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Argentina, Britain Agree on Flights to Malvinas Islands

by LADB Staff

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Argentina and Great Britain agreed July 14 to permit Argentine citizens to visit the Malvinas/Falkland Islands and to construct a memorial to Argentine soldiers killed in the 1982 war between the two countries. Historic three-way talks began in London in May, when representatives of the British government and islanders met with Argentine officials in the first contact since the 1982 war.

Negotiators met for another round of talks in New York on July 2 on issues including the resumption of flights from Chile and the ban on Argentines visiting the islands. Argentine Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook signed the agreement in London. The two countries agreed to cooperate on managing and preserving fish stocks around the South Atlantic islands, 500 km east of Argentina.

Cook said a monument to Argentines killed during the conflict will be built but that no Argentine flag would be hoisted on any part of the island. The agreement demonstrates improved relations between Britain and Argentina. Di Tella said in London it is "the beginning of an element of trust."

Di Tella and Anthony Lloyd, Foreign Ministry undersecretary, met again to discuss implementing the recent agreements when Lloyd made a two-day visit to Argentina July 19-20. "We are determined to move forward, building this trust," said Lloyd. "We are very pleased with this agreement." He said, however, that signing the agreement would not erase the damaging effects of the war from the minds of the islanders.

War wounds still fresh for islanders

The early Argentine republic kept a token military force on the islands that it claimed, but it was expelled by British forces in the 1830s. In 1982 Argentina's military rulers sent troops to the Malvinas to enforce its claim of sovereignty, igniting a 10-week war. Britain won the war in which 1,000 soldiers, 652 of them Argentine, died.

Chile at the time ruled by military dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) was the only Latin American nation to back Britain during the war, and reportedly allowed the country to be used as a base for British Special Air Service operations and for launching spy flights.

After Pinochet stepped down in 1990, the Concertacion governments of Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) and Eduardo Frei backed Argentina's claims of sovereignty over the islands. Democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983 and diplomatic relations with Britain were restored in 1990. About 2,400 people live on the islands. Most are shepherders of English and Scottish descent. The staunchly pro-British islanders have banned visits by Argentine passport-holders and all direct flights to Argentina since 1982. They have made exceptions only for visits by relatives of fallen Argentine soldiers.

Flights beneficial to Argentines and islanders

The flights by Chilean airline LanChile were suspended earlier this year following Britain's arrest of Pinochet (see NotiSur, 1999-04-23, 1999-06-11). Since Chile stopped the flights, the islanders' isolation has grown, and Britain has urged them to improve relations with Argentina. A recent poll on the islands by local business leaders showed most people would accept visits by Argentines but were opposed to direct flights. Some inhabitants, however, are strongly opposed to restoring any ties with Argentina.

In Port Stanley on July 11, about 300 people protested the talks, burning an Argentine flag. Many islanders are still angry with the Argentines for the 1982 invasion and for planting land mines that threaten inhabitants. British military officers say they hope to reach an agreement with the Argentine military for a joint effort to remove the mines. Chilean Foreign Minister Juan Gabriel Valdes said in Argentina on July 19 that flights from Chile to the islands will resume immediately and stopovers in Argentina will begin Oct. 16.

The parents of soldiers who died in the conflict will be the first Argentines to travel to the islands. Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem said he hopes to be among the first travelers. President Menem touts agreement Menem took office in 1989 promising to win back the islands "with blood and fire." Despite the rhetoric, he restored diplomatic ties with Britain, encouraged an expansion in trade, visited Queen Elizabeth in 1998, and hosted Prince Charles this year.

Menem called the agreement the "crowning achievement" of his 10 years in power. It returns relations between the islands and Argentina to pre-war status. Islanders used to depend on supplies from Argentina and would fly to Buenos Aires for medical care, schooling, and shopping trips.

The agreement was welcomed by the international community. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called it a "sign of growing goodwill and cooperation," and US President Clinton said it showed both sides were willing to work to "promote the well-being and stability of the region." Britain and Argentina agreed to disagree on the issue of sovereignty, which was not discussed in the negotiations. [Sources: CNN, Xinhua, 07/14/99; The New York Times, 07/15/99; Notimex, 07/16/99; Reuters, 06/28/99, 06/30/99, 07/13-15/99, 07/19/99; Associated Press, 07/14/99, 07/15/99, 07/20/99; Clarin (Argentina), 07/14/99, 07/20/99; Spanish news service EFE, 07/11/99, 07/14/99, 07/20/99, 07/21/99]

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