

Bush Promotes U.S. Anti - Poverty Fight in Guatemala

The New York Times
March 12, 2007

SANTA CRUZ BALANYA, Guatemala (Reuters) - President George W. Bush visited Guatemalan hill towns on Monday to promote U.S. efforts to fight poverty in Latin America, where Washington's power is increasingly being questioned by leftist leaders.

Bush watched U.S. and Guatemalan military doctors and nurses give health care to locals in the town of Santa Cruz Balanya near the capital.

Residents, many dressed in colorful flowing dresses or ponchos and straw hats, greeted the U.S. leader with banners of welcome and a few shouts of "Viva Bush."

But elsewhere in Guatemala, where many remember U.S. support for military repression during a long civil war, street protesters told Bush to go home.

Guatemala is the second-to-last stop on Bush's five-nation, Latin American tour, a trip in which he has been dogged along the way by thunderous denunciations from his leftist nemesis in the region, Venezuelan President [Hugo Chavez](#).

Worried about Chavez's growing influence, Bush has used the tour to try to improve ties with leaders of the right and moderate left in Latin America, where the Iraq war and U.S. trade and [immigration](#) policies have made him deeply unpopular.

Guatemala, ruled by conservative President Oscar Berger, joined the CAFTA free trade agreement with the United States and other Central American countries last year. Washington says the pact will help alleviate poverty in the region.

Bush was to visit a farm cooperative and ancient Mayan ruins later on Monday, to the chagrin of Mayan leaders who promised to spiritually "cleanse" the site afterward because they consider the U.S. president an aggressor.

Brief scuffles broke out between riot police and indigenous farmers opposed to Bush's visit to the Iximche ruins, the capital of the Kaqchikel Mayan people before the Spanish conquest five centuries ago.

"We are protesting against the world's biggest murderer stepping onto our sacred place. For us it is painful and an enormous offense," said indigenous leader Jorge Morales Toj.

BUSH VS CHAVEZ

Chavez shadowed Bush on Sunday, visiting Nicaragua for talks with President Daniel Ortega, an old U.S. foe from the Cold War.

“The battle between the U.S. empire and the great Latin American people is taking place again,” Chavez said in a speech in Nicaragua's colonial city of Leon.

White House officials accused reporters of turning Bush's tour into a Bush vs. Chavez trip instead of concentrating solely on Bush's agenda.

“We didn't pack anybody else in our luggage,” White House spokesman Tony Snow said.

Bush, on the first visit by a U.S. president to Guatemala since [Bill Clinton](#) came in 1999, will offer support for President Berger, considered a U.S. ally in the war on drugs.

Guatemala will ask Bush for more support to fight drug traffickers who have infiltrated its police and may be involved in the murders of eight politicians and policemen last month.

“Guatemala is in urgent need of helicopters and modern ship navigation systems to track down groups that have more advanced technology,” Berger's advisor Richard Aitkenhead told Reuters.

The annual State Department human rights report released last week highlighted corruption and impunity in Guatemala's security forces, citing complaints of kidnappings, rapes and murders carried out by police in 2006.

“Security is the number one issue of interest to the average Guatemalan, so we expect to cover that,” said Dan Fisk, South American expert for the [National Security Council](#).

Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann offered to resign last month after the opposition accused him of turning a blind eye to death squads in the police that killed rivals in the drug trade and street gang members.

Berger has not accepted the resignation.