

Brazil's Lula da Silva opens energy-plan tour

Brazil's president launched a five-country trip aimed at forging multinational energy agreements.

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SAO PAULO --

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva began a six-day, five-nation tour Sunday to develop energy and biofuel agreements in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Lula da Silva and Mexican President Felipe Calderón today are expected to sign a memorandum of understanding on biofuel as part of a wide-ranging energy agreement. They will also discuss an accord on deep-water oil exploration, said the Brazilian leader's spokesman, Marcelo Baumbach.

About 50 Brazilian executives will accompany Lula da Silva to Mexico in an effort to expand bilateral trade, which reached \$5.75 billion in 2006, the Brazilian foreign ministry said.

However, Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said that a trade accord between Brazil and Mexico is not on Lula da Silva's agenda.

The countries are the two largest economies in Latin America, accounting for about two-thirds of Latin America's gross national product, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Lula da Silva will travel Tuesday to Honduras, where he is also expected to sign a biofuel agreement, the foreign ministry said.

He will then visit Nicaragua and Jamaica, where he will attend inauguration of an ethanol dehydration plant owned by Jamaican and Brazilian investors.

In Panama, Lula da Silva is expected to sign a memorandum of understanding for joint biofuel development and to promote the participation of Brazilian companies in Panama's planned expansion of the Panama Canal.

Brazil, the world's leading ethanol exporter, has been touting its sugarcane-based biofuel around the world as a cheap, eco-friendly alternative to fossil fuels amid soaring oil prices and global warming concerns. Brazil signed a biofuel accord this year with Chile and the Dominican Republic.

The Latin American trip will give Lula da Silva somewhat of a respite from the crisis dogging his administration since the July 17 crash of a TAM Linhas Aereas SA jetliner in Sao Paulo -- Brazil's deadliest -- and the ensuing aviation-industry chaos.

Since the crash that killed all 187 aboard the plane and 12 on the ground, Lula da Silva has replaced the country's top aviation official and the head of the national airport authority, while vowing to ensure the safety of the country's airways.

A poll released Sunday, however, showed the aviation crisis has not affected Lula da Silva's popularity. Forty-eight percent of Brazilians said Lula da Silva's government is good or great, the same percentage as before last month's crash, according to a Datafolha polling institute survey published in Brazil's largest newspaper, the Folha de S. Paulo.

Datafolha said Lula da Silva maintained his approval rating after the TAM crash because most Brazilians are poor and do not travel by plane. A robust economy also helped, it said.

Datafolha interviewed 2,095 people across Brazil on Aug. 1-2. The survey's margin of error was 2 percentage points.