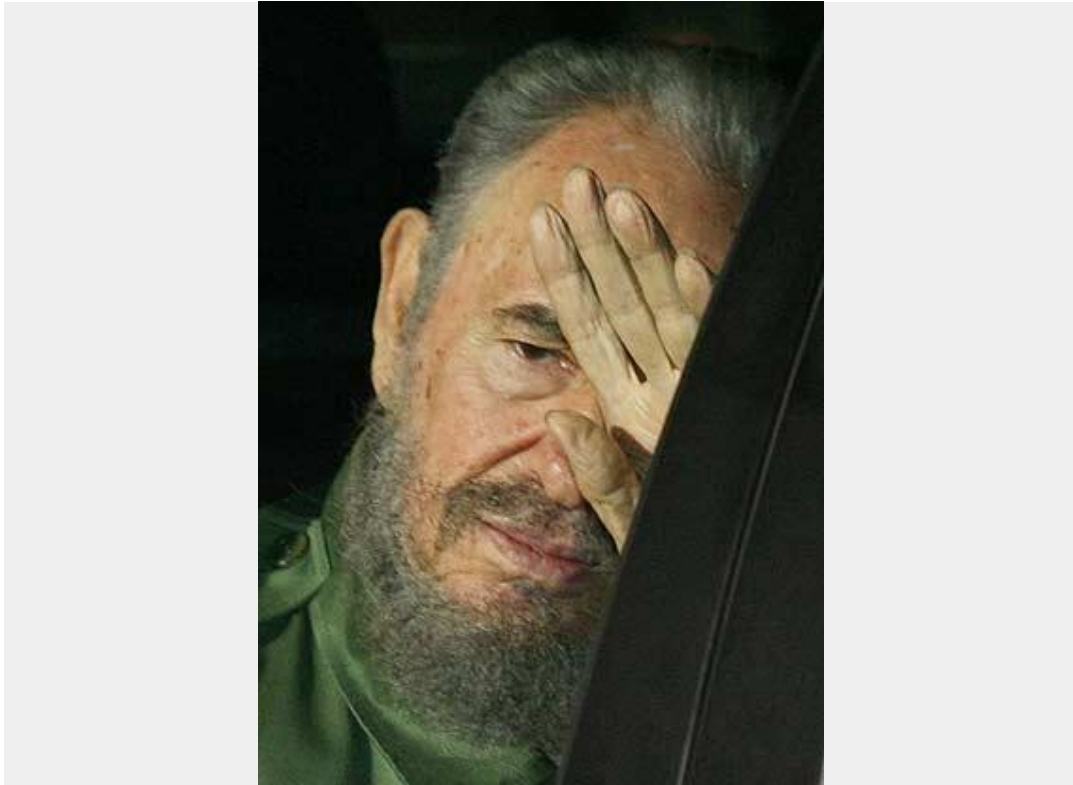


# Castro pays surprise visit to Americas trade summit

In his first trip abroad in seven months, Cuban leader Fidel Castro traveled to Argentina to sign deals with members of the trade bloc **Mercosur**.

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LUCAS SILVA/AP

**UNEXPECTED PRESENCE:** Cuba's President Fidel Castro waves to media from his car, as he arrives at the Jose Ignacio Taravella airport in Cordoba, Argentina, Thursday, to attend a presidential summit of the South American trade bloc Mercosur.

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**CORDOBA, Argentina** - In a rare trip abroad, Cuban leader Fidel Castro arrived in Argentina's second-largest city Thursday to join a summit of heads of state, boost his island's trade with South America and visit the childhood home of revolutionary hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

The landing of Castro's plane about 8:20 p.m. was broadcast live on many local news channels, and hundreds of curious people waited around the city to catch a glimpse of the 79-year-old who has ruled Cuba since the revolution in 1959.

His surprise arrival -- his visit was officially announced only Thursday morning -- at the meeting of heads of state from the trade group known as Mercosur eclipsed many of the other agenda items and events scheduled for the summit, including the formal entrance of Venezuela into the bloc.

Today, Castro is expected to sign trade agreements with the Mercosur nations -- Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela -- visit Guevara's home and perhaps attend a rally with his top South American ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Chile and Bolivia are associate members of Mercosur, and their presidents, Michele Bachelet and Evo Morales, respectively, are also expected to attend the summit.

Castro's last international trip was in December, when he visited Barbados. This is his fourth official visit to Argentina, the last one coming during the inauguration of President Néstor Kirchner in 2003. Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque also joined Castro on this trip, according to the Cuban news service.

Castro arrived about one hour after Chávez, a fiery leftist and nearly constant critic of President Bush.

"The presence of Fidel at the Mercosur is very positive," Chávez said at the airport in Córdoba. He said the trade alliance would be stronger with the addition of Venezuela, the world's eighth-largest oil producer, and the new relations with Cuba.

"We are entering a new phase of the Mercosur," with greater cooperation and a social conscience, he said.

### **EXPANDING TRADE**

Mercosur leaders are expected to discuss how to expand the region's exports and talk about trade issues and agreements among member countries and with Cuba as well as Pakistan.

Among some of the more contentious items on the agenda are Chile's recent declaration that it would cut its reliance on Argentine natural gas, and Argentina and Uruguay's disagreement over the installation of two pulp mills on Uruguayan shores near Argentina.

Castro's arrival, as his movements often are, was cloaked in secrecy up until Thursday morning, when Argentine and Cuban officials confirmed he would be attending the summit.

After his Cuban airliner landed in Córdoba, he exited the jet in his traditional green uniform and waved to the media and distant crowds with his left hand. He briefly greeted Argentine dignitaries before entering an official car and heading to a state dinner at the Ferreyra Palace.

He was expected to stay with the other presidents at the Córdoba Holiday Inn. An estimated 4,500 law enforcement officials swarmed the streets of Córdoba, about 450 miles northwest of the capital city of Buenos Aires, as the presidents began to arrive Thursday evening.

Today, the final day of the two-day meeting, Castro is expected to sign trade accords with Mercosur and individual countries. Brazilian newspaper O Estado reported that Mercosur would allow manufactured items such as electric appliances, vehicles (mainly buses) and farm equipment from South America to be exchanged for Cuban products, principally medicines, cigars and rum.

Venezuela and Cuba announced a separate trade agreement that aims to smooth the processing of imports through their respective customs.

### **PROTEST RALLY**

Castro's attendance at the summit boosted speculation that he will join Chávez and Morales at a rally with supporters, who will be protesting U.S. sanctions on Cuba and efforts to forge a Free Trade Area of the Americas, among other issues.

A Cuban delegation inspected the Guevara home-turned-museum in the village of Alta Gracia, about 22 miles from Córdoba, for security concerns this week, La Voz del Interior newspaper reported.

Thursday, reporters and TV crews flocked to the place where Guevara lived from age 4 to 16, trying to confirm that Castro would visit. The museum houses Guevara artifacts such as photos, letters, books and the car his mother drove.

Museum manager Ada Ventre said she could not confirm Castro's visit, but added it would be ``a historic event, because [Castro] has been a close friend of Che's."