



# Council on Hemispheric Affairs

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## **Although now the favorite, Gaviria is the wrong man for the OAS**

Facing Sunday's election of a new OAS secretary-general, Washington has launched a forceful campaign over an office for which it traditionally has accorded only passing attention if not outright contempt. Its goal is to persuade the English-speaking Caribbean nations and others to switch their support from front-runner Costa Rican Foreign Minister Bernd Niehaus, to Colombian President César Gaviria, a late entry into the race. Although the State Department has publicly expressed confidence in Gaviria's electoral prospects, it has not specified which countries support him. It should be noted that it was actually Washington rather than Bogota which masterminded Gaviria's entering the race, and it has quarterbacked his campaign strategy since then. If anything, it is the Clinton Administration, even more than the Colombian government, which now has its prestige on the line.

Niehaus continues to claim the support of approximately 20 nations (with 18 needed to win), including Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, Central America's six votes, and as many as 11 of the 13 CARICOM votes. However, Administration officials feel that Gaviria has the momentum, and are confident that he can draw Niehaus supporters in a second round of voting if Niehaus fails to win in the first round.

The graceless back-room bullying (Washington has emphasized the ongoing Caribbean-Central America banana dispute and is rumored to have pledged to channel technical assistance funds to Caribbean countries through Colombia, in its efforts to break-up the pro-Niehaus coalition) now being carried out by U.S. regional policymakers is one more example of a dismaying amateurism on the part of the State Department's Bureau of Inter-American affairs under the Clinton Administration. Washington is not mincing words in its search for support. For example, a State Department background briefing paper that has come into COHA's possession includes a section emphasizing U.S. financial support to Ecuador and the threat that Washington's annual contribution to the OAS would be more difficult to sell to Congress, demonstrating the base tactics being employed to persuade that country to switch to Gaviria.

Although it is serenely confident that it can soothe the feelings that its hardball actions have produced following the ballot, it may be underestimating the fall-out from its "ugly-American" tactics. Also, Washington invites derision throughout the hemisphere by insisting that its candidate "has demonstrated a commitment to democracy..." The fact is that Niehaus' bona fides in this respect easily match those of Gaviria, while Costa Rica, a nearly model democracy, dramatically contrasts with the cloacal nature of Colombia's national life.

Although the State Department publicly insists that country of origin should not be a factor and hotly denies that the race has become a "big versus small country" issue, its primary stated reason for supporting Gaviria—that he would work for "the hemisphere as a whole"—is a tactic meant to imply that Costa Rica's Niehaus would act from the point of view of only the smaller countries. But at the heart of Washington's position is its concern that it would lose de facto influence over the organization in the event of a Niehaus victory, which would produce a voting majority of Central American and Caribbean nations whose total combined population is less than that of Colombia.

#### **Washington's peculiar standards**

The Clinton Administration would much prefer that the smaller hemispheric nations continue to "play their role," while the OAS leadership remains in the hands of a proven ally, which it can use as a facilitator to press forward its own agenda, including opening markets and expanding trade. The U.S. has never, prior to the election, publicly announced its support for an OAS secretary-general candidate, meaning that its recent actions must be seen as an act of desperation to keep the post out of Niehaus' hands. Furthermore, the Clinton Administration's self-imposed requirement that the next secretary-general be a former president, apparently didn't apply to Ecuador's Rodrigo Borja when he was a candidate last year, nor was it ever mentioned at the time that Secretary-General Joao Baena Soares, a career member of Brazil's Foreign Service, was elected to his present position when the OAS was a much weaker body than it is today. Besides the totally inappropriate nature of Washington's efforts to advance Gaviria's cause, it has chosen a deeply flawed candidate representing a nation which is more deserving of being regarded as a regional pariah than receiving accolades.

#### **Gaviria's record is far from unblemished**

Gaviria's primary fault is his apparent indifference to an appalling record of political violence and human rights abuses committed by his security forces, which have occurred on his watch. Hundreds of incidents of summary executions, disappearances and torture have been documented by local and international human rights organizations, as well as the State Department's own annual human rights report and the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The OAS monitoring body recently denounced a "terrible crisis of violence and human rights violations in Colombia" carried out against "individuals whose political positions are at variance with the Government position."

A further heinous practice is Bogota's near institutionalization of "social cleansing," represented by the murder of such "undesirables" as beggars and street children, committed with total impunity by bribed off-duty police officers. Although the left is responsible for equally reprehensible incidents of violence, Gaviria must be seen as especially accountable because he commands the very forces of law and order that are most guilty of rights abuses. Members of the country's security forces responsible for human rights crimes rarely have been prosecuted since the civil conflict known as the Bogotazo first broke out in 1948, the year of the OAS' founding, in a meeting held in Bogota that year.

Contrary to the statements of U.S. Ambassador to the OAS, Harriet Babbitt (whose appointment to this position continues a long tradition, with few interruptions, of

inexperienced political figures being selected for the post) Gaviria is hardly noteworthy for his pro-democracy actions. In fact, his November 1992 declaration of a State of Emergency signaled the contrary. It allowed him to further concentrate power in his, as well as the military's hands, including the placing of the police under armed forces control and supplementing their powers to search and detain. Moreover, although the State of Emergency expired in August of 1993, many of the decrees have been converted into law, including granting military courts jurisdiction in cases involving its personnel, broadly defined, and the institution of secret trials which have been widely criticized for limiting the due process rights of civilians, with the same state of affairs existing in nearby Peru having attracted strong State Department public condemnation.

#### **Other Gaviria shortcomings**

Many analysts, including the former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Marco Bruni Celli, believe that it would be inappropriate for an ex-president to serve as secretary-general, because he likely will be called upon to mediate intra-regional disputes in which he was involved. Gaviria demonstrably would not be able to hear Colombia's current territorial claims against Venezuela regarding Lake Maracaibo because of the assumption of a conflict of interest by the public. Another weakness of the Gaviria candidacy (apparently of little concern to him and his supporters) is that it is unconstitutional for a Colombian president to accept another position while in office (the OAS charter requires the incoming secretary-general to begin his term in June but Gaviria's term runs through August).

Yesterday's tragic assassination of Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio is a further indication that the hemisphere is passing through violent times. In this regard, Gaviria's personal security should also be of concern, as the OAS has no budget for bodyguards. He could very well be a marked man, given his conflicts with drug kingpins and guerrilla bands, and certainly would require Secret Service protection at considerable U.S. taxpayer expense. His choice becomes even more problematic when it is remembered that South Americans have held the office since the OAS' inception in 1948, with the first incumbent being a former Colombian president. Gaviria's election would effectively mean that no candidate from the Caribbean or Central America need even apply for the post, for the same arguments that Washington is privately putting forward now could be utilized at any time. It also should be noted that if Niehaus is defeated, the venerable Latin American tradition of rotation in office is no longer applicable, since Gaviria's victory would mean that two Colombians would have held the OAS post, and no one from the entire Caribbean basin.