

South American-Arab Summit Sets Example For World Peace

by Gretchen Small

Co-hosted by Brazilian President Lula da Silva and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the first-ever South American-Arab Summit was held in Brasilia on May 10-11, bringing together 17 Heads of State, two Vice Presidents, a Prince, 60 Cabinet ministers, and 315 other officials from the 34 nations of these two seemingly disparate regions. Together, these countries—12 in South America, 22 from the Arab League—represent over 660 million people of the developing sector.

Arriving in Brasilia on May 6, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa summarized the spirit of the summit: “Arabs and Latin Americans must make common cause to prosper in this world. . . . It is our destiny!” The historic summit was the Brazilian government’s initiative, first raised during President Lula’s December 2003 visit to several Arab nations. From the start, the summit was intended to achieve more than merely fostering South-South economic cooperation, however urgently needed and useful such cooperation is. As Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim stated in opening the Foreign Ministers’ final pre-summit meeting on May 9, the summit “is the beginning of an historical moment in which we are setting—for other regions of the world—an example of how it is through dialogue, through understanding, through the search for knowledge of the other, that we can develop into a better, more peaceful, more just, and more democratic world.”

The neo-conservative imperialists in Bush’s United States and Sharon’s Israel sought to derail the summit from the get-go. Their global agenda depends on ensuring that Harvard guru Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” becomes a reality; without the wars thus fomented, and the destruction wrought by the International Monetary Fund’s policies, their would-be new world empire of globalization will fail. The world, however, is slipping out of their control. Although not willing to openly break with globalization, the nations of South America are building alternative bridges to other nations to create the possibility of survival. Such was the motivation driving the March 29 Ciudad Guayana summit among Brazil’s Lula, Colombia’s President Alvaro Uribe Velez, Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez, and Spain’s Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, with its emphasis on the integration of physical infrastructure as

the key to peace in South America.

The summit in Brasilia extended such cooperation to the neo-cons' favored target: the Arab world. And instead of globalization's mantra of "the democracy of the free market," several speakers at the summit harkened back to spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement, the great post-war anti-colonial movement which fought for the principle that all nations have an equal right to progress and development, in peace and sovereignty.

'Interwoven Cultures'

Brazil has already come under fire, as the media pours out disinformation about the summit. First the line went out that it was a failure, because not every head of state attended. Now come the lies that the summit backed terrorism; that the Arabs imposed their political agenda over Brazil's intention to stick to economic issues, etc.

The importance of the summit lies not in the laundry list of particular resolutions adopted in the final communiqué, but in the very fact that it occurred at all. Here the neo-conservative lunatics in the Bush Administration are twitching with desire to launch new wars against the Arab world, with Syria as a particular target, and the nations of South America, which are supposed to be Wall Street's docile pets, up and form an alliance with those very nations.

From the outset, Brazilian leaders counterposed the idea of the summit to the miserable lie of an inevitable "clash of civilizations" with the Arab world. In his address to the pre-summit foreign ministers meeting, Amorim reiterated the concept which had framed the organizing for the summit every step of the way: that of *Convivencia* (literally, "living together"), that advanced civilization, in Andalusia, produced by the peaceful intermingling of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, in the pre-Torquemada days of the Iberian Peninsula. Amorim emphasized that, as South America builds its own South American Community of Nations, in parallel, we reach out to the Arab world, which has so influenced our culture, people, and civilization. The historic Arab influence is so pervasive in South America, that more than a dialogue or alliance of civilizations, we could almost speak of "an interweaving of civilizations" between us, he said. The principal purpose of the summit, said Amorim, is to develop our direct relations, maritime ties, business and cultural exchanges—"all this besides the philosophy of tolerance which has already inspired us greatly, which was clearly seen in the Iberian Peninsula in the years in which our Arab brothers were there, too."

In a well-directed slap in the face to the neo-cons' demand that South American governments target ethnic Arab South Americans as potential terrorist threats, the final "Declaration of Brasilia" issued by the summit expressed "its appreciation for the positive role played by South American citizens of Arab descent in the fostering of bi-regional relations." This is no small community: Brazil alone is home to a more than

2 million immigrants from Syria, and close to 7 million from Lebanon. Brazil, in fact, is home to the largest community of Lebanese descendants in the world, outside of Lebanon.

The slander being circulated against the summit, is that the final declaration contains support for terrorism. This is simply a lie, as the declaration emphasizes the importance of international cooperation to *combat* terrorism. What provoked the neo-cons' fury, is that the declaration includes a defense of the Palestinians' right to a sovereign state, in coexistence with the State of Israel; its insistence that Israel disband settlements in Palestinian areas, "including those in East Jerusalem," and retreat to its 1967 borders; and its reiteration of the time-honored "right of States and peoples to resist foreign occupation, in accordance with the principles of international legality, and in compliance with International Humanitarian Law." The declaration's denunciation, by name, of the U.S. "Syrian Accountability Act" which unilaterally imposes economic sanctions against Syria in violation of international law, also produced the usual outrage from the usual quarters.

'Irrigating' Peace

The weaknesses of the strategy of these governments is their insistence on skirting the central issue of the global crisis today: the need to *replace* the dying international financial system, before we all go down with it. Instead, the governments call for a few reforms of the international financial system, so that, somehow, they could receive much needed capital for investments in infrastructure and eradication of poverty and hunger.

The South-South economic cooperation discussed is more viable. Substantial attention is being paid to joint projects addressing the scientific and technological problems of agriculture in arid and semi-arid regions, ranging from study of irrigation technologies, to urban sanitation and means to lessen water loss in public water supplies, and desalination.

Trade and investment agreements were discussed among the over 1,200 businessmen from South America and the Arab nations who participated in the business seminar held in parallel to the summit in Brasilia. As several Arab businessmen pointed out, it is ridiculous that there is no direct trade today between the two regions, and, instead, it is all carried out by European firms, and products shipped from one region to the other, go through Europe, adding 45-60 days to the trip.

Cooperation between the two regions is to continue, with high-level officials of the foreign ministries scheduled to meet again in November 2005. A tentative schedule of new meetings was adopted: foreign ministers to be held in 2007, in Argentina (with "extraordinary" foreign ministers meetings to be held, as necessary), and a second South American-Arab summit scheduled for 2008, in Morocco.

As President Lula said in closing, the summit demonstrated that it is possible to construct a world without war, without walls, and without ideological, racist, or prejudiced economic and cultural boundaries.