

On eve of Americas Summit

Bush faces mass protests, opposition to trade pact in Argentina

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Wracked by multiple political crises at home and receiving the lowest approval rating for any recent US president, George W. Bush is leaving the country Thursday to face an even more hostile audience.

The two-day quadrennial Summit of the Americas being held in the Argentine seaside resort of Mar del Plata Nov. 4-5 will be marked by one of the largest demonstrations in the country's history—called to repudiate the policies of the Bush administration.

On the eve of the summit, the Argentine daily *Pagina 12* reported a poll showing that six out of ten Argentines oppose Bush's presence in the country. By contrast, 75 percent welcomed the visit by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who has been vilified by Washington and has in turn denounced US foreign policy.

Protests began yesterday over the Bush visit—three days before his arrival—with blockades of bridges and highways in the Buenos Aires area and the appearance of posters throughout the Argentine capital bearing the slogans “Stop Bush” and “Fuera Bush,” in some cases superimposed over photographs of wounded Iraqi children.

Nor are the protests limited to Argentina. Last Wednesday, some 6,000 people marched on the US Embassy in Brasilia in an anti-Bush protest. The US president is scheduled to visit the Brazilian capital following the summit, going from there to a stop in Panama before returning to Washington.

The presence of the US president in Argentina has been preceded by the imposition of a massive security clampdown. An army of 7,000 additional police has been deployed in the resort city, which has been divided with three concentric circles of chain-linked fencing. Residents of the area surrounding the summit site have been identified and provided with passes to enter and leave their own homes. “We’ve been imprisoned,” one of them told a local television network.

A 100-mile no-fly zone has been declared surrounding the city, with orders to shoot down unidentified planes.

In addition to the blanket of security imposed by the Argentine government, Bush is arriving with an entourage of some 2,000, much of it composed of security personnel. Last Friday, two giant US military cargo planes arrived in Buenos Aires carrying large quantities of arms and two helicopters for use in guarding the US president.

On Friday a mass march expected to draw as many as 100,000 people will take place in Mar del Plata. Leading it will be popular football star Diego Maradona and Argentine Nobel Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel.

Bush is “a torturer, violator of human rights, an assassin, a violator of United Nations resolutions, of international treaties and of the sovereignty of peoples, as has happened in Iraq,” Pérez Esquivel said

in a radio interview Saturday explaining his participation.

Maradona, who now hosts one of Argentina's most popular television shows, said, “In Argentina, there are people who are against Bush being there. I am the first. He did us a lot of harm. As far as I'm concerned, he is a murderer; he looks down on us and tramples over us. I am going to lead that march along with my daughter.”

Also participating in the march will be Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a US soldier slain in Iraq, and Javier Couso, the brother of the Spanish television cameraman who was killed when an American tank fired on the Hotel Palestine, the headquarters of international journalists, during the US storming of Baghdad in April 2003.

Nora Cortiña, of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo-Founding Line, said that her group was also joining the march. “We will not only say no to Bush, we will say no to the politics of subordination and dependency,” she said. “The best homage we can pay to our children is to be independent and free as they wanted us to be.”

Meanwhile Argentina's Association of State Workers has announced a nationwide strike on Friday to protest Bush's presence in Argentina. The walkout will include national, state and municipal workers. The Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentine Workers Federation) has called for strike action as well.

Thousands are expected to participate in a “People's Summit,” being held in Mar del Plata. Venezuelan President Chávez is the only Latin American head of state expected to address this opposition gathering.

Bush is widely regarded as *persona non grata* in Argentina. Last July, the mayor of Mar del Plata, Daniel Katz, commented on the upcoming arrival of the US president by describing Bush as the “most unpleasant guy in the world.” Attempts were made to get a court order barring his entry into the country.

On Monday, a campaign was initiated in Argentina via email and text-messaging calling on people to hang black flags from their homes and cars as a symbol of “mourning” over Bush's presence.

The “mourning,” the message read, “is so that we can show not only our rejection and indignation, but also our respect for all those who have died and are dying because of this perverse character.”

Residents have already hung homemade signs and banners denouncing Bush from apartment balconies both in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata.

Within the summit itself, Bush faces little prospect of success. Washington's aim is to use the gathering to jump start the stalled negotiations on creating a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and to push for closer subordination of the Latin American

governments to US militarism in the name of the “global war on terrorism.”

This is the fourth Summit of the Americas, the first being held in 1994 in Miami in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement’s implementation between the US, Canada and Mexico. That summit declared its support for widening this free trade zone “from Alasaka to Ushuaia,” Argentina’s—and the world’s—southernmost city.

Subsequent summits in Santiago, Chile in 1998 and Quebec City in Canada in 2001 reaffirmed the goal of enacting the hemispheric-wide trade zone by 2005. The deadline for the agreement, however, came and went without any FTAA agreement being concluded. No meetings have been held to push the process along in the last year and a half.

This year, instead of trade and security, the theme of the summit, selected by Argentina, is “Creating jobs to fight poverty and strengthen governance.”

Now, diplomats in Argentina are working down to the wire in an attempt to craft a common declaration that can be signed by all 34 countries participating in the summit. The sticking point in these negotiations is how the FTAA will be mentioned. Originally, Argentina reportedly opposed including any reference to the US-backed trade deal, but subsequently relented.

In Washington, the Argentine ambassador to the US, José Bordón, denied Monday that Argentina had agreed to back the FTAA in exchange for US support in negotiating a new debt agreement with the International Monetary Fund, the AFP news agency reported. “There is not going to be any kind of give and take,” Bordón declared.

Brazil and Venezuela have put up the stiffest opposition to the FTAA. Argentina’s President Néstor Kirchner, elected in 2003 on the basis of overwhelming popular hostility to the IMF and the so-called “Washington consensus” model of economic development, has also voiced opposition to the pact, but now appears more malleable.

The FTAA has nothing to do with freedom, in trade or otherwise. It is a blueprint for a regional trading bloc that would subordinate the economies and markets of Latin America to the needs of Wall Street, allowing for the greater mobility of finance capital and thereby creating the best conditions for pitting workers of the different countries in the hemisphere against each other while driving down wages and social conditions.

The proposed free trade deal has met with widespread popular opposition in Latin America. Two decades of so-called economic reforms—privatization of key industries and social services, the opening up of markets, deregulation of financial sectors and the abandonment of production for domestic consumption—have led to economic stagnation, rising unemployment, widespread poverty, massive indebtedness and a series of catastrophic economic crises.

Nowhere is this truer than in Argentina, where the economic collapse of December 2001 devastated what had been among the continent’s highest living standards. As a recent report spelled out, today nearly 39 percent of the country’s population—and 55 percent of Argentine children—live in poverty.

The Brazilian government has opposed the FTAA agreement because of its one-sided favoring of US interests. Washington has refused to amend its massive agricultural subsidies program, which effectively bars the access by Brazilian agribusiness and its products like sugar, citrus and soy beans to US markets.

Venezuela, whose only major export is oil, with the US as its biggest customer, has no real economic interest in the FTAA, and Chávez has promoted Latin American economic integration in

opposition to opening up the continent’s markets to unrestrained penetration by US capital.

In the face of opposition from Latin America’s largest economies, the Bush administration has attempted to forge unequal deals with the region’s weakest and most dependent states, concluding a Central American Free Trade Agreement with Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

Meanwhile, American capitalism faces competition from its economic rivals on a scale that is unprecedented in what Washington previously referred to as its “own backyard.”

Mercosur, which includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, with six associated countries (Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela), is currently working to conclude a free trade agreement with the European Union. A meeting between the two trading blocs is scheduled for the beginning of next year.

Chile and China have concluded negotiations on a free trade agreement, the first such bilateral deal reached by Beijing in Latin America, following a concerted push for Chinese investment and trade deals throughout the continent.

With little hope of achieving anything of substance at the Mar del Plata summit, the Bush White House is fearful that the images that come out of the meeting may do little to help the embattled administration. The president’s supporters appear to be obsessed with the threat that Bush could be forced to directly debate Venezuela’s President Chávez and come out the worse for it.

At a conference on the summit convened last Thursday by the right-wing Washington think tank, the Hudson Institute, the principal speaker spoke of Chávez “lying in wait” at the summit to organize an “ambush of President Bush.”



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