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By Marcos Salgado

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Petro and Maduro

Historic meeting in Caracas



Sources: CLAE

The Miraflores Palace, the seat of government in Caracas, was the scene of a highly anticipated meeting, that of the presidents of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, and Colombia, Gustavo Petro.

In a two-hour private meeting, the leaders even agreed to restore the coordination of intelligence agencies of the two countries to attack the action of armed gangs on the border.

According to Petro, that area is now in the hands of mafias, and he agreed with Maduro that it must be "completely recovered."

It was the first meeting between Venezuelan and Colombian leaders in six years. Between Caracas and Bogotá there are 1,400 kilometers, which Petro flew over to meet his counterpart Nicolás Maduro and try to bridge that gap. "Separating two neighboring

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nations is a suicidal adventure," Petro said, shortly after shaking hands with Maduro for the first time officially. That two neighboring countries do not speak to each other is "unnatural," Petro told the cameras, at the end of the visit.

"Colombia and Venezuela, if we have anything, it is a common destiny," said Maduro, who stressed that relations between Caracas and Bogotá should always be marked by "brotherhood and understanding." "Governments are obliged, in the diversity of our visions, to always work for the common good," he added.

The separation "happened at a bad time," quoted Petro, who is now trying to shorten distances. During lunch and the meeting, the Colombian offered to mediate in the dialogues between the Government and the opposition, a thorny issue, but in which news is expected soon.

Maduro commented that they talked about commercial and economic relations, and the "new steps" that they will take "towards a total and assured opening of the borders between Colombia and Venezuela," as well as "the security and proper and corresponding operation" of the border area.

The summit, which was attended by senior officials from both countries, was key to what is coming, such as Venezuela returning to the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) and the recovery of the border, which would be fully opened on January 1, as well as the joint agreement on the defense of the Amazon at COP27 that will take place next week in Egypt.

Petro said that at the meeting they talked about internal problems even the most complex situations in the world: "It is unhistoric for Colombia and Venezuela to separate. It once happened, but it should not happen again because blood ties unite us," said the Colombian president. "We are going to live a new phase that must generate a true American integration in practice, in fact," he added.

"We must link ourselves to the people and be able to light a new century to shout democracy and freedom, that is our invitation (...) Thank you for these hours and we will continue in these discussions, debates and meetings of a brotherhood that should never have been broken": this is how Petro concluded his visit to Caracas, which according to his host, was fruitful", "auspicious" and "with good results".

Tensions

Relations began to strain during the Government of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), with the departure of many Colombian companies and the nationalization of others; Juan Manuel

Santos (2010-2018) tried to recompose them, but his public denunciations of irregularities in Maduro's election in 2013 served to maintain suspicion in Caracas.

The last presidential meeting had been in August 2016 between President Maduro, in his first term, and President Juan Manuel Santos. But more than an official visit, it was only a working meeting to reach agreements on the complex common border, which never came to an end.

Everything went wrong definitively when Iván Duque arrived at the Casa de Nariño. Duque recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as "interim president" in 2019 and made Colombia the first critic of Maduro's government and one of the headquarters of Venezuela's radical opposition. Relations were severed and control was tightened on a 2,219-kilometer border, where millions of people move. From Colombia came attempts at irruption, mercenaries, coup attempts and assassination, according to a script written in Washington in the Trump administration.

A tension that did not stop growing and that was several times about to escalate in the direct military field. The arrival of Petro to the presidency in Colombia marks the failure of this policy of conspiracy and confrontation.

Petro also said that this meeting has to contribute towards real regional integration, not on paper. And he asked Maduro that Venezuela return to the inter-American human rights system and also to the Andean community of nations. The latter, Maduro said, would be practically agreed.

The arrival of Lula to the presidency in Brazil from January will give a new tone to the relationship between neighbors. There is even talk in Caracas of a meeting between the three, Lula, Petro and Maduro, next year.

It is clear that for the continent and especially for the besieged Venezuela are very good news. As President Petro said yesterday in Caracas, now we must ensure that this integration is not only on paper, and is a firewall against the pretensions of the United States to regain control in the continent.

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