

1989 BARTELS SPEAKER

Carlos Andres Perez

President of Venezuela



Venezuelan president calls for debt reduction to avoid chaos

By Barry Gross, Cornell Chronicle

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Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez Rodriguez said his nation and the rest of Latin America must overcome the burdens of foreign debt, international trade equities and North Americans' negative feeling for their region if they are to improve their lot in the world.

Delivering the 1989 Bartels World Affairs Lecture at Bailey Hall on Sept.28, he called for a reduction – not an elimination – in the debt and in the interest on the debt “to avoid chaos,” adding that “what is at stake is not whether a country will honor its commitments,” but whether it will be able to survive.

Because it believes that it can find no better allies and friends, Venezuela is turning to U.S. Universities to find greater understanding for its problems, Perez said. He added that he foresees greater cooperation between Cornell and Latin America in the future and then proposed that his country and the university work together to train top management for Venezuela.

Details have yet to be worked out, but Senior Provost Robert Barker will be working with Davydd J. Greenwood, director of the Center for International Studies, and the deans to initiate the next steps in the process. Cornell will work directly with Dr. Beatrice Rangel Mantilla, the director general of the Presidential Secretariat in Venezuela

In introducing Perez, Cornell president Frank H. T. Rhodes asserted that having a head of state as a Bartels Fellow was “a wonderful occasion and a memorable one in the history of Cornell.”

Perez had a busy schedule during his 12 hours or so on campus. He had lunch and dinner with some members of the faculty and administration, met with others during the morning and afternoon and held an informal gathering with the Venezuela students in the afternoon, followed by a question-and-answer session with Latin American and other Spanish-speaking students.

Greenwood, CIS director and John S. Knight Professor of International Studies, noted that in his conversations as well as his lecture, Perez talked not only about debt problems but “also a great deal about Latin America’s cultural importance. What’s intriguing about this is his emphasis on the balance

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between the debt problems and the cultural and social importance of Latin America as it will emerge in the 21st Greenwood said.

Cornell's large contingent of alumni from Venezuela "played a crucial role in Perez's visit," he noted. "This is just another example of how valuable our foreign alumni are to the university community."

"I think that one of the most important things that Perez pointed to is the educated North Americans' lack of knowledge about Latin America," said Professor Billie Jean Isbell, director of Latin American Studies Program and an associate professor of anthropology.

"He sees as one of the primary goals of his presidency facilitating the dialogue between North America and our neighbors in Latin America," she continued. "Our Latin American Studies Program as well as other Cornell resources can play an important role in establishing continuous links between our two regions."

Alfredo Fernandez, a graduate student in the master of professional studies program and president of the 30-member Venezuela Student Association here, introduced Perez to the students during their afternoon sessions. The president was presented with a plaque carrying the names of all Venezuela students at Cornell, Fernandez said.

"He talked to us in a very close way, not like a president, but like a friend of ours," the graduate student said. The students met again the following day to discuss the lecture, which they enthusiastically endorsed, and to talk about the meeting with their president, Fernandez added.

Two Cornell alumni, Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels, established the fellowship program in 1984 to foster a broadened world perspective among Cornell students by bringing to the campus people who have distinguished themselves as international public figures.

Perez called the Bartels Fellowship "a priceless encouragement for the hard work of the government." He was elected to his country's presidency in 1973, served from 1974 to 1979 and last year became the first Venezuela to be elected to serve a second term as president.

At a press conference that morning, he asserted: "It is not true that we don't want to pay our debt or want to declare a moratorium"; Venezuela only wants to discuss the terms of payment.

Perez warned during his lecture that if Latin America does not resume economic growth, political instability will grow, putting more than that region at risk.

Venezuela's president cited quotations from President Coolidge and others that disparaged Latin America and its people in asserting that Americans "rarely see the other side of 'Yankee go home' – the traditional scorn" of North Americans for Latin Americans.

During a question-and-answer session immediately following his lecture, Perez discussed the interrelationship of the debt crisis, trade policies and the worldwide drug problem.

He praised President Bush for his policy against drug trafficking, but noted that three months before giving Columbia funds for his fight against drug trafficking, the United States refused to sign an international coffee agreement that would have had a positive effect upon coffee prices and, hence, upon the non-drug-related economy in Columbia and the rest of the region.