

South American leaders launch new alliance Unasur

The representatives of 12 South American countries - including several heads of state - met Friday to launch the region's latest integration mechanism, the Union of South American Nations (Unasur).

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said in Brasilia that a united South America could shift the global balance of power.

'South America, united, will move the board game of power in the world, not for its own benefit, but for everyone's,' Lula said.

'We want to show that Latin America is capable of speaking with a firm and strong voice and of building effective integration,' said Chilean President Michelle Bachelet.

Chile took on the pro tempore presidency of Unasur, in the face of Colombia's refusal to do so.

Unasur, whose creation is still pending ratification from the legislatures of member countries, brings together a joint population of 388 million people in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela, with a regional annual GDP of close to 2 trillion dollars.

Barely a week after the European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean (EU-LAC) summit in Lima failed to show many tangible results, both Bachelet and Lula stressed the need for 'concrete' measures in the framework of Unasur.

'We want to move forward quickly with innovative and long-reach projects in priority areas, like financial and energy integration, the improvement of regional infrastructure and of road and railway connections, the establishment of a vigorous agenda for cooperation in social policies, the strengthening of cooperation in education,' Lula said.

As he opened the summit to launch Unasur, Lula stressed that the region can contribute to overcoming the current world food crisis, as long as it is autonomous.

'When food scarcity threatens social peace in many parts of the world, it is to our region that many turn looking for answers. We are conscious of our global responsibilities, but we will not decline to exercise them in a sovereign way,' the summit host told his peers.

In an attack on the protectionism of developed countries, Lula called upon the leaders of the remaining 11 members of Unasur not to let themselves be fooled 'by the arguments of those who, based on protectionist interests or geopolitical motivations, are annoyed by the growth of (South American) industry and our agriculture.'

Lula stood up for his proposal to establish a South American Defence Council to integrate the region's defence industries and help overcome tensions. The proposal was presented in recent weeks by Brazilian Defence Minister Nelson Jobim but has encountered resistance particularly from Colombia.

Uribe, however, again expressed his opposition to the proposal and argued that the region already

has the Organization of American States (OAS) to overcome conflicts.

Uribe also said an obstacle for such a Defence Council is the resistance of some South American countries, including Brazil, to define the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as 'terrorists'.

Former Ecuadorian president Rodrigo Borja (1988-1992) caused a stir late Thursday when he said that he would not accept the position of Unasur executive secretary.

Analysts note that current tensions in South America are the main challenge for Unasur.

The summit that took place Friday was originally scheduled to be held in March in Colombia, but had to be postponed in the light of the Colombian cross-border raid on Ecuadorian territory on March 1, which killed FARC number-two Raul Reyes and 26 other people.

The incident sparked a severe crisis between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela that has only been partially overcome since although Uribe promised never again to carry out raids beyond his country's borders.

In an effort to contribute to overcoming the crisis, Lula was set to meet Friday with Uribe and also with presidents Hugo Chavez, of Venezuela, and Rafael Correa of Ecuador.

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