Solidifying ties with African and Latin American allies

Although President Chen Shui-bian was forced to cut short his diplomatic tour to Africa and Latin America because of his desire to be close to the people of Taiwan following Typhoon Bilis, the consensus was that his six-nation journey had greatly strengthened the ROC’s presence in the international community.

It was the first time that an ROC president had ever visited the three African nations of Burkina Faso, The Gambia and Chad. Indeed, it was the first time that any Asian head of state had stepped upon Gambian soil. In Central America, Chen visited Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and he also spent several days in the Dominican Republic. In each country he signed joint communiqués designed to enhance bilateral relations, and he endured a hectic pace as he inspected factories, vocational centers and industrial processing zones made possible by Taiwanese investment.

Everywhere he went, President Chen Shui-bian was greeted enthusiastically by local citizens and members of the media eager to chronicle the achievements on this diplomatic tour.
As he set out on his diplomatic journey on August 13th, the president stressed the determination of the ROC to become an integral part of the international community, despite attempts to isolate it. “Unless the Republic of China is to disappear from the face of the earth,” he said, “it has to reach out.” He reminded the citizens of their responsibility to assist the less developed nations around the world, pointing to the fact that Taiwan itself had benefited from foreign aid in the early days of its struggle to transform itself into a powerful economic and trading entity. An indication of the new government’s commitment to reaching out to developing nations may be gleaned from the comments Chen made as he reminded the people about the relatively low level of humanitarian aid being disbursed by the ROC; an annual amount that accounts for only 0.13 percent of the gross national product. That, he pointed out, is well below the average of 0.24 percent of GNP (OECD statistics) offered by the major developed countries.

Chen’s arrival in the Dominican Republic allowed him to attend the inauguration of newly elected President Hipolito Mejia. The Dominican Republic and the ROC have maintained a close relationship since signing a friendship treaty in 1940, and the new president, who has visited Taiwan more than 20 times, vowed to make his country “the ROC’s staunchest ally in Latin America.” During his stay in the Dominican Republic, Chen met with various delegations from other ROC allies in the region.
The trip to Nicaragua was an occasion for signing a joint communiqué with President Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo and for delivering an address to the Nicaraguan parliament. In the past few years this nation has been one of the strongest supporters of the ROC’s bid to rejoin organizations such as the World Health Organization and, ultimately, the United Nations.

In Costa Rica, which Chen had last visited 16 years ago as a Taipei City councilor, he reaffirmed to President Miguel Angel Rodríguez Echeverria the ROC’s commitment to strengthening ties and establishing a mechanism for strategic cooperation. He also visited garment factories, a processing zone, an orchid farm and a vocational training center, all of which had been set up with the help of the ROC government and Taiwan businesspeople. Ties with Costa Rica have been strong since 1944, when the allies entered into a friendship agreement, and the history of business cooperation is impressive.

His arrival in The Gambia was greeted jubilantly, with thousands of citizens lining the route from the airport to the capital. Important communiqués were signed, and Chen reassured President Yahya Jammeh that the new ROC administration would honor the existing cooperative agreements with The Gambia. The heads of state visited a vegetable, rice and fruit farm developed by ROC technical missions, and President Jammeh announced that, effectively immediately, people holding ROC passports would no longer need visas for stays of up to 90 days in his nation.

In Burkina Faso, Chen was honored by being asked to deliver a speech in parliament. Here, as elsewhere throughout his overseas trip, the president proved himself to be a sensitive and adroit diplomat as he shared experiences with President Blaise Campaoré and his top officials. The ROC president declared that he was proud the “Taiwan Experience” was being carried out in the Bagré region.

Last on the demanding schedule, the visit to Chad had to be curtailed because of President Chen’s concern about conditions at home following Typhoon Bilis, which blasted across the island on August 22nd and 23rd. Nevertheless, he had an opportunity to meet with President Idriss Deby and to sign a joint communiqué on the enhancement of bilateral relations. He also visited the ROC’s medical service mission, which has been operating valiantly in this African nation.

The message of Chen, who was described by President Rodriguez of Costa Rica as one of Asia’s “third wave” democratic leaders, was clear: that he respects stability and the continuity of foreign policy, that his government is caring, and that consequently humanitarian concerns in these and other parts of the globe are high on the diplomatic agenda.
The diplomatic tour was but the initial step in a series of activities aimed at reinforcing the ROC’s ties with its allies. According to foreign ministry officials, the plan is to organize a number of overseas trips by President Chen and Vice President Lu to Central America, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. Prior to his inauguration, Chen emphasized that he would be stepping up exchanges with Europe and working hard on improving relations with the European Union.

In response to questions posed at a press conference on August 28th, the hundredth day of the new administration, the president declared that the trip had been “comforting in some ways and touching in others.” He admitted that for many people, including himself, the tour had provided an opportunity for adjusting or changing their concepts or ways of thinking. It was the hope of his administration, he said, to make a greater effort to understand these friendly countries; each of which, though it may be small, is great in its own way.

“When I stood on the rostrum at national airports with leaders of friendly nations and listened to the national anthem of the Republic of China played by their bands, I was deeply moved and even stirred with pride. [I felt] the importance of our country, the importance of our country’s being recognized, and the importance of the ROC’s international profile.” He spoke of putting Taiwan on the world stage so that “the whole world [can] see the Republic of China and the democratic achievements and economic prosperity resulting from several decades of effort by the 23 million people of Taiwan. We want to offer humanitarian assistance and compassion to the world; that is both our responsibility and our privilege.”

We acknowledge with thanks the information on President Chen Shui-bian’s tour provided by the Taipei Journal, in particular the excellent articles written by Myra Lu.