

**The Caribbean will always have Cuba's support**

• THE Ministerial Council Meeting of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS-AEC), held March 10 in Havana, represented another milestone in efforts to revitalize the bloc, composed of 25 nations of the region.

The event also marked the end of Cuba's term as ACS-AEC pro tempore president, for the period 2016-2017, with an agenda focused on strengthening the organization as a mechanism for political consensus and dialogue in the midst of a turbulent and uncertain international situation.

The meeting was also presided by June Soomer ACS-AEC secretary general; President of Cuba's Parliament, Esteban Lazo, and Salvador Valdés Mesa, a Council of State vice president, among others in attendance.

"In the face attempts to build walls, our choice will continue to be that of unity, solidarity and complementarity, in defense of the most legitimate interest of our peoples," stated Cuban Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, at the start of the work session.

"This can only be achieved in the current situation we are facing, if we effectively articulate and organize our actions around the consensus that has been reached.

"The commitments not to interfere directly or indirectly in the internal affairs of any other State, and respect the principles of national sovereignty, equal rights and self-determination of the peoples; to practice tolerance and peaceful coexistence, as well as full respect for the inalienable right of all States to choose their political, economic, social and cultural systems, are essential conditions for peace, harmony, development, and the integration of our countries," he stated.

"It is vital to continue advancing in the consolidation of the Association. The postulates of the Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace constitute guiding principles for relations between our states," added Rodríguez Parrilla.

Regarding ongoing efforts to revitalize the ACS-AEC, he stated that these "cannot amount to the mere modification of structures, budgets, and mechanisms, but above all must encompass a broader vision regarding the role that the community must play in the present circumstances."

The Caribbean will always have Cuba's support, stated the Foreign Minister, explaining that Cuba will continue to defend the legitimate interests of Caribbean nations in international and regional forums. He also thanked countries of the region for their continuous solidarity and brave support of Cuba.

During the working sessions of the event, Rodríguez Parrilla also recalled Cuba's aims during its time as president pro tempore of the bloc, highlighting proposals to enhance and advance in efforts to revitalize the organization.

He emphasized the importance of the 7th ACS-AEC Summit held in June 2016, in the Cuban capital. The Declaration of Havana, he added, showed "regional consensus on complex and important issues, demonstrating that the ACS-AEC is a useful mechanism for dialogue and concerted action in defense of common interests."

An important step in this regard, according to Rodríguez Parrilla, was the inclusion in paragraph 37 of the Declaration instructing the ACS-AEC leadership to create a work group responsible for reviewing and revitalizing the organization's operating mechanisms.

#### PLANS FOR THE PRESENT & FUTURE

At the end of the meeting, Venezuela assumed the Association's pro tempore presidency from Cuba, while Minister Rodríguez stated that the country will continue to "do everything possible" to contribute to the work of the ACS-AEC.

He noted, "Genuinely important agreements for the region's present and future, have been adopted," while also commenting that although the negative international situation threatens the future of Caribbean nations, the organization offers opportunities for "collective action."

Meanwhile, speaking during a press conference held after the event, Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister, Rogelio Sierra, explained that the island is ending its term at the head of the ACS-AEC, pleased, but not completely satisfied given the challenges which remain to be addressed.

"We believe that we have made a modest contribution to Association's work," stated Sierra.

He reaffirmed Cuba's commitment to continue supporting the bloc in its current role as ACS-AEC vice president and in honor of the visionaries who, in 1992, decided to create the organization which was officially founded in 1994, in Cartagena de Indias, with the aim of promoting regional exchanges and cooperation.

Sierra noted that Cuba's efforts as president pro tempore centered on promoting, managing and implementing cooperation projects geared toward disaster response and climate change.

He added that the island's role in successfully organizing the First ACS-AEC Cooperation Conference as head of the bloc, held March 8 in Havana, was recognized during the Ministerial Meeting.

Also praised was the usefulness and significance of the projects presented by Cuba, which are open to all member states and aim to combat and provide solutions to key problems which specifically affect small island states of the Caribbean.

According to Sierra, participants in the Ministerial meeting expressed their support for, and approved, a resolution to pay tribute to the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, proposed by Secretary-General June Soomer.

The Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister went on to announce that Japan, the United Arab Emirates and Palestine were admitted as ACS-AEC observer states, "nations which have had a proactive outlook toward the greater Caribbean community."

Also addressed during the event were concerns regarding a series of challenges for the group of 25 member states, according to Sierra, mentioning threats to peace, increased military spending, the impact of climate change, inequality, rising poverty rates, and opposition to extreme protectionist measures.

He noted that the issue of migrants constitutes a matter of concern for member states, who have stressed the need to eliminate policies which prevent orderly, safe, regular migration; and expressed their support and solidarity with Mexico.

Meanwhile, the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (Caricom)-Cuba, took place on March 11, in the capital's Tryp Habana Libre hotel, an fitting opportunity to strengthen and expand the close ties which unite the bloc and the island, which "Will enable us to work together within diversity to face the huge challenges caused by the regional and international situation."

#### TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER

Speaking during the inauguration and closing ceremonies of the Ministerial Council Meeting, ACS-AEC Secretary General June Soomer, reaffirmed her willingness to continue working to strengthen the bloc.

The diplomat from Saint Lucia pledged to work to support Venezuela in its role as President Pro Tempore.

She called on the organization's 25 member states to strengthen the Association and work together to face all challenges.

Soomer explained that the Ministerial Council must find innovative ways to help the organization grow, noting member states' commitment to ensuring the success of the Association.

She highlighted that the bloc's importance was reaffirmed after a process of broad debate and recommendations, also noting that the interest of countries from other regions in participating in ACS-AEC activities represents an excellent opportunity to diversify the organization.

We are in a position to implement important programs for our development, we must also focus on promoting educational excellence at a regional level, she added.

Soomer went on to express her support for the Colombian peace process and invited all member states to participate in "Carifesta," a cultural exchange event taking place soon in Barbados.

Finally, she thanked Cuba for its support, guidance, ideas, and generosity in the realization of these activities and during its time as president pro tempore.

We have found a path to integration, for both big and small nations, stated Soomer in her inaugural remarks.

She also expressed her pride as a Caribbean citizen at being able to implement decisions which benefit the peoples of the region. We have always navigated well through pitfalls and we acknowledge that strengthening this organization will help us to advance, because together we are stronger, noted the ACS-AEC Secretary General.

Regarding Cuba's accomplishments, Soomer expressed her admiration for Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro, noting that the island has managed to maintain an excellent health and educational project.

The ACS-AEC is a platform from which to advance. These are not superficial alliances, but stem from our common history, she stated.

#### VENEZUELA, NEW PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

"The Caribbean is a space for the historic coming together of our peoples," stated Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Delcy Rodríguez, highlighting the geopolitical importance of the nations which make up the Association, during the event closing ceremony.

Rodríguez recalled the legacy of Comandante en Jefe, Fidel Castro and Bolivarian leader, Hugo Chávez, who worked tirelessly to achieve regional integration.

In this sense she described the passing of both leaders as a "harsh blow" for the peoples of the Caribbean.

On assuming the ACS-AEC Ministerial Council Pro Tempore Presidency, Rodríguez, speaking on behalf of President Nicolás Maduro, thanked the bloc for the trust placed in Venezuela to lead the mechanism for the period 2017-2018.

"It's a great challenge, and even more so

considering the extraordinary work done by Cuba at the head of the ACS-AEC."

At another moment during her speech, Delcy Rodríguez noted that the 22nd Ministerial Council Meeting ended with an action plan which will enable her country to offer its support to the Secretary General.

Regarding important challenges to be faced, she highlighted disaster prevention, given that Caribbean countries are frequently affected by severe natural events.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister also highlighted sustainable tourism as another area on which work must be done to continue harnessing the potential of regional countries in this field.

She also described the ACS-AEC's position regarding respectful relations between countries as an example to follow.

The Latin America diplomat expressed her country's support for Mexico in the face of attempts by the United States to build a wall on the border which separates the two nations.

Speaking prior to the event with **Granma International** and **ACN**, Rodríguez called to strengthen integration processes among regional countries, based on each nation's existing economic potential.

"Divided we will never achieve our dreams for the future progress of our people. This Friday's meeting demonstrated the important commitment by governments of our region to advancing on the agenda, which as well as promoting development, aims to reduce existing asymmetries."

In this regard, Delcy Rodríguez recalled that former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez stressed the need to critically address these asymmetries, or challenges, and work on cooperation projects in order to solve regional problems.

#### SISTER PEOPLES

Speaking to the press on March 10, in the context of the 22nd ACS-AEC Ministerial Council Meeting, Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray, thanked the Cuban government and people for their expressions of friendship, affection, and support for his country.

Mexico regards Cuba as a close friend, he noted. We are close peoples and will continue to be sister nations, stated Videgaray.

Regarding U.S. President Donald Trump's plan to build a wall on the border with Mexico, the Foreign Minister explained that his country is a sovereign and strong nation, and expressed thanks for the support of Latin American and Caribbean nations in this regard.

Meanwhile, during a short break in the meeting, Salvadoran Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hugo Martínez stated that Caribbean countries "are looking to build bridges able to foster greater exchanges."

The Central American diplomat went on to highlight the complimentary character of regional economies, thus providing greater opportunities for trade between them.

At another moment, Martínez said that both the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) of which El Salvador is current President Pro Tempore, and the ACS-AEC are aiming to become stronger in order to tackle common challenges, by promoting integration based on shared values.

"Our position is centered on integration, unity, and cohesion in defense of the values in which we believe. Our position is not one of confrontation," stated Martínez. •