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## Canada can play lead role in OAS

By STEVE LEE

There will be many changes at play when 35 foreign ministers, their officials, journalists and protesters gather in Windsor next week for the Organization of American States (OAS) general assembly.

Changes include protests against globalization and a growing role for citizens and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in international affairs. Change also includes a larger role for Canada in the hemisphere and a need to link trade interests with other public-policy objectives.

Canada should seize this moment as an opportunity.

Street protests at recent international meetings have drawn attention to three divisions in the international system.

There is a divide between industrialized northern societies and the southern poor over participation in the global economy, including prosperity and access to education, information and new technology. With falling aid budgets and a deepening wealth gap, northern societies are seen as either unwilling or incapable of addressing this divide.

There is a second divide between many governments of the north and governments of the south over the legitimacy and role of NGOs in public affairs and international relations. Some southern governments see environmentalists and labour as self-interested agents attempting to maintain the division of wealth between north and south. Or, as Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo said, "trying to save the developing world from development."

The third divide is within northern societies like Canada and the United States, a gap between those who prosper in the new global economy and those who are left out, marginalized or just overwhelmingly anxious about their futures and the fate of their communities.

In preparation for Windsor, Canadians already have played an important role in helping to shape Canada's policy response to these divisions and in helping to shape the conference agenda. At Windsor, Canada will promote human security in the hemisphere, "putting people first" by promoting attention to democracy, human rights and indigenous peoples and creating conditions for prosperity for all.

This is a remarkable moment of Canadian leadership. Canada has brought a focus to people and to human security in hemispheric affairs.

"The major accomplishment for Canada is that the OAS as an institution accepts the human security agenda," according to George Haynal, assistant deputy minister for the

Americas. After 10 years with Canada as a member, "It's an ideological breakthrough."

In round tables organized by the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development across the country, Canadians have provided advice and policy ideas.

"The number of elections is no longer considered a sufficient indicator of a consolidated democracy," said Max Cameron of the University of British Columbia. "Elections do not necessarily produce democratic leaders. On the contrary, they may lead to cementing an authoritarian regime. While institutions and procedures are important, more attention should be paid to what goes on inside them and what they produce."

"Economic, social and cultural rights are as important for any democracy as political rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association and electoral rights," said Judith Weiss of Mount Allison University in Halifax.

At a round table in Ottawa, participants emphasized the need for corporate codes of conduct within trade agreements.

Sheila Katz of the Canadian Labour Congress said that workers in Latin America have heard the promises of prosperity from free trade. However, the spread of free markets often has led to enhanced social and

economic inequality, stagnant wages and unemployment.

During the Winnipeg round table, First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine and other indigenous leaders met with Marc Lortie, the Prime Minister's special representative for the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec city. This round table has led to plans for a Canada-sponsored gathering of indigenous leaders throughout the hemisphere.

Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy is proposing a renewal of the Inter-American Indian Institute. "Our hope is to see a proposal at Windsor for a renewed institute that could help respond to the real needs of indigenous peoples."

From the 10 round tables some common themes emerged:

- Democracy is fundamental to everything and needs to be strengthened in some countries.
- Human rights are essential in building viable democracies.
- Democracy in the region must include women, children, indigenous peoples and small states.
- Citizens throughout the Americas need access to services such as education, health and the digital world of new technologies.
- Canada should take the lead in ensuring that the free trade negotiation process is open, transparent, and politically accountable to maximize the

involvement of civil society and contribute to increased democratization in the hemisphere.

This partnership in shaping the agenda for Windsor and identifying issues for Canadian foreign-policy attention is key to Canada's success as the hemispheric host in the coming year and can be a model for others.

"We ignore civil society at our peril," Axworthy says. That the minister and Canadians share common concerns is no accident. They are born of the same Canadian values: that fuelled discussion at the Americas round tables.

As official and informal events unfold in Windsor, it will be useful to keep in mind the important leadership role Canada plays, including leadership involving citizens in public policy.

It may be useful to remember as well that the divisions and the forces of change around globalization, trade policy and citizen participation will continue to take shape beyond Windsor.

*Steve Lee is the executive director of the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development which helps Canadians and others outside governments to contribute to foreign policy development. The OAS meeting in Windsor runs from June 4 to 6.*



REUTERS FILE PHOTO

**SEATTLE COMING TO WINDSOR?** Protests are possible when the Organization of American States meets in Windsor next week. Street demonstrations and arrests, above, were a feature of the World Trade Organization meeting last year in Seattle.