

Latin American Governments commend churches, seek further Christian cooperation in working with Children-at-risk

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Christian groups working to improve the plight of children throughout Latin America are hailing an agreement signed by 21 countries at the Ibero-American Summit held November 17-18 in Panama.

“The church has been doing an enormous amount of work for children at risk,” said Alfredo Mora, Director of the Latin America office of Viva Network. “The church is an inexhaustible source of the values which society needs to be able to overcome fundamental problems.” Viva Network is a worldwide Christian agency that helps to coordinate work on behalf of children. The Latin American office of Viva Network, Red Viva, is a partner ministry with the Latin America Mission.

Ibero-American leaders signed a declaration at their Panama meeting outlining a commitment to combat regional child poverty. Child advocates were disappointed, however, that this year’s summit was overshadowed by charges from Cuban President Fidel Castro that a group of U.S.-based exiles was planning to assassinate him during the conference and the political turmoil surrounding the eventual resignation of Peru’s president Alberto Fujimori.

“We have to prioritize development policies for our young people,” Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso told the opening meeting of the summit, centered on the theme “United for Children and Adolescents.”

Advocates and church workers came to the summit prepared. “Christians working with children throughout Latin America met in Quito for the first time last September,” said Katharine Miles, the Network Coordinator for Red Viva. “At that meeting, we developed several declarations that affirmed our work on behalf of children.”

“The first declaration was from the church to the church, challenging pastors and churches throughout the region to go beyond what they are already doing to help meet the needs of children,” she explained.

The group declared that, “We will continue promoting and pushing ourselves for the work with children, because our Biblical mandate, it is part of God’s plan.”

“The second declaration was from the participants to the governments, reminding them that the church is involved with children in Latin America,” Miles added.

Mora said that “it is evident that the evangelical church in Latin America is recognized by governments and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) for the good work they are doing with children. This opens the door for the church to take more responsibility in meeting the challenges that face children.”

Latin American churches need to increase their outreach to children including starting new programs that respond to new problems, he explained.

Mora commented that while churches are pledging to work cooperatively with Latin American governments in addressing children's issues, the governments have warned the churches to be open to greater cooperation. "In the past, Evangelical churches have often worked separately from others," he said.

In working with children, Mora said that Evangelical churches need to keep themselves focused on why they are involved in this type of ministry. "We must remain Gospel centered and not lose our identity while we seek to work with other governmental and secular agencies," he said.

In their document presented to the Latin American presidents, the Christian workers stated, "We would like to coordinate actions with the governments, in an alliance for the children. We want to play an active part in national plans and programs for children that are intelligently, seriously proposed without party flags." The statement continued, "We want to see the interest of the governments for the children expressed in public budgets that are sufficient and worthy, that are invested in holistic programs that have great impact and that don't just offer alternatives for survival but guarantee full exercise of their rights."

Stressing the importance of meeting children's needs, Colombian President Andres Pastrana urged leaders to ensure that the agreement that came out of the summit went "further than mere words." Pastrana added that around 6,000 minors, many under 15, were members of armed groups swept up in Colombia's bloody internal conflict that has killed around 35,000 in the last decade.

Of the 200 million children and teen-agers in Latin American and the Caribbean, half are considered to be living in poverty and 10 percent work, according to UNICEF.

Some countries have passed laws trying to end child labor, but few have made much headway.

In Ecuador, which has 3.7 million children, nearly 900,000 are believed to be working - about half in the capital, where they shine shoes and sell newspapers for pocket change. In Costa Rica, 150,000 children work in the countryside. In Chile - a relatively rich country - 125,000 children are estimated to be working.

But in many cases, child workers inhabit a much darker world - of prostitution, drugs or violence.

In El Salvador, for example, human rights groups estimate that 800 underage girls work in brothels.

And in Brazil, almost 70 percent of deaths among children are blamed on street violence, according to a Brazilian foreign ministry official, Bernardo Pericas Neto.

``Children are the segment of the population most ignored by governments," said sociologist Marcos Gandasegui at the Center for Latin American Studies in Panama City. ``Their rights are respected only in theory."

According to UNICEF figures, barely three-quarters of Latin American and Caribbean children complete fifth grade.

In a final accord dubbed the Panama Declaration, leaders outlined a commitment to improve youngsters' lives, which included extending primary education to all children by 2015, promoting technology in schools, and measures to prevent the spread of AIDS

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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Related web sites:

www.viva.org

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