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President Lula Da Silva Builds Relations with African Countries

by LADB Staff

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On his recent trip to five African nations, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva promised help in getting low-cost generic AIDS drugs where they are needed. He also urged the African nations to work together with other poor and developing countries on trade issues. Brazil's trade with Africa totals US\$5 billion a year just 5% of its imports and exports.

Lula made promoting Western financial help for Africa's infrastructure and general social and economic development a theme of his tour. He was accompanied by several ministers and over 100 businesspeople. The Brazilian president began his African trip in Sao Tome and Principe, then went to Angola and Mozambique. Lula also visited Namibia and South Africa. He signed cooperation agreements in every country he visited and agreed to help build pharmaceutical plants in Mozambique and Namibia to produce generic drugs to alleviate AIDS.

Brazil, like Angola, Mozambique, and Sao Tome and Principe, is a former Portuguese colony where Portuguese is the official language. From the 16th to the 19th century, one in three slaves shipped to the new world ended up in Brazil, and today only Nigeria has a larger black population. Brazil imported African slaves as late as 1850 and did not abolish slavery until 1888. Today, more than 76 million of Brazil's population of 180 million are of African descent.

Brazilian society was built through the work, sweat, and blood of Africans, said Lula during his trip. He said Brazil wanted to repay the "debt to Africa" by establishing a new policy of cooperation with the continent and contributing to its development.

Lula talks trade in Angola

In Angola, Lula urged the government to fight against protectionism, which, he said, causes "great damage" to developing nations. "Developing nations must take a new role, be more demanding," he told the Angolan parliament. "The sectors in which developing nations are most competitive are up against protectionism by industrialized countries." Brazil, along with South Africa and India, led the developing-world push for fairer trade rules during the failed World Trade Organization (WTO) talks in September in Cancun, Mexico (see NotiSur, 2003-10-10).

Brazil is already Angola's fourth-largest trading partner. It has announced plans to invest some US \$100 million in Angola's sugar cane industry, and a Brazilian firm runs the bus and taxi companies in the capital Luanda. Lula promises plant to produce AIDS drugs In Maputo, Mozambique, Lula said Brazil would build a pharmaceutical plant to manufacture AIDS drugs "in the near future."

Meanwhile, Brazil would continue to provide Mozambique with discounted medicines to treat the disease. "We intend to produce anti-retroviral drugs here in Mozambique in the shortest possible time," Lula said at a joint news conference with host President Joaquim Chissano. Brazil has defied the international pharmaceutical companies by producing generic versions of the anti-retroviral AIDS drugs despite patent issues (see NotiSur, 2001-05-25, 2003-09-05).

Brazil has also cooperated with Mozambique during the last three years in a program to train medical personnel. Besides its program to provide AIDS drugs to those who need them, Brazil's aggressive and highly effective media campaign to promote safe sex has helped Brazil keep the infection rate to less than 1% of its population.

This contrasts sharply with infection rates in southern Africa where they reach 30% in some countries and about 16% in Mozambique. Almost 1.7 million of Mozambique's 17 million inhabitants are infected with HIV, which is expected to reduce the nation's life expectancy to below 40 years by 2010. Africa is home to more than 70% of the estimated 42 million people worldwide infected with HIV.

"The fight against HIV/AIDS is one of the greatest challenges for us, and we are confident that Brazil's...rich experience in this regard will be a valuable contribution to our struggle against the epidemic," Chissano said. Lula and Chissano also discussed trade ties, and Chissano expressed support for Lula's campaign against farm subsidies. "We are sure that the role of Brazil will be crucial in our efforts against...farm subsidies and in the struggle to obtain access for our products to the markets of the developed world," Chissano said.

Lula said countries that subsidize their agriculture sectors "lack respect for other countries that cannot allow subsidies." He added, "We poor countries make an effort to develop ourselves through our agricultural production, but we have to confront an unjust world market, in which we cannot enter in conditions of equality because the others produce on the basis of subsidies."

Lula and Chissano also signed trade cooperation, food security, and mining and education agreements. Nearly a million people in Mozambique risk serious hunger as a result of floods and droughts that have destroyed crops. Africa and Brazil, sharing a common past, must "walk together" in efforts to improve the lives of their people, said Lula at a state dinner hosted by Chissano. "The past and the future of our peoples are mixed in an immense river of culture, faith, and creativity."

On Nov. 7, Lula arrived in the Namibian capital Windhoek for meetings with President Sam Nujoma regarding agriculture, public health, technology cooperation, and increasing bilateral trade. The two leaders also discussed ways to improve treatment for and care of AIDS patients.

"We have good possibilities of increasing our bilateral trade and investments," said Lula after meetings between members of his delegation and the Namibians. South African visit caps trip Before Lula arrived in South Africa on Nov. 7, South African vice minister of foreign trade Aziz Pahad said his country wanted to strengthen the excellent relations it has with Brazil. Pahad mentioned Lula's announcement after he took office that Africa would be "the foreign policy priority for his government."

Lula and President Thabo Mbeki discussed reform of the UN, improving bilateral economic ties, and accelerating cooperation between the 14-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Latin America's Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) trade group.

While Brazil may share a language and culture with the Portuguese-speaking nations, politically Lula is closest to President Mbeki. The South African leader attended Lula's inauguration. Since then, Mbeki and his emissaries have traveled frequently between Johannesburg and Sao Paulo. Brazil enjoys a trade surplus with South Africa garnered by growing imports of meat, minerals, fuel, machinery, and mechanical appliances. In turn, Brazil is important for South Africa's growing tourism economy, with five weekly flights between the two capitals. Mbeki referred to the "Brasilia-Pretoria-New Delhi axis" as a way to confront the powerful countries, not only within the framework of the WTO but also in international policies.

South Africa is Lula's principal ally in the struggle against the negative effects of globalization. "We want to develop a strategic policy with the rest of Africa, with China, Russia, India, and Mexico," Lula said in Pretoria. "This would guarantee that developing countries at the World Trade Organization (WTO) can negotiate equitable market access for their products."

Regarding their common challenges, Mbeki said that, although South Africa and Brazil are developing countries with relatively well-developed economic sectors, those exist alongside serious poverty in their populations. He also said that "both countries have large black populations who have been victims of discrimination and social exclusion and who are the majority of the poor and marginalized."

While in South Africa, Lula also met with former President Nelson Mandela at his Johannesburg home before returning to Brazil the evening of Nov. 8.

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