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The San José Accord flap

Pemex chief Beteta is raising doubts about where his true loyalties lie. The U.S. "strategic reserve" is involved.

In a New York press conference on April 2, Petroleos Mexicanos director Mario Ramón Beteta raised a recriminatory finger, charging that Venezuela had "de facto left Mexico bearing 100 percent of the burden" of the Mexico-Venezuela agreement to subsidize oil sales to nine Central American and Caribbean countries, an agreement known as the San José Accord. This situation, he threatened, could lead Mexico to drop the agreement when it comes up for renewal next August.

Beteta's statements were seen here and in Caracas as a knife in the back to the present joint efforts by Mexico and Venezuela to cool tensions in Central America.

A week before, Mexican Secretary of National Patrimony Francisco Labastida had issued a communiqué announcing the two countries' determination to maintain the agreement. The announcement was made after a meeting between Venezuelan Minister of Energy and Mines Humberto Calderón Berti, Labastida, and Mexican Foreign Minister Bernardo Sepulveda. The latter is closely working with President de la Madrid on delicate diplomacy in Central America. Labastida and Calderón told the press that the agreement had not only good economic effects, but social and political ones.

Signed in San José, Costa Rica in 1980 by the López Portillo and Herrera Campins administrations, the agreement marked the beginning of joint efforts to overcome Central America's political tensions.

According to Venezuelan sources, the two countries are now supplying 180,000 barrels of oil per day under the accord, which stipulates that 70 percent of these deliveries must be paid in cash. The other 30 percent is delivered on the basis of five-year credits at 4 percent annual interest rates. These credits can be extended to 20 years with 2 percent interest if such funds are invested in energy or other natural resource development projects. The accord amounts to an estimated total of $900 million dollars per year, $300 million in the form of credits.

In Beteta's statements for the press as he stepped off the plane from extended consultations in London, he added that if the United States tries to impose a $5 dollar tax per barrel on imported oil, Mexico would lose approximately $2.5 billion dollars per year. Nobody knows where Beteta got this figure, unless he was making the astonishing claim that Mexico, not the U.S. consumer, would pay a U.S. tax.

Whatever the case, Beteta's remarks raised havoc here. Some columnists are calling for Mexican oil exports to the United States to be exempted from this tax if it is approved. Such demands echo recent proposals by former Assistant Secretary of State Meyer Rashish, who drew up a study for David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger in the mid-1970s which proposes turning Mexico and Venezuela into a "strategic petroleum reserve" for the United States.

Beteta made his remarks during ceremonies installing Alfredo Gutiérrez Kirchner as head of the Pemex office in New York and of the company's new offices in Washington. According to a UPI wire circulated here March 25, the Washington office is intended to "establish a new oil relationship with the United States."

The opening of an office in Washington at a time when Pemex is cutting back its budget has led some here to suspect that Mr. Beteta is willing to listen to those forces which, like Rashish, are committed to make Mexico and Venezuela drop the San José Accord and concentrate on supplying a U.S. "strategic oil reserve."

As for Mr. Gutiérrez Kirschner, he is the son-in-law of the head of the Washington-based Inter-American Development Bank, Antonio Ortiz Mena, the dean of Mexico's monetarist economists and the man reputed to be the behind-the-scenes fixer in Mexico's current debt reorganization efforts. As finance minister in the 1960s, Ortiz Mena engineered the "stabilizing development" model which heavily favored import dependency in key production lines to the detriment of Mexico's domestic industrial infrastructure.

Beteta's New York statements quickly shifted to the category of "misstatements" as the de la Madrid government caught up with him. On April 5, the board of directors of Pemex issued a communiqué stating Mexico's commitment to the accord as agreed to by the Calderón-Labastida-Sepulveda meeting, adding that Venezuela has "satisfactorily met its commitment" to the deal. Beteta had to swallow his words by asking the press of clarify that although "Venezuela had not been operating in the accord, now it is doing it." An embarrassed Beteta also later released a statement backing off from his claim that Mexico would lose $2.5 billion if the U.S. tax went through.

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