

AMERICAS CONFERENCE

# Hemispheric leaders told to heal splits, look ahead

**Latin American leaders must soothe divisions and join the global economy, speakers at the Americas Conference said.**

The Miami Herald  
Sep. 15, 2006

Throughout 2006, Latin American voters have been going to the polls to choose presidents in often-divisive elections.

Now, the presidents have to figure out how to govern their divided nations, spurn populist temptations and bring security and prosperity to their poor, a parade of speakers told The Miami Herald's annual Americas Conference on Thursday.

The message came through loud and clear, from everyone from Costa Rican President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias to an architect of Mexican President-elect Felipe Calderón's victory.

In her keynote speech, Josefina Vásquez Mota, campaign manager for Calderón and now head of his transition team, attempted to smooth over the divisions left from his hair-thin victory over Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has called the vote rigged and refused to accept the results.

"Felipe Calderón is going to be the president of all Mexicans," Vásquez Mota said, adding that Calderón had promised to be the ``president of job creation."

But while she said that Calderón will reach out to Mexicans who did not vote for him, she also made a veiled threat to López Obrador supporters, who have snarled traffic for weeks in part of downtown Mexico City to protest the results.

Calderón "holds in one hand dialogue and agreement," she said, ``but in the other will exercise the law."

## NEW SYSTEM

Manlio Fabio Beltrones, president of the Mexican Senate and an opponent of Calderón, said he had never before favored requiring a runoff when no candidate gets a majority, but that Mexico now needs such a system to avoid electoral deadlocks.

"We are convinced the next elections are going to be the same," Beltrones said.

Arias set the tone for the conference at the opening gathering Wednesday night when he called on Latin Americans to embrace the global economy or face stagnation.

In an apparent reference to leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Arias said the region could consolidate the gains it has made through economic integration ``or it can slide backward, falling captive to populist rhetoric."

Arias earlier this year edged out a left-wing rival who rejected a free-trade agreement with the United States and four other nations.

Latin Americans in places like Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Haiti and Costa Rica have gone to the polls to choose new leaders, a testament to the region's democratic resurgence but also an occasion for political divisions to surface.

Elections are set for later this year in Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela, rounding off the busiest electoral season in the hemisphere's history.

Candidates friendly to U.S. policies won in Mexico, Colombia and Peru. In Bolivia, populist Evo Morales was sworn in as president.

Argentina's Roberto Lavagna, the former economy minister credited with bringing his country back from the economic precipice, said his government's more nationalist and populist tilt in recent months could slow the red-hot economy.

Lavagna, who is considering running for president in 2007, was critical of President Néstor Kirchner's decision to apply price controls, take ownership stakes in airlines and water utilities and give the president a stronger hand in budgetary decisions. When Lavagna opposed these policies earlier this year, he was fired.

Unless such policies are reversed, he added, the economy could cool off in 2008, weighed down by investor uncertainty and concerns over the health of Argentine institutions.

Lavagna wants Argentina closer to moderate leftist governments like Chile and Brazil, he told The Miami Herald. "I hope we can push Argentina toward the middle."

## **GENERAL SPEAKS**

Thursday's inaugural speaker, Gen. Bantz Craddock, commander of the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command, put a spotlight on Latin America's vulnerable underbelly: lack of security and its economic toll.

Craddock, who has been nominated to command NATO, contrasted major security gains in Colombia with the toll that criminals, urban gangs, drug traffickers and natural disasters take on the region.

"Money," Craddock noted, "will not go where there is danger."