

It's not news if it's good

Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara



The success story of regional integration in Latin America today is seldom heard elsewhere in the world, even as people there experience it daily.

LATIN America has been experiencing a progressive, historic but silent revolution for 10 years now. However, few people in the rest of the world seem aware of it.

The silence is not because these countries had sought to avoid world attention. Rather, the international media dominated by Western news agencies seem to have other priorities.

Often enough significant events and key issues are neglected, bypassed by the saucy, the sensational and the scandalous – all that glitters is not gold, much that matters may never be told.

Without exception, Western news agencies have doggedly promoted the so-called Arab Spring to the point of tedium.

The standard bogeymen of Western storytelling – Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Bashar Assad – are going or gone, so jubilation in Occidental newsrooms may be expected. But there should be limits and other (news) priorities too.

Elsewhere, countries that succeed outside Western norms, dictates and development models may seem unimportant or “politically incorrect”. So they are routinely ignored or underrated.

Worse, the changes said to be wrought by “Arab Spring” uprisings are said to be positive when the exact opposite is happening.

In virtually all these countries, living conditions have deteriorated rather than improved.

But the nine countries of Latin America and the Caribbean that came together in 2004 as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Alba) have been making great strides in every critical area of national development.

Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela have raised standards of living for their people in social, economic and political terms.

Standards in housing, health care, education and employment have risen. These countries have also scored a high 0.721 in the UN Human Development Index, which measures national achievements beyond economic growth and material development.

On Dec 14, 2004, Venezuela and Cuba signed the joint declaration for the establishment of Alba. The alliance is based on humanist principles that place the citizen rather than the state or the corporation at the centre of national policymaking.

This people-centred alliance soon attracted the interest of other countries. Next to join were Bolivia, then Nicaragua, and Dominica, with Ecuador, Antigua and Barbuda as well as St Vincent and the Grenadines joining together – followed by St Lucia.

Grenada and St Kitts and Nevis will be the next members. Other countries attending Alba summits as Participants are Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Paraguay, St Kitts and Nevis, and Uruguay.

With a proud record of a decade's achievements under its belt, Alba marked the passage of its first decade at a forum in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

Ambassador Lourdes Puma Puma of Ecuador explained Alba's background and objectives, including the use of the Sucre (Unified System for Regional Compensation) as a virtual currency in trade among member nations.

There is also a Bank of Alba with regional integration as its core purpose. The bank encourages and offers financial support for projects that promote the social development of all the peoples of the continent regardless of race, religion, politics or other background.

The areas that Alba covers in promoting regional integration are comprehensive and ambitious. There are medical schools and a health sciences university with scholarships, and a pharmaceutical company and a drugs regulatory centre with free access to medication.

There are plans for a new financial architecture and an emphasis on science and technology, without neglecting the arts.

There are also awards and scholarships for literature, culture, research and cinematography.

Alba is also working with the People's Trade Agreement that lobbies for the social, cultural and environmental rights of the region's peoples. It also works with Petrocaribe, an alliance of nations over oil purchases, as well as Mercosur, a regional customs union for advancing free trade and the movement of goods, people and currency.

The guest speaker at the Kuala Lumpur forum was Dr Chandra Muzaffar, president of the International Movement for a Just World.

Dr Chandra identified the significant distinction between Alba and other regional organisations in the way it places priority on the human being, the individual person, in public policymaking.

This humanist aspect of a caring regional society that Alba seeks to build is widely cherished by the national leaders of its member countries. And despite a priority on economic development, Alba is also conscious of environmental needs and emphasises sustainable development.

In pursuing technology, Alba also seeks independence of telecommunications content in programming. Telecoms and broadcasting community services will also be provided to rural and other marginal areas.

Despite their achievements, Alba countries are still developing nations with much to do to achieve full development status. In the meantime basic needs have not been forgotten, with a food fund that has cut malnourishment to under 5% in four Alba countries and eliminated illiteracy in five countries.

More broadly, Alba seeks a more multipolar world that avoids war as a matter of policy. It much prefers human development that addresses the real needs of real people, particularly the most disadvantaged members of society.

Alba is named after the great 18th-19th century Venezuelan leader and liberator Simon Bolivar, hailed as a Latin American independence hero and a regional beacon of progress and development.

Bolivar is the only person in history to have two countries named after him: Bolivia, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Bolivar's goals for Venezuela and its neighbouring countries labouring under the Spanish colonial yoke may be summed up in four basic priorities: a popular and participatory democracy for the people, economic independence for real development, fairer wealth distribution and elimination of corruption.

In the Latin America of his time, Bolivar led territories that included Bolivia, Colombia (then including Panama), Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. As a political and military leader he fought many private and public battles against slavery and for the liberation of his people.

Bolivar died in 1830 at the age of 47. He had paved the way for democracy in many countries in Latin America, but much else remains to be done.

After an era of cruel dictatorships, Latin America is again ready to embrace its history of decency and human achievement. But obstacles remain in the way of Alba countries, particularly when they seek their own way to development.

They prefer a more direct way that impacts positively on the people, particularly the most vulnerable in society such as the poor and the weak. Thus they avoid the customary assistance from powerful transnational institutions that comes with strings, cables and levers attached.

And yet when the UN established the Bretton Woods aid organisations the World Bank and the IMF, they were also supposed to help the poorest without encumbering them. But a problem with institutions is that their practices become institutionalised and worse.

Alba has been established with much goodwill and its achievements have been impressive.

Alba countries deserve support and admiration for their record so far, and encouragement on their promise.

Alba emerged from Venezuela's rejection of the proposed Free Trade Area for the Americas, which would heighten inequality by enhancing the power of transnational corporations at the expense of the poor.

Neither the World Bank nor the IMF may want to call Alba's achievements a "miracle", but they are miraculous nonetheless.

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