

CONFERENCE ON THE CARIBBEAN

Caribbean leaders reach out to U.S.

A full agenda at a U.S.-Caribbean conference includes trade, security, crime, cooperation and freedom of the press.

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WASHINGTON --

A high-level conference designed to strengthen U.S.-Caribbean ties kicked off Monday with a meeting between Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and foreign ministers from the 15-member Caribbean Community, or CARICOM.

The Conference on the Caribbean will include a summit Wednesday between President Bush and the region's leaders -- the first time they will meet as a group with a U.S. president in a decade.

The packed agenda includes discussions on everything from trade and investment to security and drug trafficking and the negative impact of U.S. deportations of criminals back to their Caribbean home nations.

In addition, Caribbean leaders are reaching out to Caribbean Americans, some of whom spent Monday on Capitol Hill talking about how they can become stronger advocates for the region and on issues such as immigration.

Caribbean officials at the two-hour meeting with Rice said the talks touched on trade and Cuba, and described the session as "very cordial."

At the Organization of American States, Assistant Secretary General Albert Ramdin said that CARICOM "needs to engage more with the Western Hemisphere."

"That's not happening enough," said Ramdin, who was born in Suriname, adding that the bloc too often focuses on its own regional issues. "It needs to look beyond its narrow borders."

OAS officials also said that they are increasingly worried about complaints of attacks on freedom of the press around the region.

Ignacio Alvarez, the OAS' special rapporteur on freedom of the press, said in the coming months he plans to visit several Caribbean nations to investigate the problems, which include the killings of reporters in Haiti and the recent expulsion of journalists from Antigua.

"It's starting to get a little ugly," Karla Heusner Vernon, the editor of the Independent Reformer newspaper in Belize, said at the session. "If governments are not happy with the way media are doing their jobs, they need to find another way."

Vernon complained that several journalists in her English-speaking Central American nation had been the target of physical assaults by police in the course of doing their job. The conflicts had been reported in the local press, but not much more had been done.

Guyanese journalist Miranda LaRose also complained that the government in her country still had not returned advertising to the Stabroek News, where she works. Guyana's government pulled the ads in November. She said she believes the ads were pulled because of her paper's coverage of the government.

"We are not antigovernment," she said. "We deal with the issues."

The Guyanese government, led by President Bharrat Jagdeo, and the Stabroek News have been in a very public row over the government's decision to pull ads from the newspaper.

Jagdeo met with representatives of the Caribbean media in February to discuss the issue. They included Harold Hoyte of One Caribbean Media, Newton James of The Gleaner Group of Jamaica, Dale Enoch of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers and Rickey Singh, an independent journalist.

Jagdeo told the group that "the switching of the majority of government advertisements from Stabroek News to the Kaieteur News was not a press freedom issue, but a decision based on economic value for his government and was determined on the newspaper's circulation."

Alvarez said he wrote a letter to Guyana's foreign minister about the dispute and is awaiting clarification.