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Event report

Social Agenda in Latin America

***With former President of Peru and Director of the Global Center for Development and Democracy,
Alejandro Toledo***

Friday, March 26, 2010, 10am – 11.30am

This Current Affairs event featured former President of Peru Alejandro Toledo, who talked about a new social agenda for the region his center had developed alongside twenty former Latin American presidents. Focused on economic growth, alleviating poverty and building democratic institutions, this agenda was recently presented to the sitting heads of state participating in the 2009 Ibero-American Summit in Portugal.

Address

Dr Toledo began by stating that the vision for his center was to advance democracy and alleviate poverty in developing countries through the promotion of social equality, governance, economic stability and sustained growth. He said that classical development economics had operated under the assumption that by increasing economic growth and the incomes of individuals, one could eradicate the problems of inequality and social exclusion. Dr Toledo said he challenged this view, arguing that high levels of poverty and social exclusion inhibit the achievement of economic growth.

He reminded the audience that in the world today, 2.4 billion people do not have their basic needs met - that includes access to water and sanitation, healthcare and education. In Latin America, a continent of 500 million people, 95 million are living on less than a dollar a day. He stressed that if this situation was not addressed, it would lead to more social discontent, making the region unattractive to foreign investors who are crucial to its growth. In this way, he felt he could convince business in the region to endorse a new social agenda, as they could be shown to profit from its implementation in the long term.

Dr Toledo named education as the best weapon against poverty and social exclusion, and acknowledged that it was the access that he had been able to have to a great education that had led him to where he was today.

He also noted that people have begun to lose faith in democracy in the region. To counter this, Dr Toledo underscored the region's need for strong democratic institutions independent of the judicial system, and called for a renewed attention on political corruption.

In conclusion, turning to the new social agenda his center had proposed, he said that sixteen issue areas had been identified by the group of politicians and experts he had assembled, and 63 policy recommendations had been drafted to tackle these issues.

Question and Answer Session

Having thanked Mr Toledo for his remarks, Dr Coicaud took questions from the audience.

What are your views on climate change and Latin America's capacity to cope?

Dr Toledo said he supported more investment in research and development for clean energy, and stressed that the energy needs of the poor were a particular concern. He underlined the wealth of natural resources Peru had as a country, and expressed his wish that future companies operating in the country would be respectful of these resources, and work to prevent pollution as much as possible.

You mentioned that your center had made 63 policy recommendations. Could you talk about one of them?

Dr Toledo talked passionately about the entrepreneurial skills of the poorest women in the world, and about the successes already achieved through investment in these women in the form of business training and micro-credit initiatives. However, he said that microfinance had still not reached its full potential in Latin America and one of the policy recommendations was to increase awareness and access to micro-credit across the region.

How can states reconcile indigenous visions of democracy with the Western liberal democratic ideal?

Dr Toledo said he did not feel there was a distinction to be made. He expressed his happiness with the increasing participation and visibility of indigenous peoples in formal politics in the region, and hoped that this would continue.