

# **Raúl presides 22nd ACS-AEC Ministerial Council Meeting**

• WITH the President of Cuba's Councils of State and Ministers, Army General, Raúl Castro presiding, the 22nd Ministerial Council Meeting of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS-AEC) was inaugurated March 10 in Havana.

Speaking during the opening of the session, the island's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, recalled the words of the Cuban President when, during the Fifth Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Celac), held last January in the Dominican Republic, he stated that "Never has it been more necessary to effectively advance along the path of unity, recognizing that we have many common interests."

The Cuban Foreign Minister stated, "Important changes, significantly impacting our region, have occurred in the world panorama since the 7th ACS-AEC Summit, held in Havana."

Rodríguez Parrilla explained that exclusionary and repressive migration policies in destination countries could see more Latin American and Caribbean migrants face deportation and discrimination; and expressed concern about harsh protectionist trade regulations, which represent a genuine challenge for the sub-region.

He warned that governments of the area have the duty and responsibility to "Build more just, equal and inclusive societies, centered on human beings," in order to further unite and integrate Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Meanwhile, ACS-AEC Secretary General, June Soomer, highlighted the importance of the commitment of the region's women to integration, and thanked member states for appointing her the bloc's highest position.

The meeting took place in the capital's Tryp Habana Libre hotel in the context of efforts to revitalize the regional organization founded in Cartagena de Indias in 1994.

Finally, Venezuela assumed the ACS-AEC Ministerial Council pro tempore presidency (2017-2018) from Cuba. •



ESTUDIOS REVOLUCIÓN

## The Caribbean: A look at the neighborhood

Sergio Alejandro Gómez

• THE Caribbean meetings held in Havana last week, March 8-11, left clear evidence of the leading role our region is playing in political developments on the continent, as well as the potential which exists for greater integration in the face of adverse international conditions.

The 22nd Association of Caribbean States (ACS-AEC) Ministerial Council, preceded by the bloc's 1st Cooperation Conference, as well as the 5th Cuba-CARICOM Ordinary Meeting, are customary gatherings which usually occur without attracting much attention, given the many international events to be covered by the media.

Nonetheless, the tumultuous regional scene, marked by the arrival of Donald Trump to the White House and his alarming protectionist announcements, and with Cuba as the host prioritizing the meetings, the events took on special significance and were attended by high level delegations from the great majority of countries invited.

Over the last year, Cuban diplomats have taken advantage of the country's pro tempore presidency to revitalize the ACS, founded in 1994, thanks, to a large degree, to the push provided by Havana, facing the Special Period following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The initial idea was to create an environment for concerted political action which would include the 25 countries in the Greater Caribbean from Mexico to Trinidad and Tobago. In many ways, it could be considered the prototype for what would later become a much more ambitious project: the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

During the last ten years, the ACS had lost momentum and more than a few observers forecast its demise.

The 7th Summit, however, held in Havana in June of 2016, saw renewed interest in the bloc's recovery. It was no accident that paragraph No.37 in the Declaration of Havana, approved by those in attendance, called for the establishment of a work group to revitalize the organization's operational structure.

Efforts to consolidate the bloc's functioning went beyond the region's borders, looking to make a greater contribution

to integrationist processes throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

In fact, on March 11, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla emphasized the importance of Caribbean nations playing a greater role in CELAC, saying repeatedly, "Alone, our voice is weak, but together we can be heard." Given the influence of South American countries who now have governments which have little interest in integration or the work of their predecessors, the numeric superiority of Caribbean nations, and the unquestionable leadership of many, could serve as a counterweight within CELAC, which includes Our America's 33 independent states.

Perhaps a better way to explain this thinking was offered by ACS General Secretary June Soomer, from St. Lucia, who spoke of "aligning the stars," the ACS, ALBA, CARICOM (the Caribbean Community), and CELAC.

Beyond the political situation, there are many reasons to bet on a united Caribbean, held back for centuries by colonization, the language barrier, and the lack of infrastructure facilitating interaction between island countries.

These meetings addressed the need to work together on climate change, transportation, tourism, trade, and cooperation to improve the quality of life of Caribbeans.

Also evident was the untapped potential of the Greater Caribbean, a market of some 300 million persons, located on an important international trade route. The region attracts significant investment and receives more than 40 million international visitors every year.

In the case of Cuba specifically, the figures are eloquent: 2.5 billion dollars in trade with AEC countries, and a 98% increase in commerce with CARICOM countries in 2016, as compared to the previous year.

Indicative of how much potential exists is Cuba's experience with the Mariel Special Development Zone, which has attracted close to a billion dollars in investment and aspires to become a regional commercial hub.

Perhaps few countries are in better condition than Cuba to support Caribbean integration, both in the political and economic arenas, without losing sight of projects that include the entire continent from the Rio Bravo to Patagonia.

Cuba is linked with the continent by history, language, and culture - as is the case for other former Spanish possessions - but at the same time shares the Caribbean history of slavery and colonial domination.

Cuba's ties with the small island states of Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago are longstanding. Practically as soon as they gained their independence, in 1972, these nations established relations with Havana despite pressure from the United States and the Organization of American States, creating a relationship which has stood the test of time.

For decades, solidarity and cooperation have been Cuba's best ambassadors, ranging from the construction of an airport in Grenada to Operation Miracle which has restored sight to thousands. More than 31,000 collaborators, especially medical staff, have journeyed across the Caribbean and 3,000 youth from these countries are studying in Cuban classrooms, according to official statistics.

Cuban authorities have reiterated many times, "The Caribbean can always count on Cuba," and evidence to the fact is the country's commitment to completing planned efforts, despite its own economic difficulties.

The Cuban Revolution, and especially its historic leader Fidel Castro, is symbolic of the Caribbean people's resistance. Fidel's presence was felt in every one of the presentations made by those attending last week's meetings. And this will no doubt be the case every time the peoples of the region gather.

Thus, after passing the ACS pro tempore presidency on to Venezuela, Cuba has made clear that it will continue its contribution to promoting Caribbean integration.

With an agreed upon strategy, well-oiled regional structures, and political will, the extreme positions adopted by the Trump administration appear less paralyzing for the ACS, and in fact serve to unite member countries.

Unity can put the Caribbean in a position to advance its development, and at the same time contribute to maintaining a balance on the Latin American political stage, despite setbacks for the left in South America and clouds on the horizon to the North. •