

Iran President Cancels Trip to Brazil and the US Sighs in Relief

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, canceled a trip to Brazil this week without explanation amid criticism in Teheran from the country's clerical leader and US concern about Iran's growing influence in Latin America.

The state visit of more than 100 officials and businessmen was set to begin this Tuesday, May 5, in Brazilian capital Brasília and focus on expanding the countries' trade, which quadrupled to US\$ 2 billion from 2002 to 2007.

Since coming to power in 2005, Iran's leader has visited Venezuelan President, Washington's fiercest critic in the region, as well as allied governments in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, where US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last week Iran was building a "huge" embassy that undermines US interests in the region.

The trip, including stops in Venezuela and Ecuador, was postponed indefinitely, Ahmadinejad's office said in a statement, without explaining why the plans changed. Roberto Jaguaribe, a political undersecretary at Brazil's foreign ministry, told reporters in Brasília it will be rescheduled for a date after Iran's June 12 elections.

Brazilian president Lula da Silva may visit Iran following an Ahmadinejad trip to Brasilia, he said.

In Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei overturned a decision by Ahmadinejad to merge two state organizations, the Islamic Republic news agency reported. The leader's statement, which comes in advance of June 12 presidential elections, is a public setback for Ahmadinejad.

The Iranian president was invited to Brazil after Brasília for the first time in 17 years sent its foreign minister to Tehran, and following government managed oil corporation Petrobras began exploration in the Iranian waters of the Caspian Sea.

Iran's push (and China, Russia) to expand economic and political ties in Latin America is "disturbing" and not in US interests, Hillary Clinton said May 1st.

Iran and Venezuela last week signed an agreement to deepen military ties after a series of deals that include funding a bilateral development bank with 200 million USD of capital. Iran has also promised investments in the energy and petrochemical industries of Chavez's allies Ecuador and Bolivia.

Brazil's foreign ministry in a diplomatic note expressed "concern" over Ahmadinejad's April 20 speech at a UN racism conference in Geneva, in which he accused the West of using the Holocaust as "pretext" to oppress Palestinians, and said objections would be raised during the visit.

That didn't satisfy Brazil's 100,000-member Jewish community. A few thousand rallied over the weekend in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, carrying banners that read "President Lula: explain to your guest what freedom of expression means."

Marco Aurélio Garcia, Lula da Silva's top foreign policy adviser, downplayed the controversy, telling reporters April 27 that Ahmadinejad's visit "doesn't mean that we share the same opinions." He pointed to Obama's own steps to engage Iran, like delivering a videotaped message and joining European allies in talks over its nuclear program, which drew UN sanctions in 2006.

US Reaction

The US State Department would not comment on the invitation. A spokesperson said in a statement, before the visit was postponed, that it was a country's sovereign decision whether to pursue ties with Iran, and that those who did should push Iran to meet its international obligations.

"I can't think of any national interest that justifies such a loss of credibility," said Rubens Ricúpero, who was Brazil's ambassador to the U.S. from 1991-1993. "There's no point being defiant just to prove your independence."

Last week United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Washington would try to reverse the "disturbing trend" of growing Chinese, Iranian and Russian influence in Latin America.

Mottaki who was in Brazil last March, said that President Ahmadinejad's visit to Brazil includes a delegation of 110 representatives from 65 Iranian companies hopeful to increase bilateral trade and investments.

In Washington last week Hillary Clinton was quoted stating that "If you look at the gains, particularly in Latin America, that Iran is making and China is making, it's quite disturbing."

Ms. Clinton explicitly blamed former US president George Bush for what she claimed as "Iran and China's gains" in the region." The Bush administration policy of "isolating leaders who have led the opposition to US policies in Central and Latin America has failed and marginalized Washington's interests," she said.

"I don't think in today's world, where it's a multi-polar world, where we are competing for attention and relationships with the Russians, the Chinese, the Iranians, that it's in our interest to turn our backs on our own hemisphere."

"If you look at the gains, particularly in Latin America, that Iran is making, that China is making, it's quite disturbing," the chief US diplomat said. "They're building very strong economic and political connections with a lot of these leaders. I don't think that it's in our interests," Clinton said.

Mrs. Clinton also admitted Washington, which has also made overtures to the Castro dynasty in Cuba, was still exploring how to deal with Venezuelan president Chavez, Nicaraguan President Daniel Noriega, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and Bolivian President Evo Morales.

Earlier last month, the United States welcomed Venezuela's move to restore full diplomatic ties between the two countries - broken in September - by returning its ambassador to Washington.

President Obama has said he wants to see his gestures to Havana returned in the form of releasing political prisoners, expanding human rights and democratic reforms. Clinton acknowledged the United States stands alone in the region with its policy toward Cuba.

"Were facing an almost united front against the United States regarding Cuba," she said. "Every country, even those with whom we are closest, is just saying, 'You've got to change, you can't keep doing what you are doing.'"

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