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Fifth Summit of the Americas: Human rights left behind

The governments of the Americas have failed to recognize that human rights must be placed at the centre of efforts to confront the many fundamental challenges facing the region, including poverty, the global economic crisis, public security, climate change and energy security, Amnesty International said today at the close of the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

“At a time of global economic turmoil and with a new spirit of compromise in the air between the government of US President Barack Obama and other governments in the Americas this Summit offered an unparalleled opportunity to lay out a strong human rights vision for the Americas,” said Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada, who was part of the Amnesty International delegation at the Summit. “Instead, human rights have once again been pushed to the back”.

The Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain, adopted by consensus at the close of the Summit on 19 April, is based on the Summit’s three principal themes: human prosperity, energy security and environmental sustainability. But the Declaration fails to lay out a clear human rights framework for progress in these areas.

Amnesty had urged the governments of the region to make a firm commitment to ensuring that all measures taken in response to the current global economic crisis fully conform to their human rights obligations. But the recognition in the Declaration of the responsibility governments have to address the crisis does not acknowledge human rights at all.

“Governments must unequivocally agree that human rights obligations will guide their efforts to address the economic crisis,” said Alex Neve. “If not, there is a very real risk that both the crisis and the response to it will deepen inequalities and lead to widespread violations of the rights of marginalized sectors of society in the Americas.”

Amnesty International had made a number of recommendations as to ways in which an earlier draft of the Declaration needed to be strengthened with regard to human rights. The organization was disappointed that there were no such improvements in the final Declaration.

Amnesty International was also deeply concerned that the Summit process excluded important voices from being heard in a meaningful way, particularly Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples, organizing the third Indigenous Leaders Summit of the Americas, had been forced to hold their gathering in Panama after being told that it would not be possible to find a venue in Trinidad and Tobago.

“Grave violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples are among the most pressing challenges throughout the Americas. As such, strengthened protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples should be one of the priority concerns at every Summit of the Americas. The exclusion and marginalization of Indigenous peoples at this Summit was disrespectful and unacceptable,” said Alex Neve.

“Governments must make amends and demonstrate that they are committed to improved protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples by moving rapidly to finalize and adopt a strong American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

One of the dominant issues at the Summit of the Americas was Cuba, which has been excluded from the activities of the Organization of American States (OAS) for 47 years. While there is no reference to Cuba in the Declaration, many governments and the Secretary General of the OAS called for Cuba to be reinstated in the OAS. Many governments also called for the US trade and economic embargo against Cuba to be lifted. Amnesty International reiterated its position that the embargo contributes to human rights violations and should be immediately lifted, and that the Cuban government must also take steps to improve its record of human rights protection, including by releasing all prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International welcomed the fact that leaders discussed the continuing humanitarian and human rights crisis in Haiti and pledged to bolster their efforts to assist the country. They have agreed to focus on the situation in Haiti at the upcoming General Assembly of the OAS, to be held in Honduras in June.

Background Information

Because a number of governments, including Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Honduras, indicated that they were not prepared to formally sign the Declaration, leaders agreed to instead adopt it by consensus and have Trinidadian Prime Minister Manning sign on behalf of all leaders. The governments that had registered objections did not feel that the Declaration dealt adequately with the current global economic crisis and had wanted to see strong references to the issue of Cuba's reintegration into the OAS and the lifting of the US embargo against Cuba.

An Amnesty International delegation participated in the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Trinidad and Tobago between 17 and 19 April 2009. The delegation also participated in the parallel People's Summit, where social and human rights movements, trade unions, Indigenous Peoples, women's and environmental organizations discussed their recommendations to governments. The Amnesty International delegation was made up of Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada; Ivahanna Larrosa, Director of Amnesty International Uruguay; and Stacy Shapiro, Campaign coordinator for the Americas at the International Secretariat.

For more information:

Americas: A secure future built on human rights for all: Recommendations to states in advance of the Fifth Summit of the Americas

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR01/001/2009/en>

Cuba and the Fifth Summit of the Americas

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR25/002/2009/en>

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