

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Trilateral Media Dialogue:  
Colombia – United States – Venezuela**

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## **1. Introduction**

The trilateral media dialogue between journalists, editors and newspaper directors from Colombia, the United States (U.S.) and Venezuela took place June 13-14, 2011 in Atlanta, Georgia. This encounter was the fourth in a series of meetings between Colombian and Venezuelan media professionals with the objective to promote both a deeper understanding of the role of the media in inter-country relations and a more balanced reporting on issues that cause tensions between the countries. The Colombian and Venezuelan journalists have held rich discussions that have focused on the political constraints and the strengths and deficits in the content of the reporting. This effort has accompanied the improvement in bilateral relations and seeks to support that improvement, which is viewed as still fragile and dependent on the personalities of the two leaders. Given the triangulation that has often affected the U.S.-Venezuela-Colombia relationship (e.g. the 2009 U.S. military base cooperation agreement) and the related media coverage, the group proposed to hold its fourth session with U.S. editors and journalists. The meeting series is a part of the Media Working Group, part of The Carter Center and International IDEA's U.S.-Andean Dialogue Forum, a group of influential citizens from Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, United States and Peru that work to improve relations between the six countries.

The meeting was designed to provide a space for prominent journalists, editors and directors to share information on the characteristics of the trilateral media coverage. In so doing, the organizers hoped to promote mutual understanding among the participating journalists and media professionals while contributing to the forging and deepening of personal relations and networks. The ultimate objective of the meeting was to promote a better understanding among participating journalists in order to contribute to an improved quality of information available to journalists on issues that cause tensions between countries.

## **2. Topics analyzed**

The meeting was opened by a presentation by three experts on foreign policy from Venezuela, Colombia and the U.S. The presentations focused on the “triangulation” of the relations between the three countries; how it was generated, how it is being changed and what risks exist that it could happen again. As part of this panel, one journalist from each country commented on the presentation, based on their own experience and expertise. Then the conversation was opened up for wide comments, discussion and analysis by all participants through a moderated conversation over dinner.

The second day focused on analyzing the characteristics of the trilateral media coverage and the factors, dilemmas and constraints that are affecting the media coverage. The findings from a content analysis of the press coverage of main issues on the bi-national

agenda between Colombia and Venezuela, carried out by the Carter Center, were shared. The second day was also dedicated to jointly examining approaches to promote that the trilateral media coverage contributed to an informed citizenry rather than detract with politicized reporting.

## **2.1. ‘Triangulization’ and ‘de-triangulization’ of Colombia – United States – Venezuela relations**

The panelists who spoke on the relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and the United States characterized it as a triangular relationship; the actions taken by one country or between two countries has an effect on policies and relationships held by the third. As the three panelists outlined in their presentations on the subject, this triangular relationship started to appear in 1999, when U.S. policies such as Plan Colombia and the election of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela dramatically changed international relations between the three countries. The polemic differences between the Venezuelan and the U.S. government strained bilateral relations, while U.S. anti-narcotic, and later anti-terrorist, policies strengthened ties between Colombia and the U.S.

The tensions between Venezuela and the United States result directly from their differing views on democracy and global power. Ever since the end of World War II, the United States has sought to accumulate and exert its power in the global realm. Chávez challenges this unipolarity, actively seeking alliances to create a multi-polar global power structure. As the panelists pointed out in their presentations, Colombia faces the dilemma of either aligning itself with U.S. interests, or with the interests of other South American countries, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. As a result, their foreign policy decisions have contrary effects on their bilateral relations with the United States and Venezuela, respectively. An alignment with U.S. interests tend to negatively affect the country’s relationship with Venezuela while strengthening the one it has with the United States, and vice versa.

Colombian presidents Pastrana (1998-2002) and Uribe (2002-2010) aligned themselves strongly with the United States. The internal problems generated by the illegal drug trade and guerrilla violence aligned symmetrically with American anti-narcotic and anti-terrorism priorities and international policies. Upon president Chávez’ declaration of neutrality on the issue of the internal armed conflict in Colombia and in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. in September 11, 2001, President Uribe capitalized on the U.S.’s security interests, placing its problems with the FARC and drug production within anti-terrorist and anti-narcotic frames. In conjunction with Plan Colombia, started in 1999 as an attempt to decrease illegal drug production in Colombia (the principal producer of narcotics), Colombia became a recipient of significant U.S. funds. In 2004, Colombia was the primary recipient of anti-terrorist operatives and the third largest recipient of military aid from the U.S in the world. This alliance can be seen further in Colombia’s support of the invasion of Iraq and President George W. Bush’s other foreign policies.

According to one of the panelists, this triangular relationship between the countries began when U.S. involvement in the area started to be seen as a national threat by Venezuela. Each initiative that tied Colombia closer to the U.S. increased tensions between Venezuela and both countries. Chávez views Plan Colombia and anti-terrorist foreign aid from the U.S. as an excuse for military build-up in the region by Washington and for a future invasion of Venezuela. From the White House's perspective, Venezuela's alliances with Iran, Cuba, and other countries judged 'unfriendly' to the U.S. are perceived to represent a threat to U.S. national security and Venezuela's oppositional stance on U.S. interventionism affects the possibilities of military and political coordination between the two powers on global issues such as the drug trade.

While the panelists agreed on the bilateral frictions that exist between Colombia and Venezuela, the perceived origin of tensions differed between participants. While the three panelists noted the political polarization between Venezuela and the U.S. as the main source of tensions between Colombia and Venezuela, one commentator argued that the original schism between these two Latin American countries was to be found in Uribe's new, aggressive approach to combating the FARC and Chávez simultaneous neutrality in the matter. While this difference clearly facilitated the U.S.-Colombia alliance, it also created a link between Chávez and the FARC, which reflected poorly upon the Venezuelan president in the eyes of Colombians, contributing further to the tensions between the two countries.

Additionally, the panelists acknowledged that this triangular relationship could potentially lead to a diplomatic renaissance between the United States and Venezuela. Multiple participants imagined instances where the relationship each of these countries has with Colombia could indirectly improve relations between the U.S. and Venezuela. Additionally, a couple of participants pointed out the complexities of the triangulation between the three countries by highlighting that a multitude of internal and external factors affect the trilateral relationship. These complexities make it hard to predict how the relationship will develop or how to ameliorate its frictions. One participant noted that the election of Santos in Colombia has initiated a new phase to this relationship since he has actively tried to mend Colombia's relationship with Venezuela and in turn distance itself slightly from the U.S. international agenda.

Ultimately, the commentators questioned the journalist's role in creating, maintaining, or weakening this triangulation. While one noted that a lack of serious investigation and contextualization in the media has led to a general polarization in its reports on international events, another participant developed this idea further, questioning the journalist's responsibility in reporting on international affairs. While maintaining that it was not the press' responsibility to actively mediate international affairs, he elucidated the difficulties associated with providing objective coverage. Due to economic demands, it is tempting to report 'the sensational aspects' and the negative simply because it attracts greater interest than positive stories. He stressed the need to contextualize these sensational stories in order to provide reader access to both sides of the issue.

## **2.2. Characteristics of the trilateral media coverage**

In this section of the meeting, the participants analyzed how the U.S. press portrays Colombia and Venezuela and how the U.S. is discussed in Colombian and Venezuelan newspapers. All participants recognized serious shortcomings in the way that each national media outlets cover international affairs between these countries. For instance, the participants discussed ways in which the stance taken by the national government on issues tends to have a great effect on the way the media in the country reports on current events.

The journalists from the three countries are all facing a declining public interest when it comes to international news. In Colombia, there is very little news on the United States, Venezuela, or any other country for that matter. This lack of interest, along with harder financial times for newspapers, has led to the revoking of on-site correspondents in Colombia and Venezuela for U.S. media. Reports that fill the pages of newspapers come from larger international news agencies, such as Associated Press and Reuters, and lack the sophisticated knowledge of the areas on which they are commenting to write unbiased stories – there is a fundamental lack of decent contextualization in each of the three countries' media. These large news corporations hold a monopoly of the information on international events that audiences read and society's access to varied and detailed reporting on international news events is curtailed by this monopoly on information. Furthermore, U.S. international interests are focused on the Middle East and North Africa - areas of conflict and upheaval - and as a result, Latin America receives less and less coverage in the U.S. media.

Many Venezuelan participants identified that their country's media as polemic and polarized. For example, media outlets aligned with or against the government will cover events related to the U.S. differently. As a result, the same story is told from opposed, yet often equally biased, positions. This divide in media reflects the ideological divide among Venezuelan citizens, and the participants pointed to its unfortunate side effects as it prevents the dissemination of more neutral and unbiased information.

Similarly, many participants noted that the U.S. media often seem to report on issues that reflect the political position of Washington in terms of their international relationships with each country. Colombia receives less and less coverage in daily U.S. newspapers. Venezuela, on the other hand, appears frequently in the American media, but the topics covered range from reports on negative events in the country to criticisms of political reforms that Chávez has enacted. As one participant noted, the posture of the national government of each country is an inevitable and powerful input into the work that journalists produce. Additionally, two other participants noted the necessity to cater to the audience that actually buys the paper. These audiences select for a range of articles that interest them – and this is where much of the bias originates. In order to maximize profits, newspapers have to cater the information they include within their pages to what their consumers would like to read about. Due to the poor economic situation and the rising access to information through technology, print newspapers are even more constrained by their audiences' interests.

Another main factor in each country's representation in international media was the role that its leader played in characterizing the entire nation. Uribe, Bush, Chávez, Santos, and Obama are all charismatic leaders whose actions and opinions become synonymous with the nation they represent in the other country's media. This perception is misleading. One participant articulated this, adding that it limits the ability of a story to be informative. It ignores large sections of the population, and the diversity and richness of the countries.

Overall, the bias we see in the media of each country is the result of multiple factors: the external forces of the economy, shifting public interests, insufficient contextualization of the issues in the media, and inadequate investigation. While some of these forces are unavoidable, there are also clear factors that journalists can actively counteract.

### **2.3. The role of the journalist**

The participants agreed that the basic role of the journalists is to inform the population. As such, journalists and the media contribute to the shaping of perceptions of the reality of the other country through their reporting. Therefore, a Colombian participant believes that a journalist should write reports with the consciousness of how their words affect the audience that reads them. When referring to the trilateral relations of Venezuela and Colombia, the participant believes that journalists should take into consideration how the information can affect the trilateral relations and the population overall before writing a news article. In contrast, other participants strongly support the idea that a journalist should always inform, regardless of the impact that the information has. One journalist supports the argument that the mission of a journalist is not to reduce "messiness" of the information but to simply inform.

According to the participants, the role of the journalist has to be balanced between the informative role innate to the profession with the diplomatic implications that such information might potentially have. As an example, a Venezuelan participant claims that certain parts of the Venezuelan media has tended to fill the vacuum left by the lack of an organized opposition. For another participant, it is impossible for journalists not to have an effect, negative or positive, with the news coverage, since there are always ethical consequences.

Each of the participants saw their role in different lights. Some focused on the need to sell papers, satisfy their editors or owners, or otherwise conform to the multiple forces that affect what gets printed in their magazine or newspaper. Others considered that journalists have the fundamental duty journalists to understand and appreciate the impact their reports will have on their audience and consciously tailor their work accordingly. It is clear that the discussion encapsulated the struggle that a journalist has between the ideal – to inform in an objective manner – and the practical – the exogenous factors that control the demand for certain stories and the competition that elicits exaggeration and bias. While everyone agreed that media coverage has a direct or indirect impact on

relations, disagreements abounded as to what role journalists played and should play in this situation.

#### **2.4. Factors, constraints and dilemmas affecting the trilateral media coverage**

The participants concluded that there are two types of constraints that limit and affect journalists and the media when covering the other countries: structural and non-structural. The structural impediments refer to those that the journalists have no control over while the non-structural refer to those factors that journalists can influence.

For structural impediments, the participants identified some factors such as economical, the limitation on the number of pages that a newspaper has, etc. The economical and financial situation that newspapers are facing today limits the coverage of events in other countries since there is no money to have correspondents abroad. Due to the limited resources that the media has, the number of correspondents has decreased proportionally. This has greatly limited the ability to cover events abroad. A participant explained that editors are sometimes limited between choosing between sending a staff person abroad to cover an event or to allocate that resource for the coverage of 10-15 events that occurred within the country. Thus, the coverage of international affairs in national media outlets tends to be limited.

This is also connected to the fact that the news industry is ultimately a business, as one participant highlighted during the meeting, and is therefore concerned about selling newspapers and their ratings. In the U.S. case, since the attention on Latin American affairs has decreased in comparison to other regions of the world, it becomes difficult to assign resources to cover Latin America.

Also, there is the physical limitation of the number of pages that a newspaper has, as a participant highlighted. In the case of Colombia, decisions such as covering the internal Colombian conflict and the daily news leave the international section to be sacrificed for the sake of actual printing space. It presents a dilemma of what news is covered and printed, bending to fit the interests of their readers. This limits the amount of coverage that other countries get. The participants agreed that domestic news normally takes precedent over any international news coverage.

In addition, the discussion turned on what determines the informative agenda. There were two trends that indicated that the agenda could be set by the 'bottom up,' meaning what the readers want, or the 'top down,' referring to what the editors and owners of media outlets want. According to a Colombian journalist, if it is set by local interest, the media generally prints local stories and coverage becomes almost completely "provincial". If it is instead based upon the 'top down' structure, the possibility is raised that media organizations as economic enterprises may negatively influence the characteristics of journalistic coverage. For example, risks are that a privately own newspaper will give more importance to certain news that they have a direct relation to, rather than equally



covering all pieces of news. An example was given related to the Peruvian newspaper El Comercio and its coverage to the newly elected President Ollanta Humala. The newspaper started to give a negative spin to the coverage of Humala after the candidate declared that he wanted to create competition to the airline LAN. The owners of the Peruvian newspaper have economic ties with LAN airlines and its coverage was impacted by that economic interest. Also, one participant illustrated self-censorship as an example of the pressure from the 'top-down.' Many journalists self-censor when searching for news since they will not do research or try to pitch an idea when they are aware that such an idea runs a high risk of being shot down by the editor. For a variety of reasons, a journalist will not force an editor too frequently into the uncomfortable position of saying 'no' to a story.

## **2.5. The impact of the digital media**

The participants analyzed the impact that the internet and social networks have on the media. They agreed that it implies a loss of editorial control over the information since there it has not passed through any type of verification or quality control. With the rise of the internet and other social networks, the news coverage has been affected in different ways, both positive and negative. For instance, the increase of bloggers that cover news can be a danger since they are not well trained and therefore might exacerbate bi-national tensions or reinforce simplified and stereotyped information. On the other hand, bloggers can actually help inform what is happening in certain parts of countries or the world where there is a lack of access, such as border areas or closed countries such as Cuba.

Additionally, the internet, and other modes of news transmission, has greatly reduced the demand for newspapers and magazines. This is an important side-effect because it places print media in dire economic conditions, making it harder not to amplify stories and cater to popular interest in order to sell papers and remain afloat.

There was not a consensus between the participants with regards to the effect that the internet has on the news coverage. For one participant, the internet does not have an impact on newspapers since it does not affect the interest of its readers regarding other countries. It just creates wider access to information at the hands of the citizens. In contrast, another participant believes that the internet is potentially dangerous since it creates low-standard information as well as limits journalists to be more concerned about audiences rather than informing about news.

## **3. Conclusions and proposals**

In the evaluations, participants highlighted the importance of strengthening mutual understanding in order to achieve quality journalistic coverage, considering that the discussions held in that regard were useful and informative. Some of the participants noted that the discussions served to acknowledge the different existing perspectives on

the characteristics of the news coverage. As a result of these sessions, the participants proposed paying greater attention to avoid biases and stereotypes in order to produce more balanced reports. The possibility of establishing new contacts with journalists in other countries was also considered particularly rewarding. Some of the evaluations highlighted the need to continue with this type of dialogue to produce genuine change in journalistic coverage of the relations among countries in the hemisphere.

The participants discussed possible actions that can be taken to improve the quality of news coverage and to deepen mutual knowledge and understanding of each others' countries. They concluded that the lack of knowledge that exists between the participants about each other's countries contributes to poor reporting and complicates the contextualization of stories in the media. One participant proposed the creation of a mechanism to promote bilateral and trilateral dialogues, much like the Media Dialogue meetings, to continue improving mutual understanding. Another participant also supported this idea, agreeing that journalists from different countries should work together and publish news stories in their respective countries' media outlets that aim to foster mutual understanding.

The participants also proposed diminishing and/or contextualizing microphone diplomacy in the news. One participant introduced this proposal, suggesting that the media should actively try to diffuse political situations by contextualizing scandals and statements that are inflammatory. Another participant suggested assuming a "more active role" in the unfolding of information in newspapers. Whether the title is big or small, whether it appears on the front page, whether or not to publish a story, etc constitutes a factor equally subject to bias. Upon making these kinds of decisions, the editors and journalists must anticipate the possible consequences of the article and impose their own criteria with respect to the content which the public considers important. While several participants agreed, many of the participants debated the duty that the media has and the role it plays in international relations. Those that disagreed with the proposal believed that the journalist's role was to cover all stories, regardless of the impact that this information can have in the international realm.

The debate related back to the discussion the participants had throughout the Atlanta meeting about the role and responsibilities of the journalist. In the face of the structural and non-structural obstacles that journalists face, the participants agreed that contextualizing potentially inflammatory news stories is the most concrete and viable way that journalists can promote a more balanced media coverage on issues that cause tensions between the countries.

## Annex 1 – List of participants

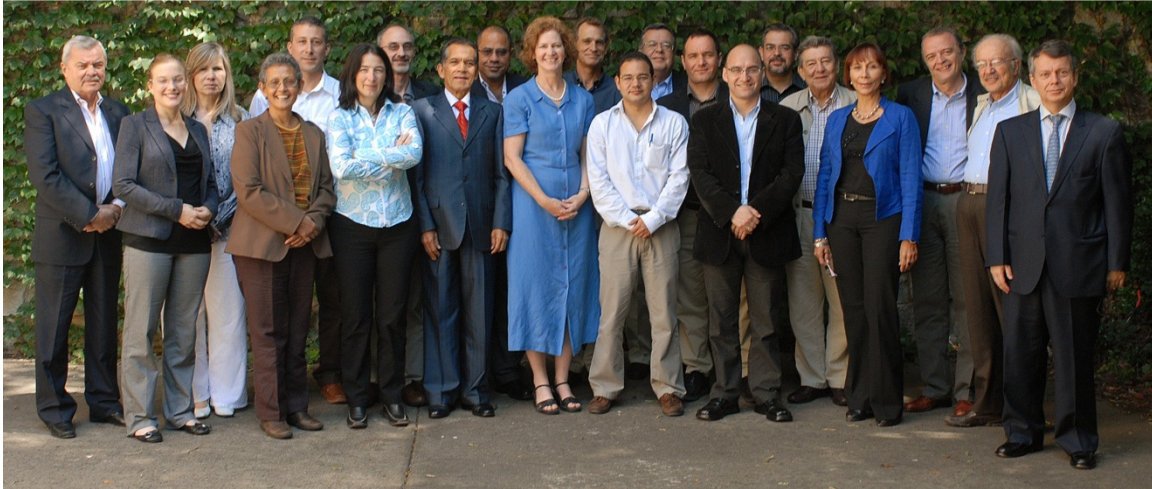
### Trilateral Media Dialogue: Colombia- United States- Venezuela

Ricardo Ávila	Director, <i>Portafolio</i> magazine (Colombia)
Elsy Barroeta	News Editor, <i>Globovisión</i> (Venezuela)
Alejandro Botía	Editor in Chief, <i>TalCual</i> (Venezuela)
Antonio Maria Delgado	Columnist for the newspaper <i>El Nuevo Herald</i> (United States)
Phil Gunson	Freelance Journalist for <i>The Economist</i> and <i>The Miami Herald</i> (United States)
Francisco Miranda	Opinion editor of <i>El Tiempo</i> (Colombia)
Martin Pacheco	Union Radio (Venezuela)
Nelson Fredy Padilla	Sunday Editor of <i>El Espectador</i> (Colombia)
Christian Parenti	Contributing Editor of <i>The Nation</i> (United States)
Socorro Ramírez	Retired Professor, National University of Colombia (Colombia)
Eleazar Diaz Rangel	Director of <i>Ultimas Noticias</i> (Venezuela)
Javier Darío Restrepo	Professor at la Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (Colombia)
Todd Robberson	Columnist for <i>The Dallas Morning News</i> (United States)
Carlos Romero	Professor of Political Science, Universidad Central de Venezuela (Venezuela)
Rafael Romo	Senior Latin American Affairs Editor, CNN Worldwide (United States)
Luz María Sierra	Editor of <i>La Semana</i> (Colombia)
Maryclen Stelling	Coordinator of the Venezuelan Chapter of Global Media Watch (Venezuela)
Vladimir Villegas	Columnist for <i>El Nacional</i> ; Host of political programs for the radio channel Circuito Union Radio (Venezuela)

### Carter Center and IDEA International

Karin Andersson	Program Associate, Americas Program, The Carter Center
Jennifer McCoy	Director, Americas Program, The Carter Center; Professor in Political Science of Georgia State University
Rafael Roncagliolo	Senior Political Advisor, Andean Region Program; Head of Mission, Peru, International IDEA
Hector Vanolli	Representative in Venezuela, The Carter Center

## Annex 2– Group Photo



Participants of the fourth dialogue session in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Annex 3 – Agenda

### Trilateral Media Dialogue: Colombia – United States - Venezuela

#### Monday, June 13, 2011

4:00 – 4:30pm	<b>Transportation to the Carter Center from Hotel Indigo</b>	Hotel Indigo
4:30 - 5:00pm	<b>Registration and welcome</b>	Ivan Allen lobby
5:00-5:15 pm	<b>Opening, meeting ground rules. Presentation of participants.</b> <i>Jennifer McCoy</i>	Cecil B. Day Chapel
5:15 – 5:30pm	<b>Presentation of agenda. Background of Forum and Common Agenda</b> <i>Jennifer McCoy</i>	
5:30 – 5:45pm	<b>Presentation of previous Colombia - Venezuela Media Dialogues</b> <i>Hector Vanolli</i>	
5:45 – 7:00pm	<b>Triangulation and de-triangulation of Colombia – Venezuela – United States relations</b> <i>Hector Vanolli (moderator)</i>	
	<b>Panelists:</b> <i>Carlos Romero (Venezuela)</i> <i>Socorro Ramirez (Colombia)</i> <i>Jennifer McCoy (United States)</i>	
	<b>Commentators:</b> <i>Luz María Sierra (Colombia)</i> <i>Eleazar Diaz Rangel (Venezuela)</i> <i>Tod Robberson (United States)</i>	
7:00 – 7:30pm	<b>Wine and appetizers</b>	Ivan Allen lobby
7:30 – 8:30pm	<b>Moderated discussion over dinner</b> <i>Rafael Roncagliolo (moderator)</i>	Cecil B. Day Chapel
8:30 - 9:00pm	<b>Transportation to Hotel Indigo</b>	

**Tuesday, June 14, 2011**

7:45 – 8:15 am	<b>Transportation Hotel Indigo – The Carter Center</b>	
8:15 – 9:00 am	<b>Breakfast</b>	Ivan Allen lobby
9:00 – 9:15 am	<b>Welcome and review of agenda for the day</b> <i>Jennifer McCoy</i>	Cecil B. Day Chapel
9:15-10:15 am	<b>Reports on internal politics of each country. Discussion</b> <i>Hector Vanolli (moderator)</i>	
	<b>Presenters:</b> <i>Ricardo Avila (Colombia)</i> <i>Christian Parenti (United States)</i> <i>Vladimir Villegas (Venezuela)</i>	
10:15-11:00 am	<b>Characteristics of the bi-national Colombia – Venezuela press coverage. Discussion</b> <i>Jennifer McCoy</i>	
11:00 – 11:15 am	<b>Coffee break</b>	Ivan Allen lobby
11:15 – 12:30 pm	<b>Characteristics of trilateral media coverage</b> <i>Analysis of U.S. media coverage of Colombia and Venezuela</i> <i>Analysis of Colombian and Venezuelan media coverage of the U.S.</i> <i>Carlos Romero (moderator)</i>	
12:30 – 2:00 pm	<b>Lunch</b>	Ivan Allen lobby
2:00 – 3:30 pm	<b>Factors, constraints and dilemmas affecting the trilateral media coverage</b>  <i>Review of economic and political constraints: similarities and differences among countries and media outlets?</i> <i>Socorro Ramirez (moderator)</i>	Cecil B. Day Chapel
3:30 – 4:00pm	<b>Coffee break</b>	Ivan Allen lobby

4:00 – 5:30 pm	<b>Recommendations to promote media coverage that contributes to an informed citizenry</b> <i>Javier Darío Restrepo (moderator)</i>	
5:30 – 6:00 pm	<b>Conclusions and closing remarks</b> <i>Jennifer McCoy</i>	
6:00 – 6:30 pm	<b>Transportation to Hotel</b>	
6:30 – 7:30 pm	<b>Rest at Hotel</b>	Hotel Indigo
7:30 – 9:00pm	<b>Dinner</b>	Restaurant Baraonda

## **Annex 4- Reports on internal politics of each country**

The meeting included three presentations on the internal politics of Colombia, the United States, and Venezuela. These summaries were then followed by a discussion between all the participants, where they could respond to the information presented as well as introduce new information into the conversation.

### **Colombia:**

The Colombian participant's presentation emphasized a growing sense of pessimism in Colombia. A powerpoint he referenced showed poles that demonstrated that people see that the country is in trouble: they view the economy as worsening, rising tides of corruption, and a heightening sense of insecurity – both due to urban crime and guerrilla violence. While Santos has succeeded in passing much of the progressive reforms outlined during his campaign - most notably The Victim's Law which gives land back to victims removed violently from their homes and recognizes victims of the armed internal conflict since 1985 - his approval rating is in decline. As president, he not only faces this rising tide of pessimism, but also criticisms by former president Uribe.

During the discussion that followed the presentations, the Colombian participants expounded upon the schism between Uribe and Santos, stating that the friction arises because, despite Santos' work with the FARC and in diplomatic international relations to construct peace, Uribe doesn't view Santos as protecting his interests. Additionally, a participant noted that Santos cares less about public opinion than Uribe, and so the way he manages the government is decidedly different than the government under Uribe.

### **United States:**

Like the Colombian presenter, the American participant who presented on the U.S. highlighted an increasing feeling of popular discontent in American politics. He characterized the current trend in policy as a deregulation of economics, political alignment with big business, and tax-cutting which has resulted in a society that is highly inequitable. Most of the country's wealth accrues to the top 0.1% of the population, while tax cuts on the wealthy and increasing costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have indebted the U.S. over \$3 trillion. While Obama's election was a moment of hope for Americans, his initiatives, such as the stimulus bill and the healthcare bill, have failed to engender optimism and have been less progressive than hoped. The political system is crippled by a voter population that is largely de-politicized and apathetic, political trends that are decidedly anti-intellectual, and a polarized party system. The U.S. now faces 9.1% unemployment, huge debt, and an apolitical public. These challenges to American politics are reflected in a general sense of dissatisfaction and cynicism in regards to the political system in the U.S.



## Venezuela:

The Venezuela presentation explained that the government is currently preparing for the coming elections in 2012, despite the fact that these elections are still unscheduled. With no leader for the opposition, it seems that Chávez will secure re-election in 2012, but the presenter pointed out that the president's approval rating has dropped from 70% in the last elections to 49% currently. But the country faces serious problems: an energy crisis, homelessness, high inflation rates, a large public debt, and increasing violence and security problems throughout the country. The police system is deteriorating; large percentages of kidnappings and robberies are executed by police functionaries and ex-functionaries, police officials extort and accept bribes, and are unresponsive to human rights violations, such as the current violence against trade unionists. Additionally, increasing violence by paramilitary groups and the FARC contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity along the country's border with Colombia. The presenter also cited an unofficial censorship over the media in Venezuela. There is a fear that results in private media companies self-censoring oppositional articles, as well as government officials seizing journalist recordings if they ask controversial questions in press conferences.

During the discussion, one participant asked whether Chavez was likely to give up power even if he lost the upcoming elections, and if he gave up power, whether it would be viable for the opposition president to govern, since all of the political institutions would be controlled by chavistas. To this, the Venezuelan participants pointed out that Chavez' past actions have never implied that he would overrule the result of the elections, citing notably his acquiescence when he lost the vote on the referendum for constitutional reform. Additionally, one participant pointed out that Chavez entered his presidency while political institutions were controlled by the opposition. The participants had confidence that an opposition leader would be able to govern if he or she were elected in the 2012 presidential elections.

The Venezuelan participants disagreed much more strongly on the issues raised by the presentations. They debated the recent attacks on trade unionists, foreign policy, and social programs. The division and arguments between Venezuelan participants reflected the political polarization between *los chavistas* and the opposition, and shed light not only on the issues debated, but also on the problem of this political schism that divides the country in half.

## **Annex 5 –Media Coverage**

### **El Sol de Margarita<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Pastel de Chucho**

Eleazar Díaz Rangel

#### **LOS PRESOS ARMADOS**

Necesariamente, la pregunta que se hace la ciudadanía es: ¿cómo entraron tantas armas a la prisión de El Rodeo, en Miranda? Porque no se trata de alguna pistolita. Lo que nos mostraron fueron ametralladoras, fusiles, escopetas, pistolas, revólveres, granadas de mano y miles de proyectiles. Porque ingresar ese armamento, solo en la Torre 1, parece imposible sin complicidad interna, que tendrán que ser averiguada apenas el gobierno termine de controlar esa situación.

Porque hasta ayer, al menos cuando escribo, la operación para rescatar El Rodeo 2 no había concluido y, por supuesto, no existe un balance, pero se sabe que la magnitud del armamento en manos de los presos les ha permitido resistir en la torre 2, donde permanecían el domingo 1.400, a pesar de todas las exhortaciones y llamamientos de las autoridades para que se entreguen y proceder a la requisa. Se supone que en esa torre, el arsenal debe ser mayor que lo encontrado hasta ahora.

Por lo pronto, debemos reconocer que las acciones de la Guardia Nacional Bolivariana no se parece en absoluto a las de décadas atrás; en una situación como ésta, habrían penetrados esas instalaciones con un elevado saldo de víctimas, como sucedió en La Planta y en el Retén de Catia. Esta vez, la GNB ha perdido a dos de sus hombres, un teniente y un sargento mayor, y tiene más de 20 heridos. Nunca se había visto una situación como ésta. Y sin embargo, la ONG “Una ventana a la libertad” la define como “una represión excesiva militar”, siguiendo la línea de algunos opositores.

Es de suponer que estamos próximos a cerrar ese capítulo de la historia penitenciaria, y que ya estudiarán operativos para el desarme en otras cárceles. Por eso, es válido eso de que cuando veas las barbas de tu vecino ardiendo, pon las tuyas en remojo.

#### **VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA Y EUA**

Con el propósito de examinar el papel de los medios en las relaciones trilaterales de Venezuela, Colombia y Estados Unidos, nos reunimos periodistas y académicos de los tres países en las instalaciones del Centro Carter en Atlanta, invitados por el Centro e IDEA, de Estocolmo. Correspondió a los profesores universitarios Socorro Ramírez y Carlos Romero, las exposiciones de apertura. En mi turno traté de complementar esas ponencias con políticas y acciones del orden militar desde Estados Unidos, que han

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.elsoldemargarita.com.ve/Noticias.aspx?NoticiaId=81739&Seccion=5>

tenido claras incidencias en las relaciones bilaterales. No se puede ver esa triangulación sin valorar el hecho militar.

Como escribió el exembajador en Bogotá, Pável Rondón, “El vértice Colombia-EUA tenía un acercamiento político-militar-económico, mientras entre EUA y Venezuela encontramos distanciamiento por el rechazo y la agresión política de la administración norteamericana a la República Bolivariana de Venezuela”.

Veamos estos hechos de la política militar de Washington de indiscutible influencia en el deterioro de las relaciones colombo-venezolanas, característica de esa triangulación: 1) Plan Colombia, que convirtió a ese país en el tercero del mundo (después de Israel y Egipto) en recibir asistencia militar de EUA, estimados en unos 4.000 millones de dólares; 2) presencia de tropas de EUA en varios lugares de Colombia, casi todos fronterizos; 3) reactivación de la IV flota en el Caribe, después de unos 50 años inoperativa; 4) frecuentes declaraciones del jefe del Comando Sur de las FA de EUA contra Venezuela y su gobierno; 5) embargo de armamentos a Venezuela, que no puede ni adquirir repuestos a su sistema aéreo F16, ni comprar en terceros países si tales equipos tienen tecnología estadounidense, pese a los contratos existentes; 6) concesión para uso de unidades estadounidenses de siete bases militares, entre las cuales Palanquero tenía capacidad de dominio hasta el extremo Sur del continente, según informe de la Air Force al Senado de EUA (A las que se añaden tres bases en Panamá y una en Curazao).

Como pueden ver, desde ese tercer ángulo ha existido una política, con muy concretas expresiones militares, dirigidas a fortalecer las relaciones con Colombia, deteriorar las de Venezuela, convertir al vecino en una amenaza real, y en escenarios diplomáticos los mostraba en la región como “polos políticos contrastantes”. En ese campo también Venezuela desarrolló políticas que incomodaban a Washington, como fue el enfrentamiento al Alca, las iniciativas para crear Unasur y, más recientemente, la Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y del Caribe (Celac), que no casualmente se instala en algunas semanas aquí en Caracas con delegaciones de 23 países.

Frente a ese panorama, ¿cuál ha sido la posición de los medios de comunicación? Sin ninguna duda, los de EUA han sido de identificación y apoyo a esas políticas; basta ver los editoriales de los más importantes, como The New York Times y The Washington Post, así como la selección diaria de noticias que sobre Venezuela publican, o las que difunde CNN. La Embajada de Venezuela tiene un estudio demostrativo de esa parcialización.

En cuanto a Colombia, aunque muchos medios conservaron su capacidad crítica frente al gobierno de Álvaro Uribe, estuvieron a su lado en los altos y bajos de las relaciones con Venezuela.

¿Y qué decirles de los medios venezolanos? La mayoría estuvo coincidiendo con las políticas y declaraciones de Uribe y los suyos, de cuantas acusaciones hacían contra Venezuela, pero de pronto cambiaron cuando Juan Manuel Santos llega a la Presidencia. Una investigación colombiana reveló cómo los medios venezolanos, en periodos

comparables, destacaron mucho más al presidente Uribe que a Santos, y las informaciones procedentes de EUA contra Chávez, aquí son destacadas de tal manera que se convierten en un factor en esa triangulación.

No creo que el debate influyera en algo en la visión de los periodistas estadounidenses sobre la relaciones colombo-venezolanas y la influencia ejercida por Washington.

**EN EL ENCUENTRO** de Atlanta fue motivo de comentarios la denuncia sobre el contrabando de gasolina que formulé oportunamente, así como el documento de los consejos comunales (CC) de El Nula, dirigido al Comandante de la GNB, general Motta Domínguez, y que parece no ha llegado a su destinatario. Es de lamentar que la esperada visita del General a los consejos no se haya producido. Pero se observan desplazamientos en los comandos, de manera que las jurisdicciones de los puentes Sarare y La Chacra han cambiado de mandos, y parece que debilitarán el control del contrabando y la eventual acción contra los GNB que pudiesen estar involucrados. “¿Qué nos quieren decir con esos cambios?”, me escriben desde un CC de El Nula que ha propuesto la permanente renovación de esos puestos militares...

**ARTURO** Valenzuela, subsecretario para las relaciones con América Latina, declaró en Bogotá que el presidente Chávez ha cambiado mucho frente a Colombia, que su discurso es muy distinto, y elogió tales cambios. ¿Por qué será que este señor ve las cosas de un solo lado? ¿Es que no se da cuenta de los cambios en el presidente Santos? ¿O es que haber desechado el plan de instalar bases militares de EUA en su país es poca cosa? ¿No ve que tales cambios en Bogotá han provocado los que él ve en Caracas?... **ME SORPRENDIÓ** leer a mi regreso una declaración del PSUV criticando la posición asumida por la oposición en la oportunidad de la repentina intervención quirúrgica al presidente Chávez, pues pensé que en la MUD reaccionarían humanamente, y como cristianos que son su mayoría...

**DOS FIGURAS** del beisbol perdimos esta semana. Primero, en Maracaibo, Carrao Bracho, el pitcher de más récords en el beisbol profesional venezolano: más temporadas: 23, y fue a cinco series finales, con 391 juegos. Y días después murió Héctor Benítez Redondo, centerfield, uno de los héroes del equipo campeón mundial de 1941, jugó 12 temporadas (1946-1957), creo que fue el único criollo con tres jonrones en un partido, jugando con Gavilanes, en Maracaibo. Nuestra sentida palabra a su deudos.

## Ultimas Noticias<sup>2</sup>

LOS DOMINGOS DE DIAZ RANGEL

### Relaciones trilaterales

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