

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
(Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago)

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**BACKGROUND BRIEFING
BY SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS
ON THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING WITH UNASUR COUNTRIES**

Crowne Plaza Hotel
Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

10:28 A.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Good morning. The President met this morning with the 12 members of UNASUR. UNASUR is a grouping of all of the countries of South America. The group is currently headed by the President of Chile, Mrs. Bachelet. This is done on a rotating basis, so she was Chairman of the meeting.

I would characterize the meeting as very civil, very positive; a good discussion, no tension in the room. Most of the South American Presidents spoke and spoke briefly. To use that horrible term, there was a frank exchange, which of course gets everybody thinking there wasn't, but there was. The President began by saying, as he had in the past, that he principally wants to listen; by listening, that's the way he learns. He expressed his support for UNASUR and said that by working together on issues like energy, on public safety, on climate change, on economic development that focuses on the poorest and making sure that the poor are not disadvantaged in this economic crisis, the United States and UNASUR have a lot in common, even though that there can be individual differences between us and individual countries.

There was some history raised and some issues of past U.S. intervention in which none of the concerns were directed at the President himself or at his administration, but more a reflection of what one hears in Latin America fairly frequently about the U.S. being interventionist. And the President made the point that he's not here to argue history. He said we need to understand the past, have to move ahead, very forward-looking. He also made a point that, just as the United States has to recognize the past and other countries have to, as well, it's also helpful for Latin America to avoid the temptation, the

easy temptation, to blame anything that goes wrong or any problems that exist on the United States.

There was discussion of Cuba. This was brought up by more than one of the Latin America Presidents. There was a general appreciation for the steps that the President has announced and for his words last night. The President -- and there was some expression, as well, that these countries would like to see us go further, particularly in relation to lifting the embargo.

The President responded that he understands the importance of Cuba for Latin America. He said we are on a path of changing the nature of our relationship with that country. He said that change will not happen overnight. He is interested in dialogue but not talk for talk's sake. He said that everything that we do in relation to Cuba is informed by a real concern for democracy. And he made the point that the members of UNASUR are all democratically elected, and that democracy and the rule of law for the people of Cuba, in his view, is or should be a concern for them -- that is, the other leaders, as well.

Immigration was raised. It's a -- as you know, it's not an issue for all of Latin America, and less so, perhaps, for the countries of South America than for, let's say, Central America or Mexico, but it was raised. The President responded, noting that we are a nation of laws, but we're also a nation of immigrants. And what we have to do is find policies that are respectful of our tradition -- that is, our open immigration tradition -- but yet provide structure and order for immigration.

At the close of the meeting, there were statements on both parts, including the President, that everybody feels that there's a new level of confidence, a new dedication to working together to address common concerns. We will not agree all the time, said the President, but we are open to working together and to discussing our differences.

Thank you.

Q Thank you, hi. I'm Laura Meckler, from The Wall Street Journal. I have two questions. One is, in his conversation about Cuba, did the President -- did President Obama at any point ask them to use their influence with the Castros to get them to make some sort of substantive move in response? And my second question is whether President Chavez was at this meeting, if there was any further interaction between he and President Obama?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: First question was, did the President ask for any specific action on the part of the other countries vis-à-vis Cuba. The answer is the President talked in general terms about how everyone in the room was democratically elected, the goal of rule of law and democracy, respect for human rights is what motivates our policy in Cuba, and that he hoped that he would have cooperation from them in this.

In terms of interaction between Chavez and the President, Chavez spoke; he spoke actually briefly by his standards -- it was actually briefly by anyone's standards -- a couple of minutes. And I think as the President left he said goodbye and individually to pretty much everyone in the room and I think they had a little interaction then.

Q A follow-up on that? Can you say what message you took from Chavez giving a book about the exploitation of South America to President Obama?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My personal view is, you know, it's a way for Chavez to get press questions and his picture taken again.

Q Well, actually, following up on that, are you concerned that Chavez is sort of using this as a platform to look like to America the leader of South America?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think, you know, I can really comment on what other individual leaders are trying to do. I think all of the leaders here from South America think that they are leaders of South America.

Q No, I understand that, but the platform -- he appears to be getting a -- doing everything he can to insert himself.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, this is the nature of the person and anybody who's been at international conferences with Chavez knows that if there's a camera around, he's going to find a way to get in it.

Yes.

Q I arrived a little bit late so I don't know if they asked, but I would like to know did Obama receive any request to go further directly --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't hear.

Q Did Obama receive any requests from any President yesterday about going a little bit quicker and further on the Cuba issue?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think it's clear that, at least speaking of this meeting this morning, that in my view -- although it was not expressed by every one of them -- but I think all of the Presidents there would like to see us move expeditiously to lift the embargo.

Q When the President was discussing the U.S. goals for Cuba and talking about how a democratic Cuba is in everybody's best interest, what was the reaction by the other South American, Latin American leaders in the room?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think he -- the question is was there a particular reaction to the President. I think at that point actually, that was -- he was responding to comments that had been made, and so that was sort of the last word on Cuba. So there wasn't a specific response to what he said.

Q Was the talk about the past that you mentioned about the economy, economic policies of the past, Washington consensus, or was it about political intervention, support for dictatorships, that sort of thing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think what some of the leaders, and I won't identify them, were talking about was what they perceive as a tradition of political intervention in Latin America.

Q Did the Colombian free trade agreement or any of these other trade agreements, issues come up?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, no. There was very little discussion of bilateral. It would not have really been appropriate in a meeting of 12 heads of state.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Although I would add that one particular President did raise that issue.

Q Oh, really?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He did?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, okay. I'm sorry, I didn't hear it. Okay.

Q Would you say that Cuba took up 50 percent -- what percentage of the session did the discussion of Cuba take up?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, I think it was one of, I don't know, maybe 20 percent --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it was one of multiple issues. In fact, it wasn't really the focus, it's just that it did come up.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It came up, but it wasn't -- they didn't spend all their time talking about Cuba. They talked about cooperation, they talked about other issues. It was there, but it wasn't dominating. In fact, no one issue dominated.

Q Two questions. The President said and you reiterated that he came to listen, as well. So when he hears these leaders talking about lifting the embargo or moving to do it more expeditiously -- is he listening and does it affect his position, is my question.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I can't speak for the President on that. I think he's laid out -- I think the best place was last night -- laid out his thinking on taking an initial step. He'd like to see the nature of the relationship change. This is going to take time. I think we have to see what kind of further steps are taken, including from Cuba, perhaps including from other countries.

Yes.

Q One of the President's talking points these days since Mexico City, but also last night, and according to what you said at the meeting this morning, is that other countries in Latin America, instead of just being upset with the U.S. for imposing the embargo need to also look at the policies that the Cuban government imposes on its people that are behind the embargo. And I'm wondering what kind of response the President got when

he talked about the fact that Cuba is not a democracy, for instance.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, this question was asked earlier, and the point was that the President's comment came at the end of a point or points made about Cuba by other speakers. It was a back-and-forth. And his comment was more by way of summary, in which he said, look, what guides us is our concern for democracy; you are democracies, as well, and we think that that should be a concern for you.

Q And there was no response?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, the conversation did not go back and forth in a staccato manner. We moved on to another topic; I can't remember what it was.

Q Well, what about in other discussions that you and the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I did not hear the brief on other discussions.

Q Did the President -- did the President give any indication of where this relationship with Cuba now stands in terms of -- we've had Castro's comments, we've had reaction from the United States. Are there now -- did the President indicate or did anyone ask what happens next? Are there meetings planned or --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, nobody asked that, and I don't have an answer for you. I think everybody realizes that we're taking some initial steps here, and let's see what happens.

Q Yes, just a follow-up. In Mr. Chavez's brief comments, were they anti-U.S. in nature? And do you have any sense of whether his warmness, I guess you could say, over the last couple days is an indication of a new attitude from him towards the U.S.?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, I wouldn't want to characterize Chavez's emotions. He was critical of past U.S. policy. He was -- his comments about President Obama were -- expressed the hope that things have changed. He was civil in his remarks; he was critical of the past, however.

Q Follow-up on the question that she just asked, do you foresee in the near future or there has been any substance to this closeness between -- or new approach, let's put it that way, between Hugo Chavez and President Obama about exchanging again ambassadors? As you know, Chavez kicked out the U.S. ambassador last year, and the U.S. did the same. Do you think that, since there's a new chapter here, that the relationship between Venezuela and the United States could normalize with ambassadors?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That question did not -- that issue of exchanging ambassadors did not come up. I think in a more general sense, given what the President is saying about dialogue with these countries, dialogue has obviously helped when ambassadors are in place. And that might -- that is something that's pretty obvious, it seems to me. But the kicking out of ambassadors is something that the Venezuelans did in solidarity with the Bolivians, actually. And it seems to me that it's -- the ball is in their court to try to fix that issue if we're going to have real dialogue.

There's a guy in his underwear standing back there, I think.

Q Gym attire. (Laughter.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I just want to get you out of here before you got arrested for flashing.
(Laughter.)

Q Did the administration or does the President have any reaction to Hugo Chavez's move yesterday to freeze the assets of the opposition leader in Venezuela, Manuel Rosales? Does he think that's a helpful gesture at a time when we're gathering at a summit to talk about democratic reforms and the process of democratic expansion?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, I'm here to brief on this meeting and give you a readout on that. And I'm not going to make comments on any specific issues either in the countries who attended the meeting or in our relationship with those countries.

Q Can you say there's a different standard for trade with Cuba than, say, with China? You say what guides us is the concern for democracy; we have enormous trade with China, but certainly they're not a democracy.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, our relations with the -- each country in the world are a product of our history, our domestic politics. I think if you're arguing for consistency, it's something that we strive for but don't always reach. And that's, you know, that's obviously the case. And so, no, I'm not going to enter into a philosophical discussion.

Q Well, does the embargo still have more to do with politics than with diplomacy?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I really can't tell you.

Q Come on. You could tell.

Q You actually could, yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I probably could.
(Laughter.)

Q You're uniquely qualified to do that, I think.

Q When you say -- when you say the President wants dialogue, do you think the President might go to Cuba soon to speak with the Cubans?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No. There was absolutely no discussion of that.

Q Was the President pressed by other leaders about the impact of the -- in terms of the economy, the U.S. economic downturn on the region, and as you know, some of the -- particularly the President of Brazil was upset --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The issue of the economy in the hemisphere came up on a couple of occasions. The President raised it, the -- this is not the first time he's had a chance to talk with some of these leaders on it. Remember, Brazil and Argentina were at the G20 meeting themselves, and the President did talk about obviously the great challenge that we're all facing about the economic downturn, how hard his government is working to see what can be done; and made the point once again that in terms of domestic policies in all countries and in terms of the activities of the international financial institutions that special care has to be given to the question of the poorest in the countries -- in all countries,

including our own -- that they're not more disproportionately affected by the economic downturn.

Q Did the issue of reelections, constitutional modifications in Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, did that come up, was that discussed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q Can you give us a sense to what extent energy was discussed and what it -- give some details about that discussion?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It was raised in just a very general term by both the President in his opening remarks and also by President Bachelet and maybe some of the others, saying this is one of those areas where we can work together: energy and climate, environment, security, what have you. But there were no specific discussions on substance of energy -- or actually on those other topics, either.

Q A very quick follow-up to that. You said no specifics were mentioned, but did President Lula mention anything about ethanol tariffs and the discussion that it would be helpful for the U.S. to lift those?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q How long was the meeting, total?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It seemed to have gone for about an hour and 15 minutes or so.

Q Back to the economy. Did they speak about the IDB and the possible recapitalization of the IDB?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not in this meeting.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't recall that the IDB issue was discussed.

Q Did the discussion get past kind of microphone rhetoric -- did anybody bring an actual message from Cuba?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q When the leaders spoke of past U.S. interventions, how would you characterize their tone? Were they giving a history

lesson, were they in any way, I don=t know, patronizing, lecturing? How would you characterize their tone?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It was more in the sense of this is what the U.S. used to do, it forms the part of the basis of the historical relationship and of course we do not believe that you, President Obama, would engage in anything like that.

Q Is it the President's intention to actually read the book that was offered by Mr. Chavez? And --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm sorry, what?

Q Is it the President's intention to actually read the book that was offered by Mr. Chavez? And I have another one on Cuba.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The President is a very well-read man; I don=t know what his reading list is, though.

Q And on Cuba, the President has said for some time that Cuba has to take concrete steps for the U.S. to engage more with Cuba. Does that position still stand, that Cuba has to take those additional steps or concrete steps?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, I think what we are is at a beginning, an initiation of a new process. The President has been clear that our goals are to see a democratic Cuba. He's also been clear that there are many issues that we have that we could discuss with Cuba -- human rights being one of them -- but there are other issues that relate to just the nature of a relationship between two countries in the same hemisphere. Migration, for instance, is a big issue that I don=t believe we've had recent talks with Cuba about.

So, no, there's no concrete benchmarks that have been laid out. What we're talking about is a process here.

Q Hi, there. In terms of the Colombia trade deal, did that come up at all? And can you give us any timing in terms of the quick pull-asides that were mentioned that the President is having this weekend?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I did not hear mention of Colombia trade deal --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll just make a brief -- President Uribe just talked about trade issues in general. Of course this was a group meeting and I think the President would very much like to be able to talk to Uribe further during this summit on a potential pull-aside at some point. So if that conversation occurs, then we'll make sure to share with the -- with you all.

Q And then do we have any timing on when those pull-aside are happening?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They will happen -- it's going to be pretty much impromptu as they go into different sessions and there are lunch opportunities, dinner opportunities. So there's not a firm schedule, but clearly the President has great interest in getting to know a number of the leaders better and he will use those opportunities as they present themselves.

Q Mr. Ambassador, did Bolivian President Morales participate in the meeting, and did he speak?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: All of the Presidents of UNASUR -- 12 of them -- participated. Yes, President Morales spoke.

Q Could you tell us more?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q Was the U.S. delegation taken aback by the lengthy tirade yesterday by President Ortega?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think Secretary Clinton gave you a fine response.

Q Yes, that worked real well for me yesterday, thanks. (Laughter.) But what was -- what do you think of -- what did you think of it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You have your answer.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It was 50 minutes.

Q The President has been asking for help to -- the other countries to participate in this process towards Cuba. I would like to know what kind of help can they offer. Do you expect, for example, Brazil to be a mediator, a facilitator, or what kind of support?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There is no request on the table by the President for any other country to be a mediator.

Q But when he speaks about helping, well, what does he mean?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think when he speaks about helping is the concern that we have that we live in a hemisphere of democracies, and for many of the countries, including many of the countries at the table this morning -- although he did not say it this way, I'm not putting words in the President's mouth -- they've lived through periods of dictatorship themselves and have a real understanding of what it means not to have a free press and open discussion and political parties and what have you. And that experience, perhaps, should in some way be reflected in how they deal with another dictatorship.

I guess -- I think we're done? Okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Anybody, one last effort here? You're tired? Good. Well, we should be able to have another briefing after the first plenary session concludes. We'll bring another senior administration official over here. Thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

END

10:50 A.M. EDT