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## President Bush Trade Mission

by LADB Staff

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Fresh from a battering in Argentina, US President George W. Bush arrived in Panama Nov. 6, last stop on a Latin America tour that included a brief stay in Brazil. His 20-hour stay in Panama was designed to put the best face possible on a trade mission called "disastrous" in a New York Times editorial. The moments spent with Panama's President Martin Torrijos could not be so characterized, but were clearly less than might have been hoped for.

Bush's main objective for the trip was Mar del Plata, Argentina, and an appearance at the 34-nation IV Summit of the Americas. His mission: convince Latin America to restart the process leading to a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The trade scheme first surfaced in 1994 with the idea that the Americas could become the world's largest trading block, under which some US\$800 million in trade would take place annually.

Things went badly for Bush, both at the summit and in the streets. This US president is the most widely reviled, least popular US president, perhaps ever, in Latin America, according to numerous polls and reports. As thousands of citizens protested against him in Mar del Plata, he was soundly rebuffed in his FTAA efforts. The largest economies refused his invitation, preferring to await the outcome of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha-round meetings in December before even considering restarting the FTAA.

Bush left the summit empty handed and in a hurry, in order, said reports, to avoid any confrontation with Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who is riding a wave of popular support in the region and who has a competing plan for development, unification, and trade, the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas (ALBA). The US president left before negotiations were finished, adding to the perception that he had been thoroughly beaten.

### *Strike two and a gaffe in Brazil*

His next stop was Brasilia, for meetings with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who took the lead in scuttling the FTAA at Mar del Plata. He fared no better there. As in Argentina, his presence brought angry protests. Demonstrators along his motorcade route chanted, "Bush fascist, you are a terrorist," and burned him in effigy. He did himself no good in saying during a joint appearance with Lula, "We are the two largest democracies in the world, and, therefore, we have obligations to work together for peace and prosperity."

The international press exploited the gaffe. India is the largest democracy in the world. After a two-hour meeting with Lula, Bush admitted he was unable to persuade him to go his way on trade. "He has got to be convinced," said the US president of the Brazilian, "just like the people of America have to be convinced, that a trade agreement of the Americas is good for jobs, it's good for quality of

life." Bush used the Brazilian stage to inveigh against Chavez, something he avoided in Argentina, where the Venezuelan was available to respond and where Chavez spoke harshly of Bush.

In veiled terms, Bush warned against those who seek to "roll back the democratic progress of the past two decades by playing to fear, pitting neighbor against neighbor, and blaming others for their own failures to provide for their people."

Lula was not about to gamble with his country's lifeblood, agricultural exports. "We agree that the reduction, with a view toward the elimination, of agricultural subsidies will be a key to balance," he said. The US is locked into a regime of subsidies with the European Union (EU) and Japan, and has repeatedly stated that reductions depend on those countries, not on the needs of its prospective trading partners. What little help the US position got during the trip came from Mexico and Panama.

Mexican President Vicente Fox made a pitch for circumventing the dissenting countries and trying to create a FTAA with any of the 29 remaining countries that cared to sign on, but the proposal fell flat. Panama's contributions were twofold. First, it was Panama that introduced the FTAA proposal into the agenda. The summit was supposed to address job creation. Second, since Panama and the US have been negotiating on a trade deal (see NotiCen, 2004-07-22), Bush could stop over there and come home with something to show for the trip.

But things did not go smoothly in Panama either, beginning with Bush's arrival under unprecedented security measures, an arrival the size of an invasion. Bush brought an entourage of 700 people; his plane touched down accompanied by F-16 fighter planes and helicopters. Citizens were outraged when key parts of Panama City were shut down, people and cars were subjected to searches and inspections, and "vehicular chaos" ensued. The presidential route was protected with steel fencing two meters high. The measures were as much designed to shield Bush from organized protests as to ensure his security.

Hundreds of police surrounded all protest areas, including the Universidad de Panama, plazas throughout the city, and the US Embassy, the target site for several protesting groups. Police forced thousands of nonprotesting citizens on their way to work to walk several blocks out of their way to get to their jobs. Where protests were planned, police interrogated citizens and demanded to see permits. "This is intimidation. The government has coordinated with all the security establishments to neutralize the protests," said Carlos Dubais, an organizer of a student protest.

In El Chorrillo, a barrio destroyed in 1989 by the President George H.W. Bush-ordered invasion that brought down the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega (1983-1989), residents burned tires and hoisted placards demanding justice from the US. "I remember that night 16 years ago," said Genarina de Leon. "They told us that we had to come out of our houses, and I had to jump with my seven children in the middle of the night." El Chorrillo residents have been demanding recompense for their losses and for the deaths of loved ones for years. Despite the rage, there was no violence. The people burned a Bush effigy in front of a church. Authorities declared Nov. 7 a holiday to keep people away from public buildings.

In the end, a zone of several kilometers within the city was turned into a ghost town overflowed by helicopters to accommodate the visit. Angry Panamanians protested where they could, peacefully. The Frente Nacional por la Defensa de los Derechos Economicos y Sociales (FRENADESOS) held a "Jornada patriótica de repudio a la presencia de George Bush en Panama," at which a manifesto was read against the president "who arrives invited by the government of Martin Torrijos to offer him a setting in which he can create international propaganda. His visit joins the interests of sectors of the dominant class to concretize a free-trade agreement with the US and promote widening the Panama Canal with gringo participation." This was in reference to aspects of the trade negotiations that could give the US preference in bids on constructing an expanded canal.

Other irksome canal-related aspects of a trade treaty include China's purchase of rights to control some facilities. The manifesto further charged that Bush "will press to involve our country more in his warlike policy and harassment of neighbor nations like Cuba and Venezuela." International coverage of the Bush-Torrijos meeting lent credence to the charge of creating international propaganda, at least for US consumption.

Bush emphasized that the countries were "close to coming to an agreement" on a trade deal, although he had to acknowledge that he would face difficulty getting a pact through his Congress, especially after the narrowly passed cliffhanger that ratified the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), to which Panama is not party. Bush used the Panamanian platform to claim that, at Mar del Plata, "twenty-nine nations said loud and clear, 'It's important for us to continue to advance a trade agenda that is positive for the people of this hemisphere.'" The assertion overstated the enthusiasm, and depends for its veracity on the meaning of the word "positive."

### *Torrijos has other concerns*

At a joint news conference, Torrijos appeared to be more interested in having the US clean up unexploded ordnance left by US forces than in trade, and his statement regarding trade was guarded. "We've discussed the advantages and opportunities offered by free trade. And we've reviewed our agenda, starting with this past April's visit, when I had the opportunity to visit President Bush in Washington."

After a few words about the strength of the relationship, Torrijos changed the subject. "There will not always be disagreement, such as the unexploded-ordnance issue, but there will always be frankness, sincerity between us so that we can discuss as friends the various viewpoints of our countries," he said. Torrijos was reportedly lobbied heavily by several groups to push Bush to clean up the contaminated zones, which also contain chemical weapons. Also missing from the statement was the reported fact that the trade agreement is stalled on precisely the same issue that torpedoed the FTAA talks, agricultural subsidies.

Bush declined to take responsibility for the explosives. He said he believed Washington had met its obligations under the 1977 Panama Canal treaties that returned the waterway to Panama. "There is a difference of opinion," said Bush. "And so we have a disagreement that we will continue to discuss."

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