulled sharply on the Eagle's tail feathers and the developed world in general. Pointed remarks were made about the damage caused by the present US Administration's raising of tariffs, expansion of subsidies to its own agricultural and forestry industries. Free trade, they acknowledged, works for some, but for small economies the playing field is sloping at an impossibly perilous angle.

Many interventions linked security to development. Better crops would lead to provisions to feed families and therefore assist in the eradication of drugs. Calls for a holistic and hemispheric multidimensional approach to security and those non-traditional threats are invisible.

The speech by US Secretary of State Colin Powell concentrated on: ensuring that small economies are prepared for the FTAA; that corruption is eliminated; that the US Millennium fund would disburse five billion dollars for three years and a subsequent five billion per annum to fund anti-corrupt governments; and, calls for the re-enactment of the Rio Group Treaty and the OAS Charter on Security; that Venezuela should resolve its political problems; and, that Haiti continues to be a democracy in crisis.

Undiplomatic questions were raised about the commitment to change in Haiti. Development is tied to security and democracy is required for sustainable economic development. Haiti was called upon to get their house in order as they are currently in receipt of development funds that could assist other countries in the Caribbean who are committed to democracy. Venezuela called for democracy with social justice.

The Caribbean Island States' were calling for special status for small islands and a regional approach to development noting that small islands are not viable players in the current global world. CARICOM called for a new strategy and a new approach for trade in the Caribbean signaling the current threats and priorities for development:

- Better preparedness for natural disasters;
- Increased cooperation between small states as it is currently not working to their advantage;
- Sectoral damage caused by trade advisories;
- Competition where infrastructure is weak;
- The current strategic plan for development is lacking in funds.

Within the current hostile global economy, Representatives accused the developed world of adopting policies that are not prosperous for the community at large – such as the breaking of multilateral trade rules. These actions send conflicting messages and are harmful to the relationship between the developed countries and smaller economies. CARICOM Representatives called for a greater understanding of the difficulties facing smaller economies and heightened the following needs:

- Establish mechanisms for implementing the Democratic Charter;
- Redefine the conception of security and normalize the list of all issues;
- Personal security is affected by the lack of economic security in the Hemisphere;
- Strengthen CICAD and to establish new parameters for human and hemispheric security;
- Increase coordination between states on security matters;
- Cut military spending; · Debt and protectionist policies of the developing world threaten small economies;
- Increase funding for international development.

Canada supported the holistic approach to security. Minister Graham called for a collective response to security issues such as the Rio Group and OAS Instruments, and the MEM. He called upon all parties present to make an effort to influence the USA on the MEM and the decommissioning of small arms.

Representatives agreed that negotiations of the FTAA were at a critical stage and that there was a need to address smaller economies at this time. However, protectionist policies are obstacles to the FTAA and since Doha, Representatives have called for a balanced agenda that requires both an agricultural and environmental policy. Representatives called upon Member states to ensure that negotiations for the FTAA include discussions with civil society to satisfy their basic needs and aspirations. They reiterated the fact that common needs and values were required to reinforce a unified community and particular attention needs to be paid to smaller economies. The level of education should also be augmented for further benefits and finally that democracy is the base for prosperity and equity.

One of the fascinations of the OAS is the role that personalities can play. An observation, shared by several of us was that it was not just Ms. Billie Miller and CARICOM that saved this conference from the abrasive and inconclusive fate of its predecessor a year ago. It was also the brand new Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Ray M. Chaderton. If he had followed in the wake of his two predecessors, the GA would have been a much more sour and confrontational affair. Despite some odd gaffes, he performed in a responsible, albeit defensive way.

Another issue that surfaced – at least for FOCAL – at this GA was the role of Civil Society and the space for Civil Society within the Inter American System. Canada, the US and others pushed for a wider opening for Civil Society in the context of the Quebec Summit – and we at FOCAL have actively supported this movement.

A glittering example of success was the extensive series of consultations with Civil Society by the OAS and some member states on the drafting of the Democracy Charter. However, since then, efforts to widen the participation of Civil Society within the region have stalled. Too many governments remain indifferent to or suspicious of their Civil Societies. The Committee of the Permanent Council on this subject is making no progress. A supplementary problem is that while some Civil Society representatives have squeezed through the net and have been registered, they are not broad based. NGOs accredited with the OAS should be less North America concentrated and cover a wider spectrum – beyond democracy and human rights – to health, environment, education, local government and aboriginal issues.

The adoption of the Inter-American Terrorist Convention and the responses toward Haiti and Venezuela confirms the collective will to proceed on the path to democracy despite the current political, economic and social challenges facing the hemisphere. Critical to peace and prosperity in the region is the commitment to broaden the process of the FTAA and consider the special needs of the future of smaller economies in the equation.