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### **Hemisphere needs a relevant OAS**

By MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE and JACLYN SHULL-GONZALEZ

Politics is the Organization of American States's main order of business. That's the central premise of "Responding to the Hemisphere's Political Challenges," a just-issued report by an Inter-American Dialogue Task Force.

OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza has embraced the political mandate with gusto. He hit the ground running in Nicaragua last year when President Enrique Bolaños, on the verge of being forced out of office, asked for OAS mediation under the Inter-American Democratic Charter. By late October, OAS diplomacy and a bit of U.S. arm-twisting had settled the crisis.

#### **Defending democracy**

Next is Nicaragua's presidential election in November. Electoral-council shenanigans, a close four-way race and Hugo Chávez's bountifulness on Daniel Ortega's behalf means that the OAS isn't home free just yet.

On May 14, René Prével assumed the presidency of Haiti. The OAS had principal responsibility for preparing and monitoring the elections. It registered some 3.5 million new voters and resolved the dispute over a second round when Prével fell shy of the majority. But, success in Haiti tends to be fleeting, and so Insulza will inevitably be called to step up to the plate again. Haitian politics are simply too fractious and will require OAS attention for many years.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter binds the hemisphere to defend democracy when it is threatened in one of its signatories. The catch is that the government in question must ask for OAS involvement, as Bolaños did last year. Ecuador, where the last three elected presidents were forced out in constitutionally questionable ways, never has. Bolivia almost certainly won't if the upcoming constituent assembly guts the separation of powers as Venezuela's did a while back.

Indeed, Chávez presents a challenge. OAS member states are disinclined to confront him openly, yet his rule mocks the charter's principles. His electoral support for Evo Morales last December, Ortega or Peru's Ollanta Humala has to be considered undue interference in these countries' domestic affairs.

In early May, the OAS Permanent Council heard a complaint by Peru against Venezuela for Chávez's statements on the runoff between Humala and Alan García -- a promising sign of the organization's increased relevance in regional dispute settlement. The OAS, however, lacks the appropriate mechanisms for mediating most bilateral conflicts. Insulza hopes to take the first steps toward creating these mechanisms at the General Assembly next month.

The Inter-American Human Rights Commission and Court -- long considered the most effective institutions within the OAS -- are, and should remain, above politics. Without compromising their independence, the commission and court could make their expertise available to other OAS initiatives. In Colombia, the commission could help ensure that the demobilization and disarmament conform better to human-rights norms.

Nonetheless, there isn't consensus that the OAS's principal charge is political. Caribbean countries are emphatic on a "wholistic view" that puts development issues at center stage. While in principle we agree, there are other factors to consider. Though all governments paid their 2005 dues -- an all-time first -- and some even settled their overdue notices from years long past, the OAS barely has its financial head above water. The Inter-American Development Bank is generously endowed to assist in development. Isn't a little division of labor a good thing?

There are, moreover, other fronts where the OAS should venture. Energy, crime and security are matters that may benefit from a bit of multilateralism. Establishing benchmarks for good public policy -- essential for democratic governance, sustainable growth and poverty reduction -- could actually prod legislators to act. Gender issues, from equal opportunity to violence against women, are not just a matter of fairness. Second-class citizenship keeps a majority of Latin American women and their children marginal to national affairs and the market.

### **Forceful leadership**

Insulza has, indeed, lived up to his reputation for forceful leadership. A robust and relevant OAS is needed more than ever.

"Dialogue implies that we are willing to let ourselves be convinced that a middle road is better than a dispute," Insulza said in early May. That's the resolve he brings and the reason why he clamors for conflict-resolution mechanisms. Strong leaders, after all, leave a legacy of institutions that others -- even those less gifted -- can use.