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Washington aggressively intervenes in OAS secretary-general race

— *Clinton Administration gets embroiled in opposing Costa Rican candidate Bernd Niehaus and attempts to break up Central American-Caribbean coalition supporting him*

— *Washington successfully persuades Colombian President Cesar Gaviria, a man not without controversy surrounding him, to run*

— *Niehaus candidacy further disrupted by former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias' desire to enter the race in his place*

With the OAS membership scheduled to select a new secretary-general next month, who will be replacing Brazil's two-term incumbent Joao Baena Soares, the status of Costa Rica's candidate, Foreign Minister Bernd Niehaus, is increasingly uncertain. His victory once seemed assured as he had gained the support of as many as 23 nations (including six Central American and 13 Caribbean votes), whereas only 18 are needed to win the election. If Niehaus were to win, it would mark the first time that a Central American has headed a body traditionally dominated by the larger South American countries. But his prospects now are unravelling due to Washington's aggressive opposition. The State Department insists that Niehaus lacks the leadership qualifications for the post, and has been lobbying his backers to switch to outgoing Colombian President Cesar Gaviria, who announced his candidacy on February 16. The other declared candidate is Venezuela's Dr. Miguel Angel Burelli Rivas, who is considered to be well behind the two front-runners.

"A new diplomatic friction"

An uproar has occurred in San Jose over what is seen as a totally unwarranted Clinton Administration campaign to hobble democratic Costa Rica's legitimate aspirations to land the prestigious secretary-general post, despite the two countries' traditionally close diplomatic ties and San Jose's impeccable human rights bona fides. Washington's actions are proving to be especially galling to Costa Ricans, considering Colombia's continued problems with violence, corruption, drug trafficking, and the increased role of paramilitary groups engaged, with impunity, in massacres, forced disappearances and tortures, none of which have been adequately addressed by Gaviria. In fact, the recent increase in political violence may stem directly from Gaviria's 1992 declared "state of internal commotion," granting him increased powers to fight insurgent groups. Moreover, it should be clarified what role, if any, Washington's gratitude played in backing his candidacy, due to Gaviria's recent decision to take the domestic political heat resulting from his welcoming 150 U.S. troops into Colombia for the purpose of anti-narcotics activities.

Understandably, Niehaus has observed that Washington's superfluous entrance into the OAS electoral thicket has spawned a "new diplomatic friction" between the Clinton Administration and San Jose. While a growing number of Latin American observers and regional commentators have expressed their astonishment over the Clinton team's ineffectual performance in conceptualizing and articulating its policy for the region, Niehaus diplomatically prefers to frame the issue more narrowly as a big nation-little nation conflict. The larger hemispheric countries "believe themselves to be nations of the first category" while the smaller nations have been assigned to the "second category," disqualifying representatives like himself from leading the OAS. Niehaus also has made the reasonable assertion that he should be chosen over Gaviria on the basis of the hemispheric "principle of rotation" which is in the OAS charter and which holds that those countries that have not previously held a particular office should be favored over those that have. If elected, Gaviria would represent the first break in this principle, as Colombian President Alberto Lleras Camargo served as secretary-general for two terms beginning in 1948.

A candidate of stature

U.S. officials have noted that Washington is seeking a more activist secretary-general, one capable of "rejuvenating the OAS," and views Gaviria as possessing the hemispheric stature and leadership skills necessary for the task—abilities they believe can only be found in a former president. Contrary to the Administration's expressed desire to strengthen the regional organization, Washington seems to be up to its old practice of trying to dominate it, while at the same time further demeaning it through using its heft to interfere with the normal electoral process traditionally associated with the post. Giving up all pretense of neutrality, it has hand-picked a candidate and is now trying to superimpose its will by attempting to bully the representatives of economically vulnerable members of the Central American-Caribbean coalition into switching to Gaviria.

The merit of the Administration's stance is belied by the history of the U.N.'s equivalent position, which has been held exclusively by smaller countries since that organization's founding. In fact, Washington appears to be acting out of some misguided fantasy that a Niehaus victory would dangerously shift the balance of power away from the larger hemispheric nations. The smaller ones, it fears, might then act irresponsibly by instituting new and costly programs and ill-advised initiatives for which they will not have to suffer the consequences. If the White House is successful, the OAS post would apparently go un-manned for two months, as Gaviria's presidential term runs through August, while the secretary-general term is set to begin in June.

The Arias card

Washington's ill-conceived anti-Niehaus crusade also has opened the door for the always self-promoting former Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias, to enter the fray. Arias' characteristic arrogance displayed in his mid-February statement saying he would contest the position if Niehaus were to step down, was meant to humble the latter and persuade him to quit the race. Whatever the origin of Arias' decision to offer himself as a candidate, it appears that he will be unable to intimidate Niehaus into pulling out of the race, as President Rafael Angel Calderon has reiterated his position that "under no circumstance" would the candidacy of his foreign minister be withdrawn. Because the support of the Caribbean and

Central American coalition is entirely based on the person of Niehaus, and not necessarily Costa Rica, Calderon, in one of his more admirable actions, has perceptibly recognized that the switch to an Arias candidacy would in all probability lead to a break up of the group backing the country's favorite son candidate.

Niehaus, an admirable candidate

Lost in the shuffle over the OAS battle is the fact that Niehaus is a very distinguished diplomat and a highly regarded candidate. The two-term foreign minister has, with notable skill, spent several years uniting the Central American and Caribbean nations in support of his candidacy. This has been no small feat, considering the recent economic rivalry that became one of the main causes for the abrasive dispute between the two neighboring areas over banana exports to Europe, and the highly contentious and meddlesome role played by Costa Rica's ambassador to Washington, Gonzalo Facio. The ambassador capped his controversy-shrouded public career by not informing Niehaus of his inappropriate initiative in support of Rep. Robert Torricelli's very controversial and threatening letter to Caribbean leaders—the very ones whose backing was vital to the Costa Rican foreign minister's campaign—warning them that if they went ahead with plans to develop ties on technical matters with Havana, the congressman would cost them their U.S. tariff benefits. Niehaus recalled Facio to San Jose and was prepared to fire him on the spot, but had to swallow his better instincts because of the ambassador's close family ties to President Calderon.

The fact that Niehaus was able to win the Caribbean's support in spite of Facio's outlandish actions, is in itself a testimony to his leadership qualities. The unity of the coalition was symbolized recently when the Caricom nations supported a Central American proposal seeking to move the original March 28th OAS election date back one day due to a conflict produced by a meeting of Central American leaders with those of the European Community.

Regarding the OAS race, the truth is that Gaviria has no particular virtues nor Niehaus any disabling vices. Washington's ineptitude regarding the OAS selection process has opened up a can of worms, to no nation's real advantage. Clearly, Gaviria is not a candidate of unblemished rectitude and independence, whereas Niehaus is. The smaller nations of the hemisphere, along with their larger neighbors, would do well to resist U.S. pressure and maintain their support for Niehaus, who is not only fully deserving of the post, but would make an estimable secretary-general.

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