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MAR DEL PLATA: POST MORTEM AND NEW CHALLENGES

Speech by John W. Graham, Chair of FOCAL at George Washington University, Washington DC, November 16, 2005

About six years ago, on the first occasion that Civil Society was invited to observe an OAS General Assembly, the president of the host country made a statement along these lines in what was an otherwise welcoming address. “Some of you” he said looking over the assembled crowd, “have civil societies, but in my country we have an uncivil society”.

Because I am alarmed at what is happening to our Inter-American process and because I believe that the engagement of civil society must sometimes be critical in order to be constructive, some of these remarks may fall into the uncivil category.

Despite excessively utopian Declarations, long and usually under-funded Action Plans, and clouds of tear gas (Quebec City was much worse in this respect than Mar del Plata), Summits have helped to knit the hemisphere together in common purpose. Mar del Plata’s action plan was actually tighter and more focused than many of its predecessors. Summits reach into neglected areas, highlighting needs and infusing priorities with urgency. Two positive examples are the attention given to indigenous peoples and the need for sustainable and democratic decentralization.

Inevitably, not all summit initiatives have had the traction that their authors expected. As we all know, trade – the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas- launched optimistically 11 years ago, has become a source of division –not cohesion. Education, the central theme at Santiago, has not prospered – with public education levels deteriorating in the majority of hemispheric countries.

I will not do a score chart, but on balance the summits have provided a positive impulse to the hemisphere. Not the least of their values have been the opportunities for heads of state and heads of government to develop personal relationships – something that is not listed in the Action Plan but that facilitates problem solving telephone calls.

Since 1994 and under various civil society hats, I have attended three full summits and one Special Summit. This last one, the one for which we are holding a post-mortem today, and despite a number of useful results, was unquestionably the least successful- a point which might be discreetly left unsaid if it were not for the potentially damaging implications for the Inter-American System.

What went wrong?

The easiest answer is that the distemper at Mar del Plata was the result of hemispheric abrasions and a lack of commitment to constructive objectives. From this perspective, the host government which devoted enormous energy and expense to the occasion, cannot be faulted. Summit disarray was a reflection of hemispheric disarray.

But this is a partial explanation.

Another was the absence, in advance of the Summit, of forward looking and credible leadership. There is a leadership void. The traditional hemispheric leaders – the US, Mexico and Brazil – are otherwise engaged or distracted. American leverage has never been so diminished. The one serious attempt to exercise Pan-American leadership comes from Hugo Chavez – an increasingly effective, if not exactly consensus building, international operator and exploiter of resurgent anti-Americanism. Although, the vast majority of Summit leaders still preferred the concept of the FTAA, the opponents effectively blocked any real progress along this road.

If I can add a Canadian parenthesis, President Bush's and Prime Minister Martin's advocacy of the FTAA would have appeared more convincing in Mar del Plata if Mr. Bush's government would honour the binding arbitration mechanisms of the North American Free Trade Area.

The omens preceding the Summit were not promising. Six Caribbean Prime Ministers, almost one half of the English-speaking Caribbean, feeling marginalized or irrelevant to the polarizing conflicts in the wider region, decided not to attend.

The unavoidable difficulties and challenges at Mar del Plata were dysfunctional enough in themselves. Unfortunately, the host government made little effort to overcome these difficulties. The Argentine government appeared to be pursuing two simultaneous and incompatible policy directions: one was to host an effective Summit and the other was to appeal to a domestic constituency by ensuring that the Summit would fracture on obduracy toward the US and inflexibility on the FTAA.

For many especially at the anti-summit, the perils of isolating the United States from regular dialogue through the Inter-American system were overtaken by the prospect of minimizing the uncomfortable asymmetry of a hemisphere that includes the United States.

Asymmetry was a popular word in Mar del Plata.

I think that it is most unlikely that Enrique Iglesias has neo-imperial ambitions – but his revitalized Ibero-American system represents a seductive alternative to those preoccupied with asymmetry - replacing the United States with Cuba, Spain and Portugal - and in the process dropping Canada and the Caribbean.

The dangers evident in Mar del Plata were that the Summit process is losing momentum and that its survival may be at risk. But it may be that a glimpse of the wreckage and its implications may be reawakening awareness of the value, as well as the fragility, of our Inter-American System.

Another area – or another dimension where change would be welcome is the relationship between civil society and the summit process. My organization and others recommend changes which should avoid some of the confusion and frustration experienced by civil society organizations at Mar del Plata and to a lesser extent at Monterrey. (The General Assembly system under the control of the OAS works better, but could benefit from some of these suggestions.)

- An open and transparent means of selecting the number and order of those who will address the summit delegations.
- Guidelines should outline specific criteria about who is eligible to speak and the selection process. Criteria should include factors such as regional representation, gender equity, and ethnic diversity.
- Delegations should take the civil society/ heads of delegation meeting seriously. Rarely do more than a third of foreign ministers participate and even more rarely do their interventions relate to what has been said by civil society representatives.
- Host government with the OAS should arrange opportunities, following the dialogue with heads of delegations, for civil society representatives to meet the media.
- A complementary session should be organized for civil society to dialogue with senior officers of the different departments of the OAS.
- To ensure consistency, the system for civil society participation should be vested in the OAS rather than the host govt.

As I have indicated, division and hollow rhetoric threaten the viability and perhaps even the continuity of a Summit process. We should be equally concerned about the survival of the Summit's central delivery system – the Organization of American States. It is not possible to overstate the importance of securing the finances upon which the OAS and the wider Inter-American system depend. The solvency and therefore the sustainability of the OAS are at serious risk.

The Plan of Action at Mar del Plata does charge members to ensure that the OAS and other hemispheric organizations have the financial capacity to implement Summit commitments. But the language is tepid and the message is all but lost with the other 69 action items. Besides, and unfortunately, Finance ministers do not attend the Summits.

With non-discretionary expenditures assuming a growing proportion of the budget and with a quarter of the membership in arrears, the OAS is moving toward paralysis when all funds from the regular budget are assigned to salaries and pensions leaving nothing to discharge its mandate except voluntary contributions. At the centre of this quagmire is the refusal of too many member states to come to grips with quota reform. Quota

adjustment is an essential part of reform, but not the most important part. The OAS needs a UN formula. It is legally bound to pay its employees at UN rates, but has so far failed to obtain agreement that annual quotas would be automatically adjusted by a formula of cost of living increments. It is this formula that allows the UN to survive and it is without this formula that the OAS slides toward insolvency.

The noise and anguish about money suggest that the OAS budget must be in the multiple billions. Far from it. At about \$76 million for the regular budget, in my country we are talking about the annual costs of a small university.

A solution is important because the OAS has a significant role. No regional organization outside Western Europe has struck out so boldly for the values of democratic governance. The OAS has created a fabric of rules and jurisprudence that has helped to change the patterns of governance and insulate member states from the perils and temptations of military and non-military coups. At their best the OAS and the Summit system nudge the region toward better governance, greater accountability and more attention the nightmare of drugs and to human rights. It has been and should remain the hemispheric damage control agency. To do this it needs reliable funding and solid commitment from its members.

With a preponderance of rational governments and reasonable leaders, it is difficult to imagine how the hemisphere can place these assets in jeopardy.