

Chamber of the Americas Gives Honduras a Boost

by Dr. David Conde, *La Voz*

Gil Cisneros has worked tirelessly for decades for the inclusion of Latin America in the U.S. priorities for trade and investment. My first experiences with his efforts involved Gov. Owens' trade missions to Mexico in 1999 and 2000.

At that time, Cisneros was the Executive Director of the U.S.-Mexico Chamber of Commerce. Since then, he has moved over to direct the Chamber of the Americas, which provides a wider field for his work.

A constant stream of executive breakfasts and conferences held by the Chamber has put a variety of opportunities on the table for U.S. companies and individuals wanting to do business in Mexico, Central and South America. Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela, Guatemala and Mexico among others are brought together with our buyers and sellers to begin the trading and investment process and help prosperity win out.

That was the case on Monday, November 8, when the Chamber of the Americas in partnership with Metropolitan State College of Denver and others including Mayor of Denver and Governor-elect John Hickenlooper hosted a Honduran delegation that came to town to find partners for its growing economy. This time around however, the delegation was led by Porfirio José (Pepe) Lobo López, president of the country.

Honduras is one of the major bastions of the Mayan civilization that flourished between 400 and 900 A.D. Its ancient city Copán located on its eastern border together with Tikal in Guatemala and Palenque in southern Mexico, are considered the most important examples of the Classic Maya.

Since its independence, Honduras has suffered the battering of a region that stands between two continents. For example, the United States established a military presence in the 1980s to support "the Contra guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan government."

Also, hurricanes have dealt devastating blows to the Honduran economy and infrastructure. Among them is Hurricane Fifi in 1974 that destroyed much in the northern coast and Mitch that in 1998, claimed 70 percent of the crops and 80 percent of the country's infrastructure.

The latest significant mishap that Honduras has had to overcome is the President

Manuel Zelaya episode. Zelaya won the 2005 presidential election over now President Lobo.

He served most of his term, but was not allowed to finish because in 2009 he wanted to hold a national referendum seeking public approval for a constitutional convention that would include changes in term limits to allow him to run again. Zelaya insisted on the referendum even after the country's Supreme Court declared it illegal.

The result was a constitutional crisis that saw Zelaya arrested and exiled to Costa Rica. Roberto Micheletti, "the former President of the Honduran Congress and a member of the same party as Zelaya, was sworn in as president by the National Congress," to finish the term.

Lobo was elected president in fall 2009 and assumed office in January 2010. His message of freedom and reconciliation resonated with the public.

His presentation to the Denver audience was frank and sincere. The democratic process, which has been in place since civilian rule and established in 1979, is working and the country is open for business opportunities and investment.

The appearance of President Lobo in Denver and his presentation to the community says a lot about Honduran optimism and interest in making things better for a country that has seen so much. Also, Cisneros and his colleagues have done well and gone far in making that presentation a reality.