

Morales' U.N. address gives his people a voice

In his first visit to the United States, Bolivian President Evo Morales forged his identity as a representative of indigenous groups.

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NEW YORK - Bolivian President Evo Morales, an Aymara indigenous leader, stood before delegates representing 192 United Nations member states a week ago and snapped the dreariness of the day's proceedings with a moment of drama.

After thanking the "fellow brother and sister presidents" gathered for the 61st U.N. General Assembly, Morales drew on the oratory skills honed from his days as cocalero union leader to remind listeners of the injustices committed against his people.

Raising his index finger as if to underscore a point, he said: "I have arrived to repair the historic damage, the damage caused over 500 years."

Then, as if it were a small trophy, he held up a small coca leaf, the banned plant from which cocaine is made but Andean indigenous people use for legitimate purposes.

"Here's a coca leaf," he said, "It is green. It is not white like cocaine."

Morales, the first leader of an indigenous movement to become president in South America, wound up his first visit to the United States last week.

The trip was aimed at projecting his indigenous identity before the world while learning about the United States in the process.

Besides his U.N. activities, Morales met Native American leaders, chatted with two former U.S. presidents, addressed investor concerns and spoke to a gathering of 700 people at Columbia University.

His visit was overshadowed by that of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a close ally, who at his U.N. appearance called President Bush "the devil."

But associates and analysts say the Morales trip has the potential to become a landmark event that will not only shape how Morales views the United States but will mark how he wants the world and the United States to understand him: a left-wing leader who has vowed to lead a democratic and peaceful revolution to allow the indigenous majority voice to be heard.

"The purpose was not to present details of his economic policies," said Stephen Donehoo, with the consultancy Kissinger McLarty Associates and who followed Morales' trip closely. "What he did was tell us who he is."

In his first eight months in office, Morales, who leads the Movement Toward Socialism party, has made it clear that he is no run-of-the-mill Latin American leader.

In May, he shook the energy industry by announcing the nationalization of oil and gas deposits and triggered a major political crisis as his political allies are seeking to rewrite the country's constitution. This has angered conservative provinces, which are threatening to break away if their autonomy is reduced.

His reluctance to pursue coca farmers has strained relations with Washington, and he frequently denounces free-market policies espoused by the Bush administration.

Neoliberalism -- a pejorative word used to characterize pro-market and free-trade policies -- continued to "pillage natural resources," he told U.N. delegates.

He called the Bush administration's possible suspension of U.S. aid because Bolivia wasn't doing enough to curtail coca cultivation a "re-colonization" and "blackmail."

His wardrobe underscores his indigenous identity.

In New York, he shunned the customary suit and tie, though he did not use the ultra-casual striped sweater that he wore on previous international travels.

During his U.N. speech, he wore a white shirt, with indigenous patterns embroidered on the collar, and a smart, black leather blazer with traditional Aymara weavings known as aguayo.

Morales' first stop was Atlanta, where he chatted with former President Jimmy Carter and harvested peanuts at his farm.

His first event in New York on Tuesday was a meeting with five Native American nations and one from the Philippines.

Morales plans to host a large gathering of indigenous people in Bolivia on Oct. 12 -- Columbus Day.

He discussed trade and development matters with former President Bill Clinton and invited him to visit Bolivia.

He met with investors at the Council of the Americas, a group that promotes closer ties between the United States and Latin America.

Morales' indigenous identity is closely tied to the coca leaf. Morales cut his political teeth by representing the cocalero growers, and associates say legitimizing the crop is one of his priorities.

Bolivia is allowed to grow a small amount of coca for traditional indigenous uses, and Washington worries that allowing more coca farming will only lead to more cocaine. But Morales

argues that the leaf, which is chewed by Indians for its mildly stimulating properties, has many uses.