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Paraguay: Political And Economic Conditions And U.S. Relations



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Synopsis

Paraguay, a landlocked nation in the center of South America, has friendly relations with the United States and has been a traditional ally. Paraguay's turbulent political history and tradition of political authoritarianism have resulted in international isolation that the country is seeking to overcome. The population of 6.9 million people is one of the most homogeneous mestizo populations in the hemisphere. Paraguay's largely agrarian economy has grown well in recent years on the strength of global commodity prices. However, in 2009, a severe drought and the impact of the global economic recession sharply reduced growth, but a recovery is anticipated in 2010. The April 2008 election of Fernando Lugo, a former Roman Catholic bishop and leader of the Patriotic Alliance for Change, as President ended 61 years of one-party rule by the still-dominant Colorado Party. The United States has encouraged the strengthening of democracy in Paraguay, and hailed the peaceful transition of power. Known as the "bishop of the poor" after a decade of work in an impoverished rural diocese, Lugo pledged to introduce land and agrarian reform, improve education and health services to better serve Paraguay's poor majority, and combat widespread corruption. Yet, as he entered his second year in office, there were more frequent calls for his impeachment. His loose electoral alliance had splintered, and he faced broad opposition in the opposition-dominated Paraguayan Congress that had stymied his center-left agenda at nearly every turn. At the end of 2009, polls indicated that Lugo had one of the lowest popularity ratings of any leader in the region. The United States and Paraguay cooperate in a number of areas but especially in the fight against corruption, and on anti-drug, counterterrorism and anti-smuggling initiatives. In 2006 and 2009, the United States and Paraguay signed two Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold agreements totaling more than \$60 million dollars to combat corruption and strengthen the rule of law. Paraguay is a major transit country for cocaine and produces the largest crop of marijuana in South America. The United States remains concerned about illegal activities in the loosely controlled tri-border region with neighboring Brazil and Argentina, such as money-laundering, drugs and arms trafficking, and trade in counterfeit and contraband goods. The 111th Congress has expressed growing interest in Paraguay. In April 2009, two bills were introduced entitled the "U.S.-Paraguay Partnership Act of 2009" (H.R. 1837 and S. 780). On September 14, 2009, the ATPDEA Expansion and Extension Act of 2009 (S. 1665) was introduced in the Senate. Each of these bills would amend the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (Title XXXI of the Trade Act of 2002, P.L. 107-210) to extend unilateral trade preferences to Paraguay. Indicating additional interest in Paraguay, the House Democratic Partnership (formerly the House Democratic Assistance Commission) made a study trip to

Paraguay in August 2009. Members of the eight-member delegation had discussions with the bicameral Congress and the executive about the need to work together to support democracy in Paraguay.

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