

Bush promotes trade deal in Guatemala

The Miami Herald
Mar. 12, 2007

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala --(AP) -- President Bush heaved crates of lettuce onto a loading dock today, a vivid demonstration of the benefits of a free trade deal he had trouble pushing through Congress.

"Free trade is important to a lot of people," Bush said after helping move cartons of lettuce at Labradores Mayas, a thriving vegetable packing station in Chirijuyu not far from here. "It's a gateway. It creates jobs in America as it created jobs here."

Undeterred by protesters who have dogged Bush at every stop on his five-nation Latin American trip, Bush is working to convince residents of the region that the United States is a compassionate nation. It's the same message he delivered earlier at stops in Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia.

His travels also serve as a counterweight to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who has been on his own parallel tour of Latin America. Chávez has been pumping his nation's oil profits into social programs across the region to further the leftward political shift he's leading in the United States' backyard.

On Sunday in Bolivia, while Bush was in Colombia, Chávez called for a socialist counterattack against the American "empire."

Bush received a brightly colored jacket at the vegetable packing station, started in the early 1990s by an indigenous farmer named Mariano Canu. The association of 66 small farming families produces 95,000 heads of lettuce a week that are sold in Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras. It employs 200 indigenous farmers and is one of the major vegetable suppliers for Wal-Mart's Central American supermarkets.

"I worked as a day laborer. I kept improving over time. The people here work hard. They want to sell you our products," Canu told Bush, who got a close look at tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, radishes and other locally grown products are washed, processed and packed for distribution.

The packing station has received \$350,000 in U.S. assistance since 2003 and is taking advantage of eased trade restrictions under the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement.

Congress narrowly passed the trade pact last year, and Bush wants lawmakers to approve three similar ones with Colombia, Panama and Peru. With the Congress now in Democratic hands, the president acknowledges that these are "tough votes," but argues that free trade and democratic reforms can help lift Latin Americans from poverty.

"You represent people who dream," Bush told dozens of workers. "You represent people who work hard and people who make wonderful products."

Earlier, Guatemala's President Oscar Berger and his wife took the Bushes to Santa Cruz Balanya, a town of about 10,000 mostly indigenous Guatemalans, to stress the need for social justice and equality. In the town, Bush was warmly greeted with cries of "*Hola*" from children who gave first lady Laura Bush lilies.

There, he saw the site of a U.S. military medical readiness and training exercise team, which brings military doctors from both nations to provide medical, dental, surgical and optometrical services for underserved rural areas. In the town square, the Bushes listened to a marimba band and were cheered by about 500 people especially excited to see Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Nearly three-quarters of Guatemala's indigenous people, descendants of native Maya, live in poverty. Many who have protested Bush's visit don't agree with U.S. immigration policy and believe current trade agreements between the countries have kept Guatemalans from rising out of poverty.

The distribution of income throughout all of Guatemala is lopsided. The richest 20 percent of the population receives two-thirds of all income.

On Sunday, in Tecpan, more than 100 Maya Indians protested Bush's visit, holding signs that read: "No more blood for oil." The group is angry that Bush was visiting the sacred Iximche archaeological site, founded as the capital of the Kaqchiqueles kingdom before the Spanish conquest in 1524.

Mayan priests say they will purify the site to rid it of any "bad spirits" after Bush is there.

"That a person like [Bush,] with the persecution of our migrant brothers in the United States, with the wars he has provoked, is going to walk in our sacred lands is an offense for the Maya people and their culture," said Juan Tiney, director of a Maya nongovernmental organization with close ties to Maya religious and political leaders.

Bush traveled to Iximche along narrow roads that wound through several villages. Hundreds of mostly friendly people thronged his route, waving and holding American flags. One banner, though, read "Bush Genocide" in Spanish.

At the ruins, Bush was given a demonstration of a ball game played by brightly clad young boys, was serenaded by a marimba band and saw Maya children perform a morality tale. Costumed as animals, the children danced out a fable in which a leopard attacks a deer, who is rescued when the other animals band together.

Back in the capital later in the day, Bush and Berger will talk about trade and immigration. The money that Guatemalans in the United States send back to the nation has become a significant part of the nation's economy.