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Editor's note: A "dialogue of cultures" to examine the cultures and histories of the peoples of Latin America, the Caribbean and North America was held last month in Caracas, Venezuela. Academy Fellow Hazel Henderson, who participated in the week-long event, notes that the need to end all forms of discrimination and to deepen peoples' understanding of other cultures was now made more urgent by globalization. The practical realism of global interdependence makes it clear that "there is no place for unilateralism in today's interdependent world." The final Declaration calls for a new globalization focusing on eradicating poverty, disease and ignorance while protecting cultural rights, diversity and the planet's ecosystems.

Inter-American Dialogue of Civilizations

By Academy Fellow Hazel Henderson

With a backdrop of this warm bustling city, news of the fall of Kabul, clashing oil producers over falling prices and continued US bombing of Afghanistan, a new dialogue of cultures was launched. Hosted by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and President Khatami of Iran, and sponsored by UNESCO, the Latin American Economic System (SELA) and several other Latin-American think tanks, the dialogue sought to examine the cultures and histories of the peoples of Latin America, the Caribbean and North America.

This week-long dialogue explored the common experience of the European conquest begun 500 years ago by the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English and Dutch colonizers. As the USA pushes for a Free Trade Area of the Americas, it seems fitting to launch such cultural dialogues. One of the many critiques of "free" trade agreements from NAFTA to the WTO is their narrow economic agendas, which have often ridden roughshod over local peoples and their environments.

Among the many fascinating presentations by scholars from all over the hemisphere, Europe, Iran, India and China were the stories of earlier migrations and globalizations. Chief Phil Lane, Jr. of the Four World International Institute, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, spoke of the new trade agreements now being forged between many of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. A Summit will be convened, February, 2002, between "The Peoples of the Eagle and the Peoples of the Condor," representing over eight million indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, in the Commonwealth of Dominica, hosted also by their last 6,000 Carib Peoples. The governments of Canada and Venezuela are also partners in co-hosting this Summit to promote sustainable human prosperity, which will restore many historic trading partnerships disrupted by the European colonizers.

The lingering pain of colonization was expressed by a Venezuelan linguist, "We are the wound, we are the blade, and we are the children of both the victims and their oppressors." Many spoke of the need for more dialogue for healing. An Islamic scholar from Morocco remembered the contributions to Spain of the al-Andalus Arabic culture that has spread its influence there since the eleventh century. From their architectural triumphs in Cordoba, these Muslims were driven out by the Spanish Inquisition and sought refuge in the Americas.

Inevitably, the "war" on terrorism was debated hotly. Former Algerian freedom fighter Ahmed Ben Bella, looking healthy and serene at 85, noted that the French had jailed him for 19 years as a "terrorist." At a private dinner, President Chavez, our host, took great delight in bestowing medals and high honors on both Ahmed Ben Bella and Dr. Ahmad Jalali, the personal representative of Iran's President Khatami. While Ben Bella apologized for speaking in French (the language of Algeria's colonists), Dr. Jalali treated us to a traditional Persian song, to the accompaniment of a Venezuelan classical string quartet.

President Chavez cheerfully shrugged off the opposition by some of Venezuela's large farmers, landowners and business people over his signing of a new land reform bill to allow landless peasants to farm unutilized land. Chavez comes from a rural and mestizo heritage as do many high officials of his administration, including Stanford-trained economist, Frank Bracho, formerly Venezuela's Ambassador to India. A devoted Gandhian, Bracho, author of a dozen books on sustainable development, health and culture, helped organize the Dialogue.

After this week-long exploration, all participants agreed that we had only scratched the surface. In our final Declaration, we called for a continuation and deepening of these dialogues, as a surer way forward for peace. The Western development model was rejected for its "looting and destruction of age-old agrarian cultures and their ecological habitat." The roles of education and media were pinpointed as key. Many reforms were cited as necessary to promote pluralism in education, media and local economies. The need to end all forms of discrimination and to deepen peoples' understanding of other cultures was now made more urgent by globalization. The Declaration calls for a new globalization focusing on eradicating poverty, disease and ignorance while protecting cultural rights, diversity and the planet's ecosystems.

None of this is utopian; indeed such an agenda is part of the practical realism of global interdependence. Violence with today's technology and weapons, whether deployed by yesterday's generals or today's terrorists, is now too catastrophic. Civilians, not fighting forces, now bear the brunt of today's conflict. During World War I, nine soldiers died for every one civilian. Today that ratio is tragically reversed; ten civilians die for each soldier – mostly women and children. Wars must be contained through treaties and a robust international system. The U.N. and its 55 years of treaty building, convening and norm setting is indispensable and must be revitalized. There is no place for unilateralism in today's interdependent world. Indeed, as Ambassador Otto Boye Soto, director of SELA, put it, "a world-wide ethical consensus is now needed. We are all responsible in the search for a better world order." Such consensus declarations include that in 1993 by the World's Parliament of Religions, the Earth Charter launched in the Hague in 2000 and the Prague Declaration of 2001.

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Hazel Henderson participated in the dialogue of Latin American and Caribbean Civilization. Her latest book is ***Beyond Globalization: Shaping a Sustainable Global Economy***. www.hazelhenderson.com. Henderson's Quality of Life Indicators, which has partnered with the US-based Calvert Group of socially-responsible mutual funds, is at www.calvert-henderson.com.