

Bush's visit sparks upheavals in Argentina

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The participation of US President George W. Bush in the Summit of the Americas in Argentina has unleashed a wave of popular outrage in that country and across much of Latin America.

Mar del Plata, the seaside resort where the 34 hemispheric heads of state are meeting, was the scene Friday of pitched battles between demonstrators and riot police, with clouds of teargas choking the streets just blocks from the meeting. At least one bank was set on fire, as protesters answered teargas canisters and rubber bullets with stones and Molotov cocktails.

Facing unprecedented hostility from the American people, reflected in his record drop in the polls, Bush is regarded as a political and social pariah south of the US border. The demonstrations outside the summit were joined by bitter divisions within the meeting itself.

Tens of thousands of people marched in a heavy rain Friday morning in Mar del Plata, demonstrating their opposition to the war in Iraq and protesting the Bush administration's economic and military policies in Latin America. The march began shortly after 8 a.m. and filled 15 blocks with crowds chanting "Bush Out!" and "Fascist Bush, You Are the Terrorist!"

Leading the march was Argentine Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and Bolivian cocalero leader and presidential candidate Evo Morales. Also in the front rank was a delegation from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the organization that challenged the former US-backed dictatorship, demanding the return of their "disappeared" children during Argentina's "dirty war."

As many as 70,000 people packed the Mundialista stadium for a rally after the march, which proceeded without incident on a 26-block route that was virtually free of police.

The rally's principal speaker was Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who warned that "North American imperialism, in its desperation, is preparing a plan of aggression against Venezuela." The day before, Venezuela had conducted military exercises simulating a response to a US invasion. Such an attack, Chavez said, would "unleash a hundred year war."

Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona, who arrived in Mar del Plata on a special train filled with demonstrators, told the crowd, "I love you very much. Thanks for being here. Argentina has dignity, let's throw Bush out." Maradona wore a shirt bearing Bush's image and the words "war criminal." Earlier, Maradona told reporters that Bush was "human garbage."

After the rally, thousands marched out of the stadium toward the Hotel Hermitage, where the summit had convened. The crowd reached the first ring of metal barricades thrown up around the meeting site, and there the clashes with the riot police began.

Bush's presence at the summit has been accompanied by massive security operations. Some 8,000 Argentine police have been deployed around the meeting site. Gunboats have taken up positions off the coast of Mar del Plata.

The US delegation, meanwhile, includes several hundred security personnel, including dog units, Marines, civilian intelligence agents and military helicopters. Two US military cargo planes arrived ahead of Bush to bring in weapons and equipment for his security detail. This virtual US invasion has provoked even greater hostility from the Argentine public.

While some US media commentators tried to minimize the significance of the protests, comparing them to earlier anti-globalization demonstrations in the US and Europe, the depth of popular hatred for the US president in Argentina is undeniable.

In addition to the protests in Mar del Plata, demonstrations were organized in Buenos Aires and cities throughout the country. Significant sections of the Argentine working class, including public employees, carried out actions to protest Bush's presence in the country.

Teachers, for example, struck in both the capital and the province of Buenos Aires against the Bush visit. The secretary of education, Daniel Santa Cruz, admitted that participation in the strike was "high," but stressed that "it was not done over union demands or salaries, but to repudiate Bush."

Across the province, union officials said that 90 percent of their members stayed out of the classrooms. It was reported that teachers also walked out in the provinces of Entre Ríos and Río Negro.

Nor were the protests limited to Argentina. An anti-Bush demonstration across the Río de la Plata in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo saw clashes between protesters and police in the city's financial district. Police at one point reportedly opened fire on the marchers. Scores were reported arrested and there were a number injured.

Protests to denounce Bush's presence at the summit were also organized in Río de Janeiro, Brazil, Caracas, Venezuela and other Latin American capitals.

On the eve of his trip to Latin America, Bush answered a reporter's question about the evident growth of hostility to US policy in the region. "Look, I understand not everybody agrees with the decisions I've made, but that's not unique to Central or South America," Bush stated. "But that's what happens when you make decisions."

The "decisions" that have provoked revulsion and anger in Latin America and elsewhere have been made to benefit the financial oligarchy in the US that Bush represents, at the expense of people

around the globe. The US military's occupation of Iraq is widely understood as a criminal act of aggression aimed at establishing US control over the region's oil wealth and promoting American capitalism's interests at the expense of its international rivals.

American militarism is seen in Latin America as the pursuit by violent means of policies of plunder and exploitation that are well known throughout the region.

Bush's promotion of "free trade" and open markets as the solution to the region's intense poverty and high unemployment is met with incredulity and rage. Argentina was regarded in the 1990s as a model of the economic policies promoted by Washington and the International Monetary Fund, with successive governments having privatized state-run industries, scrapped social welfare programs and opened up the country to unfettered foreign investment.

The collapse of the short-lived, privatization-induced boom in December 2001 unleashed economic and social devastation, wiping out jobs, pensions and living standards for millions virtually overnight.

There is little reason for US optimism about the outcome of the Mar del Plata summit, which is fraught with deep tensions. Diplomats were still desperately trying to patch together a joint statement that Washington and Latin America's governments could agree upon even as the summit officially opened.

The stalemate stems from Washington's attempt to force the acceptance of language supporting the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The US free trade zone scheme faces stiff opposition from most of the continent's major economies, including the members of the southern cone common market, known as Mercosur (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, along with several associate members, including Venezuela).

Venezuela's Chavez has expressed the most open hostility to the US trade pact, declaring that Mar del Plata would be the "tomb of the FTAA," and that he had "brought a shovel" to bury it.

In advance of the formal sessions, Bush convened meetings with Central American heads of state, who recently agreed to join a Central American Free Trade Area (CAFTA) with the United States. In the face of resistance from the continent's major economic powers, Washington has systematically pressured the weaker and more dependent states to sign such pacts.

Mexico's President Vicente Fox, meanwhile, has come forward as the principal defender of US interests at the summit. Fox issued statements condemning the protests and Maradona in particular, while promoting the FTAA plan, claiming that Mexico's own experience with the decade-old North American Free Trade Agreement was proof that such agreements were advantageous.

In an apparent reaction, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner cancelled a scheduled bilateral meeting with Fox. "This summit is very politicized," the Mexican president commented.

Earlier, Kirchner did hold such a bilateral meeting with Bush. Afterwards, Bush said of the Argentine president that he was "impressed by his frankness," while Kirchner spoke of the "sincerity" of the conversation, diplomatic language that signifies the absence of any agreement.

There were indications that the Kirchner government gave at

least a measure of tacit support to the mass demonstrations, perhaps seeing them as a means of pressuring Washington for more favorable treatment. His faction of the Peronist Party participated in the march and a prominent Peronist deputy, Miguel Bonasso, as well as leaders of social organizations linked to the ruling party, were present on the platform at the Mundialista Stadium.

In his opening speech to the summit meeting, Kirchner declared that the IMF and other international financial agencies must "assume their share of the responsibility" for the "tragedy" that the US-backed economic "reforms" had inflicted upon Argentina and Latin America. Referring to the "terrible consequences of the policies of structural adjustment," Kirchner condemned the IMF for demanding the imposition of similar measures as a condition for refinancing Argentina's foreign debt.

The Argentine government was reportedly seeking to reach a deal with Bush based on its acceptance of reopening talks on the FTAA, in return for US support in getting a less onerous offer from the IMF. No such agreement was forthcoming, however. After his meeting with Kirchner, Bush told the media that the Argentine president's "record is such now that he can take his case to the IMF with a much stronger hand." In other words, don't expect any help from the White House.

The crisis of Kirchner's government and those of the other Latin American states represented at the summit is that they are caught between the intransigence of Washington and international finance capital and the rising militancy of the masses, expressed in the upheavals sparked by Bush's visit. They know that the implementation of another round of IMF-dictated austerity measures could spark social revolution.



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