

MY RECENT MEETING WITH LULA

We met in Managua, on July 1980, 30 years ago, --during the commemoration of the first anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution-- thanks to my contacts with the followers of the Liberation Theology, which had started in Chile when I visited President Allende there in 1971.

I had heard about Lula from Friar Betto. He was a leader of workers, someone in whom the leftist Christians had early placed their hopes.

He was a humble worker from the metal industry, a man of remarkable talent and of prestige among the trade unions in that great nation that was leaving behind the dark days of the military dictatorship imposed by the Yankee imperialism in the 1960s.

Brazil's relations with Cuba had been excellent until the dominating power in the hemisphere brought them to an end. Several decades would pass before those relations could slowly recover to what they are today.

Each of our countries lived its own history. Our homeland endured exceptional pressures during the incredible stages since 1959, confronting the aggressions of the mightiest power known to history.

Hence the enormous significance we attach to the recent meeting in Cancun and to its decision to establish a Community Latin American and Caribbean States. No other institutional event of the past century in our hemisphere is so transcendental.

The agreement has been reached at a time when the most serious economic crisis of the globalized world develops concurring with the greatest danger of an ecological catastrophe for our species and the earthquake that destroyed Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, this being the most painful human disaster in the history of our hemisphere, in the poorest country of the continent and the first one to eradicate slavery.

As I was writing this Reflection, only six weeks after the death of over 200,000 people, --according to official figures released in that country-- we received dramatic news of the damages caused by another earthquake, this time in Chile, causing the death of close to one thousand people and huge material damages, according to official figures released by the authorities there.

It was particularly moving to watch the suffering of millions of Chileans materially and emotionally affected by such a harsh blow of nature. Fortunately, Chile has more experience in coping with this kind of phenomenon and it is a country with more resources and a higher economic development. If it were not for the sounder buildings and infrastructure, a countless number of people, perhaps tens or hundreds of thousands of Chileans would have perished. There are reports of two million victims and the potential loss of between 15 and 30 billion dollars. Faced with this tragedy, Chile counts on the solidarity and the sympathy of the peoples, ours included, although given the type of cooperation required there is not much that Cuba can do. Nevertheless, the Cuban government was one of the first to communicate to Chile our feelings of solidarity at a time when the communication system was not yet operational.

The country which is today putting to the test the world capacity to tackle climate change and ensure the survival of the human species is Haiti, as it is a symbol of the poverty suffered today by billions of people worldwide, including a significant portion of the peoples of our continent.

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The recent earthquake in Chile, with the amazing intensity of 8.8 in the Richter scale, although fortunately at greater depth than the one which devastated Port-au-Prince, leads me to emphasize the importance and the duty to encourage the steps toward unity taken in Cancun, even though I do not entertain illusions knowing how difficult and complex our struggle of ideas will be vis-à-vis the efforts of the empire and its allies inside and outside our countries to thwart our peoples efforts toward unity and independence.

I want to place on record the significance and symbolism I attach to Lula's recent visit and my meeting with him, both personally and as a revolutionary. He had said that as he was nearing the end of his term as president, he wanted to visit his friend Fidel; he honored me with that description. I think I know him well. We often had fraternal conversations both in Cuba and abroad.

I once had the honor of visiting him in his house located in a modest neighborhood in Sao Paulo where he lived with his family. It was very moving for me to meet with him, his wife and children. I will never forget the fraternal and healthy family atmosphere in that home and the sincere affection showed by the neighbors who approached Lula when he was already a prestigious worker and political leader. No one knew then whether or not he would become the President of Brazil since major interests and forces opposed him: but I enjoyed talking with him. On the other hand, Lula did not care much about that position; he took pleasure in fighting and he did so with irreproachable modesty. This he showed extensively when after being defeated twice by his adversaries he only accepted to run for the Workers Party on a third occasion due to the strong pressure of his most sincere friends.

I will not try to relate the times we spoke before he was elected president; on one of these occasions, actually one of the firsts was in the midst of the 1980s as we were struggling in Havana against Latin America's foreign debt, which then amounted to 300 billion dollars and had been paid more than once. He is a natural born fighter.

As I said, on two occasions his adversaries beat him in the elections with the support of their huge economic and media resources. However, his closest assistants and friends knew that the time had come for that humble worker to be the candidate of the Workers Party and the leftist forces.

Certainly, his opponents underestimated him; they thought he would not achieve a majority in the legislative body. The USSR did not exist anymore. What could Lula do at the head of Brazil, a nation of great wealth but little development in the hands of a rich and influential bourgeoisie?

But, neoliberalism was in a crisis; the Bolivarian Revolution had triumphed in Venezuela; Menen was in a free-fall; Pinochet was off the political stage; and Cuba was putting up a resistance. But Lula was elected when in the United States Bush won the elections through fraud robbing his rival Al Gore of his victory.

It was the beginning of a challenging stage. Fostering the arms race and the role of the Military Industrial Complex, and cutting down taxes to the wealthy sectors were the first steps taken the new US President.

The fight on terrorism was his pretext to resume the wars of conquest and to institutionalize assassination and torture as an instrument of imperialist domination. It's impossible to publish the events related to the secret prisons which exposed the complicity of the US allies with that policy. Thus, the acceleration took place of the worst economic crisis of those that cyclically and increasingly have accompanied developed capitalism, just that this time the privileges of Bretton Woods were there but none of its commitments.

On the other hand, in the past eight years, with Lula at the head of the nation Brazil kept overcoming obstacles, increasing its technological development and expanding the weight of the Brazilian economy. The most difficult part was his first term, but he succeeded and gained experience. With his restless struggle, his calmness and composure as well as his growing devotion to his work, under such challenging international conditions, Brazil attained a GDP close to two trillion dollars. The data vary

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depending on the sources but they all agree to place it among the 10 largest economies in the world. In spite of this, with an area of 5,327,500 square miles, compared to the United States with barely a larger territory, Brazil only has about 12% of the GDP of that imperialist country that plunders the world and deploys its armed forces in over one thousand military bases worldwide.

I had the privilege of attending his inauguration as president at the end of 2002. Hugo Chavez was there too. He had just faced the treacherous coup d'état of April 11, that same year; later there would be an oil coup organized by Washington. By then, Bush was president. The relations between Brazil, the Bolivarian Republic and Cuba had always been good and mutually respectful.

I had a serious accident on October 2004, which markedly limited my activities for months; then I fell gravely ill at the end of July 2006, the reason for which I did not hesitate to delegate my responsibilities at the head of the Party and the State through the proclamation of July 31 that year, first provisionally, and soon with a final resolution as I understood that I would not be able to resume them again.

As soon as my health situation allowed me to study and meditate I devoted myself to that and to review materials about our Revolution, and once in a while to publish some Reflections.

After I fell ill, I have had the privilege of receiving the visit of Lula every time he has traveled to our homeland; and we have talked at length. I will not say that I always coincided with all of his policies. I oppose by principle the production of biofuels using crops that can serve as food since I am aware that hunger already is, and can increasingly become, a major tragedy for humanity.

However, I must honestly say that this is not a problem created by Brazil, least of all by Lula. It is an essential part of the world economy imposed by imperialism and its rich allies that subsidize their farm productions to protect their domestic markets and compete in the world market with the food exports of the Third World nations, which are forced to import the industrial items produced with the raw materials and energy resources of these same countries that inherited poverty from centuries of colonialism. I perfectly understand that given the unfair competition and subsidies of Europe and the United States, Brazil had no choice but to produce ethanol.

The infant mortality rate in Brazil is still 23.3 per one thousand live births and maternal mortality is 110 per 100,000 deliveries while in the rich industrial nations is lower than 5 and 15 respectively. We could offer many more such data.

The beet sugar subsidized by Europe deprived our country of its sugar market derived from sugarcane, a precarious and seasonal farm and industrial labor that kept the sugarcane workers unemployed a good part of the year. Meanwhile, the United States seized our best lands and its companies became the owners of the industry. Suddenly, one day they deprived us of our sugar quota and blockaded our country in order to crush the Revolution and the independence of Cuba.

Presently, Brazil has developed the cultivation of sugarcane, soybean and corn with high-yield machinery that can be used for these crops with a very high productivity. One day, as I watched a documentary about 40 thousand hectares of land in Ciego de Avila used to grow soybean alternating it with corn where they will try to work the entire year, I said that this is the ideal of a socialist farm enterprise, highly mechanized and with a high productivity per man and per hectare.

The problem with farming and its facilities in the Caribbean are the hurricanes that are increasingly sweeping the territory.

Our country has also elaborated and signed with Brazil a project for the financing and construction of a very modern port in Mariel that will be of great importance to our economy.

Venezuela is using Brazilian farming and industrial technology to produce sugar and to use bagasse as a source of thermo-electrical energy. This is sophisticated equipment working in a socialist enterprise,

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too. At the Bolivarian Republic they are using ethanol to reduce the harmful effect of gasoline on the environment.

It was capitalism that developed the consumer societies and also the waste of fuel that has begotten the risk of a dramatic climate change. It took nature 400 million years to create what our species is consuming in barely two centuries. Science has yet to solve the problem of the type of energy that will replace the one generated with oil today. No one knows how much time that will require and how much it will cost to resolve it in time. Shall we ever have it? That was the issue under discussion in Copenhagen and the Summit was a complete failure.

Lula told me that when the cost of ethanol is 70% that of gasoline, it is not good business to produce it. He said that Brazil, which has the largest forest on earth, will progressively reduce the current pace of cutting by 80%.

Today, Brazil has the best technology in the world to drill in the sea; it can extract fuel from as deep as seven thousand meters of sea water and bottom. Thirty years back this would have seem a science fiction story.

He explained the high-level education programs that Brazil intends to carry forward and expressed great appreciation for the role of China in the world scenario. He proudly said that trade with that country amounts to 40 billion dollars.

One thing is clear: the metal worker has become an outstanding and prestigious statesman whose voice is respectfully heard in every international meeting.

He is proud to have been honored with the choice of Brazil to hold the Olympic Games of 2016 thanks to the excellent program presented in Denmark. His country will also host the World Football Cup in 2014. All of this has been the result of the projects submitted by Brazil, which left those of their competitors behind.

A great proof of his selflessness was his refusal to go to the reelection and his confidence that the Workers Party will continue in government in Brazil.

Some of those who envy his prestige and his glory, and worse still, those at the service of the empire, criticized him for coming to Cuba. To that end, they have resorted to the vile slanders used against Cuba for half a century.

Lula has known for many years that in our country no one has ever been tortured; that we have never ordered the assassination of an adversary, and that we have never lied to the people. He does know that truth is the inseparable companion of his Cuban friends.

From Cuba he left for our neighbor Haiti. We shared with him our ideas on what we are proposing with regard to a sustainable and efficient program, one especially important and very economic for Haiti. He knows that more than one hundred thousand Haitians have been treated by our doctors and by graduates from the Latin American School of Medicine after the earthquake. We discussed serious issues; I am aware of his fervent wishes to help that noble and long-suffering people.

I shall keep an unforgettable memory of my last meeting with the President of Brazil and I do not hesitate to declare it.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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12:15 PM

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