

Bush Visits Guatemala in 'Social Justice' Tour of Latin America

The Washington Post
March 12, 2007

GUATEMALA CITY, March 12 -- President Bush began touring rural villages and ancient Mayan villages here Monday as he brought his "social justice" tour of Latin America closer to home and tried to showcase ways that the United States works to uplift its neighbors.

In his first visit to this impoverished nation with a long and complicated relationship with the United States, Bush chose stops designed to emphasize his "we care" message after years in which the region felt ignored by his administration. His stops Monday include a U.S. military program to provide medical services and an agricultural cooperative for indigenous farmers whose irrigation system was built with U.S. aid.

The president will also play tourist for a change, stopping by Iximche, a 537-year-old Mayan ruin that was the inspiration for the name of the country, where he will watch the Dance of the Deer. Later in the day, he will be formally welcomed to Guatemala at an elaborate arrival ceremony at the National Palace and lay a white rose on the Peace Statue, a bronze sculpture of two hands honoring the 1996 accords that ended 36 years of internal armed conflict.

Guatemala is the fourth stop in Bush's longest Latin American tour -- following visits to [Brazil](#), Uruguay and Colombia -- and a case study in the sort of poverty and destitution he says he wants to address. Many in this Tennessee-sized country of 12 million struggle to make ends meet. The per capita gross domestic product of \$4,900 a year is barely a tenth of the \$43,500 in the United States.

"It's very important for the people of South America and Central America to know that the United States cares deeply about the human condition and that much of our aid is aimed at helping people realize their God-given potential," Bush told reporters in Bogota, Colombia, before flying to Guatemala on Sunday night. "And so we'll talk about programs all aimed at giving people a chance to realize their dreams."

Bush arrives here at a time of scandal for the government. Four police officers recently killed three members of parliament from neighboring [El Salvador](#), purportedly taking them for drug dealers. The police officers were taken into custody but then were mysteriously killed in prison. Several top security officials of President Oscar Berger's government have since submitted their resignations.

"There is the implication that's going relatively high up into the Guatemalan police," Dan Fisk, the president's top Latin America adviser at the National Security Council, told reporters on Air Force One. "So one of the issues that will be discussed, we'll talk about crime and security issues. Security is the number one issue of interest to the average Guatemalan, so we expect to cover that."

Security is dicey enough that White House staff and journalists traveling with Bush were warned not to walk more than a couple blocks from their hotel here. A welcome-to-Guatemala guide provided by the U.S. Embassy said the crime threat is rated

"critical," the highest ranking. "Violent and petty crimes occur regularly and criminals are often armed," it said. "If confronted, do not resist. Surrender your valuables, your life is more important."

During his meeting with Berger later in the afternoon, Bush also plans to talk about trade and immigration. Guatemala is one of the top sources of illegal immigrants, with an estimated 10 percent of the population living in the United States.

Bush has said that building up the economies of countries such as Guatemala will go a long way toward reducing such migration by making it more attractive to stay home. Guatemala is part of the new Central American Free Trade Agreement lowering trade barriers with the United States.

His first stop Monday morning was a school in Santa Cruz Balanya, a town of 10,000 where the U.S. Southern Command is conducting a medical readiness and training exercise. In such exercises, U.S. military doctors team up with local physicians for several days to provide medical, dental, surgical and optometric services for underserved rural areas. About 83,100 patients have been served this way in Guatemala over the past six years, according to U.S. officials.

Accompanied by first lady Laura Bush, the president also will visit Labradores Mayas, an agriculture association for 66 local farmers. A loan and technical assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development in 1986 built an irrigation system that today has made it possible for such associations to sell products to supermarket chains, including Wal-Mart Central America, U.S. officials said.

The Mayan ruin he will see later in the afternoon was founded in 1470 and served as a Mayan capital in the area until the Spanish arrived in the next century and destroyed it. The restored site today houses an archaeological museum amid a park. Mayan priests have said they plan to "purify" the site after Bush leaves to get rid of any "bad spirits" he may leave behind.

Bush flies to Merida, [Mexico](#), on Monday night to visit recently inaugurated President Felipe Calderon before returning to Washington on Wednesday.