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## **Argentina, Bolivia Sign Agreement on Immigrants**

*by LADB Staff*

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In mid-February, Argentina and Bolivia signed an immigration pact that will give legal residence and work permits to 700,000 Bolivians living illegally in Argentina. The agreement received mixed reviews in Argentina, where unemployment remains high. The agreement was signed Feb. 16 by Argentine Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella and his Bolivian counterpart Javier Murillo de la Rocha. Also attending the ceremony were the presidents of both countries.

Bolivian President Hugo Banzer was in Argentina for a four-day visit accompanied by members of his Cabinet. Banzer also discussed with Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem Bolivia's full integration into the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Bolivia and Chile are associate members.

The two countries also signed pacts on energy integration, border development, and construction of two international bridges. The immigration agreement was considered the most important accord, and the most controversial. Argentina has received more than 2 million immigrants in the last decade, the largest wave of immigrants to enter the country since the turn of the century. Most come from countries sharing a common border with Argentina, with the largest number from Bolivia, where poverty often drives people across the border in search of work.

Partly because of their large numbers, Bolivians living in Argentina have been the target of anti-immigrant sentiment among Argentines, who blame them for the high unemployment rate, which remains above 16%. The Bolivians, however, often work at low-paying jobs that many Argentines will not take, and they are frequently exploited because of their illegal status. In March 1993, police discovered 40 Bolivian families working in slave-like conditions in a Buenos Aires suburb.

In many cases, the sweatshops in which the immigrants work are foreign owned. Argentina's secretary of population, Aldo Carreras, said the agreement will require Bolivians to register with the Direccion Nacional de Migraciones to receive their legal residency and work permits. The agreement does not set a limit for immigrants to legalize the stay in Argentina. (Sources: Latinamerica Press, 02/03/94; Reuter, 02/16/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/16/98, 02/17/98; BBC News, 02/17/98)

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