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NEWS STORY

Canada's Latin American Policy Vague: Envoys

Nicaragua welcomes Helena Guergis and is invited to open an Ottawa mission, but other Latin American nations still wonder what Canada has in mind.

By Jeff Davis

Envoys from Latin America and the Caribbean have described the government's vaunted Americas strategy as vague, with many wondering whether it is merely a slogan and if not, where their countries fit into the grand scheme of things.

But Secretary of State Foreign Affairs and International Trade Helena Guergis, who recently returned from a three-day trip to Costa Rica and Nicaragua, has defended the policy as more than a motto and said the government is taking tangible steps to implement it.

The envoys' concerns were voiced in an off-the-record roundtable discussion held last week by FOCAL, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, which also involved civil society representatives and Department of Foreign Affairs officials. Following the discussion, Mauricio Rosales Rivera, Ambassador of El Salvador, said that while he knows there is an Americas strategy in the works, he does not know what this will mean in concrete terms.

"The government already mentioned on several occasions from the prime minister down to the minister and under-minister that they wanted to have a strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean," he said, "but we are still waiting [for] what will be the strategy."

It appears the policy is actually still in the works. Panamanian Ambassador Romy Vásquez de González said the government sent a message to Latin American ambassadors, saying "a document is in process—to be ready by mid-December or early January," she wrote in an email.

Ms. Vásquez said she has high expectations for the strategy, especially if it entails bilateral trade talks with Canada, and that she sees "a very dynamic plan of action," ahead.

Ms. Vásquez said she is confident that Central America will figure into the plan.

"[The fact that] Secretary of State Helena Guergis is in the area, in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, shows that Central America is part of the strategy," she wrote.

In an interview with Embassy on Monday, Ms. Guergis said she had not heard the diplomatic community's concerns, but stressed that the strategy is more than a slogan.

"Prime Minister Stephen Harper doesn't just say we're going to launch an Americas strategy...without something being behind it," she said. "If they want to come and have a conversation with me...I'm happy to sit down and talk to them about all of the things we have planned," she said.

Ms. Guergis would not say whether or not the government currently possesses a comprehensive policy document that describes the America's strategy in detail.

She said she could not say whether the Americas strategy includes an immigration component. Nor would she say whether the so-called Bolivarian regimes in Venezuela and Bolivia would be engaged as part of the Americas strategy.

She also would not say whether the opening of more diplomatic missions or trade offices is part of the plan. She did, however, say that Canada is open to discussing the issue with countries in the Americas.

Ms. Guergis said, however, that official visits like the one she completed last week are a part of the Americas strategy. During her three-day trip to Costa Rica and Nicaragua, she said, she met with the presidents of the two countries as well as ministers, trade representatives and Canadian businesspeople.

"Part of this process is a number of high-level visits, [with] ministers meeting in one-on-one, engaging conversations," she said. "That's the starting point. To have the conversation as to where it is we need to go, what are you looking for from us and what are we looking for from you."

Guergis says CA4 Could Be Revived

During her trip, Ms. Guergis said, she invited Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to establish an embassy in Ottawa.

"We would love to have them have an embassy here," she said. "They have not made a final decision, but they do want to."

On the trade front, Ms. Guergis said that after a positive meeting with Mr. Ortega, she thinks Nicaragua will push for movement on the Canada-Central America Four free trade deal.

Negotiations with the CA4, comprised of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and

Nicaragua, started in 2000. Progress, however, has stalled over market access for textiles, apparel and agricultural products, as well as labour issues.

Ms. Guergis said she noticed a marked difference in attitudes towards completion of the deal during her trip, especially from Mr. Ortega.

"I can tell you when [Mr. Ortega] was with us, he was very much open to free trade talks," Ms. Guergis said. "He instructed his trade minister to ensure that trade negotiations pick back up and that we move forward in a very aggressive manner.

"We had a stalemate in Nicaragua and with the CA4 with respect to our free trade agreements. We were not having any progress," she said. "I left the country with Nicaragua very much engaged. We've gotten to the bottom of it and now we're working towards establishing that agreement."

Ms. Guergis added that Canadian businesspeople active in Nicaragua are optimistic that the government of the former Sandinista guerrilla is ready to work with Canadian companies.

"They were not 100 per cent sure where [the Nicaraguans] were headed," she said. "But they are very pleased with how open he has been and how engaging he has been in working with the business community."

She added that the Nicaraguan government has been working in concert with the private sector to help develop the country's energy sector.

Ms. Guergis also said that Canadian businesspeople in Costa Rica are concerned that Canada's five-year-old free trade agreement with the country is not performing as well as the more recent deals Costa Rica signed with the countries of the Central American Free Trade Agreement and the United States.

She said the government would investigate how the deal can be improved.

"My task at the time was if we could open up that and have a further conversation on how to enhance that FTA to ensure that Canadian companies are on the same level playing field," she said.

Strategy Remains Cloudy

John Foster, a principal researcher with the North-South Institute, said the government has not made clear what the Americas strategy entails, and that the diplomatic, NGO and think-tank communities remain largely in the dark.

"I think its clear from this morning's [FOCAL] meeting that the strategy remains in the clouds," he said. "I think public knowledge of the strategy below the idea that we are going to do something more in the hemisphere remains extremely limited."

John Graham, chair of FOCAL, said while his organization is buoyed by the government's decision to re-engage the Americas, some doubts remain as to how far this will strategy will go.

Mr. Graham said this strategy marks the third time in less than 20 years that Canada has launched a major initiative to engage the Americas, the previous two being Canada's decision to join the Organization of American States in 1989 and the Summit of the Americas meetings in Quebec City in 2001.

In both cases, Mr. Graham said, "the government was distracted by other priorities and the momentum on both occasions eventually fizzled."

"Of course the question emerges," he asked, "is this another flash in the foreign policy pan?"

Mr. Foster agreed that there is a "sort of skepticism inherited from previous periodic romances with the hemisphere that were never consummated."

Despite the prevailing skepticism, Mr. Graham said, there is reason to be optimistic.

"So far, the indications is that the policy has some legs," he said.