

Chavez, Merkel shake hands, appear to make up

Politics often mixes and matches the most varied and even antagonistic elements.

However, Friday, the 'family photo' of heads of state and government at the European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean (EU-LAC) summit in Lima showed smiling unity of purpose, despite fireworks from earlier in the week.

To the great disappointment of reporters watching on screens at the media centre, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez could hardly see each other as heads of state and representatives from 60 countries lined up for the group photo.

The dispute had Merkel and Chavez lobbing verbal bombs at each other in recent days, beginning with Merkel's observation to DPA that Chavez was a leftist populist who does not speak for everyone in Latin America. Just hours later, Chavez retorted that Merkel belonged to the political right, 'the same right that supported Hitler - fascism'.

But Friday, the two were kept far enough apart by Peruvian protocol experts, who arranged the summit seating, so that they had no chance to engage in another spat.

And away from the cameras, before and after the formal photo, Merkel and Chavez shook hands twice Friday. The controversial South American leader even told the German chancellor that he did not mean to insult her with his comments, according to sources in the German delegation.

Perhaps to back up his conciliatory gesture, Chavez appeared at the summit wearing a conservative blue suit instead of his usual revolutionary red shirt, which he often displays at summits.

Merkel, smiling profusely and with an eye-catching orange jacket, stood in the front row for the photo at the National Museum in Lima, a couple of places to the left of Peruvian President Alan Garcia, the summit host. Between them was Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who chatted with Garcia for much of the time it took to get the photograph ready.

While Chavez stood in the middle row of leaders on the opposite side, Merkel talked to European Commission President Jose Manuel Durao Barroso, a friend of hers who publicly spoke in her favour in the clash with Chavez.

Another odd couple active in conversation was that of Bolivian President Evo Morales - the first president of indigenous descent in his country's history, who was dressed in the traditional Aymara jacket and Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, in blue. The two South American countries have long-standing territorial disputes.

The leaders stood around chatting for a long time before the final, late arrival - Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

The image-conscious Argentine leader, wearing a two-piece silver trouser suit, smiled shyly when she arrived, as if to offer an apology, and took her place on the other side of Merkel.

Finally, the European, Latin American and Caribbean leaders waved and smiled at the camera.

Sara Barderas (© IANS / India eNews)