

Bush talks trade with his Uruguayan counterpart

The Miami Herald
Mar. 10, 2007

MONTEVIDEO --

Followed by violent protests and relentless taunting from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, President Bush continued his Latin American tour Saturday by talking trade while ignoring the controversy his visit has kicked up around the region.

Bush met Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez at a bucolic presidential retreat and discussed how this tiny South American country can sell more beef, wool and blueberries to the United States.

Yet even amid the horses and trees, the Chávez challenge threatened to take over Bush's agenda as it has repeatedly on this tour, which began Thursday night in Brazil and will also take the president to Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico.

Asked at a press conference whether Chávez threatened U.S. interests in the region, Bush avoided mentioning the Venezuelan while saying he had come to Latin America to practice "quiet and effective diplomacy." Among Chávez's taunts was that Bush would not dare to say his name.

"My message to the people in our neighborhood is that we care about the human condition and that we believe the human condition can be improved in a variety of ways -- one, investment," Bush said. "And so the question is, how can we have constructive dialogue with our neighbors as to how to spread the benefits of investment?"

Chávez had no problem attacking Bush by name, which he did repeatedly at a massive anti-Bush rally held across the Río de la Plata in neighboring Argentina Friday night. The Venezuelan leader called Bush "a political cadaver" and "the little gentleman from the North" and led chants of "Gringo, go home!"

On Saturday, Chávez toured flood-stricken central Bolivia alongside the country's leftist President Evo Morales, who is a close Chávez ally. He is scheduled to lead another protest against Bush's visit in the Bolivian city of El Alto Sunday.

Chávez's thunder has presented a sharp contrast to Bush's appearances, which have been carefully staged and short on improvisation or diplomatic breakthroughs. The president's massive security apparatus, his motorcades and fleet of helicopters have produced as much local coverage as what he has said and done.

Bush continued the trend Saturday, and he and Vázquez did not announce any new agreements.

Many believe, however, the leaders discussed in private how to advance a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement signed by the two countries last month that sets the stage for a possible bilateral free trade accord. Uruguayans hope to sell more beef and textiles to the United States, which is the country's biggest trading partner.

Uruguay has moved closer to the United States while stepping away from its South American neighbors. This is the second meeting between the two presidents since last May.

Vázquez has long complained about trade imbalances with Brazil and Argentina, and if Uruguay concludes a free trade agreement with the United States, it could be forced out of Mercosur, the five-nation South American trade bloc. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited Vázquez Feb. 26 to try to stop a Uruguayan departure from the trade bloc.

Uruguay is also locked in a bitter standoff with Argentina over a pulp mill being built on the Uruguayan side of a river both countries share. Argentina's government says the proposed pulp mill will pollute the river, and Argentine protesters have blocked all land access between the two countries.

Vázquez said Saturday he valued regional integration but insisted Uruguay should have the "sovereign right of developing bilateral relations" while a member of Mercosur.

"The trade we have and the cultural, historical relationships that we have with our brethren countries in the region are very solid, very strong," he said. "But we don't want a closed integration process, but an open integration process."

Dan Fisk, the National Security Council's senior director of western hemisphere affairs, told reporters Friday that Uruguay was "taking the right policy choices."

"It definitely wants to have a trade agenda with us that is deeper and broader," Fisk said. "It's an active global trader."

That stance has been a surprising one for Vázquez, a Socialist whose 2004 election broke 170 years of power by the country's two main parties. His government includes former Tupamaro leftist guerilla fighters tortured by the country's U.S.-trained military dictatorship.

José Mujica, a former guerilla who is Vázquez's agriculture minister, said this month about the Bush visit, "Doing business is not selling your soul or changing your ideas."

While Vázquez embraced Bush, including treating him to a barbecue at his retreat Saturday, many of the country's 3.4 million people did not welcome the U.S. president.

Anti-Bush protesters rampaged through downtown Montevideo shortly before Air Force One landed Friday night. They looted stores, attacked photographers and broke shop windows, including those of three McDonald's restaurants, Uruguayan media reported.

Friday's front-page headline in La República, one of the country's biggest newspapers, read, "The Emperor of the unipolar world arrives."

Yet a recent poll by the Cifra consulting firm showed Uruguayans have the same mixed feelings about "the emperor" as the Vázquez government.

While only 12 percent of Uruguayans approved of Bush's visit, 59 percent wanted a free trade agreement with the United States.