



## PRESIDENT BUSH RENEWS ATTENTION TO LATIN AMERICA WITH 5-COUNTRY TOUR

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*President Bush finished a six-day trip to Latin America, where he has been trying to strengthen U.S. economic ties and address social issues affecting the region.*

The visit -- which included stops in Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico -- comes at a time when the Bush administration is increasingly unpopular in Latin America for its economic policies, the war in Iraq and its tough stance on immigration.

In all five countries, the president was met by crowds of protesters, some of whom held signs that read "Yankee go home" and "Bush is a terrorist."

The president brushed off the protests, however, and used each stop to reiterate his commitment to helping solve some of Latin America's most chronic social problems such as poverty, crime, immigration and drug trafficking.

### **A new message for Latin America**

In a speech outlining his policy in the region, Mr. Bush said it was "a scandal" that in a world of growing prosperity "nearly one out of four people in Latin America lives on less than \$2 a day. Many children never finish grade school; many mothers never see a doctor."

In addition to highlighting the increase in aide to the region over the last six years, the president proposed spending another \$75 million over the next three years to help more Latin Americans learn English and study in the United States.

He also unveiled a \$385 million plan to help underwrite home mortgages for working-class families in Mexico, Brazil, Chile and Central America, the Washington Post reported.

During the week, Mr. Bush spoke with the presidents of Mexico and Guatemala about reforming U.S. immigration law to make it safer for people coming to the United States to work.

Last year, Mr. Bush signed a law to build more than 700 miles of fencing along the U.S. border with Mexico. The plan has drawn lots of criticism and even been compared to the Berlin Wall by Mexico's newly elected president, Felipe Calderon.

In Colombia, Mr. Bush said he would encourage Congress to continue funding a program that fights drug trafficking and establishes order of law in parts of the country where a 40-year armed conflict has claimed the lives of thousands of people.

### **Strengthening economic ties**

In addition to spreading his message of compassion, Mr. Bush has tried to forge new economic ties with the region.

While in Sao Paulo, he signed a pact with Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to promote more production of ethanol in the Western Hemisphere.

Ethanol, a bio-fuel made usually of corn or sugarcane, is widely considered a clean alternative to gasoline. Currently, the United States and Brazil produce 70 percent of the world's supply.

In Guatemala, talk was of free trade. Early in his second term, Mr. Bush signed an agreement that eliminated most tariffs between the United States and many Central American countries.

Mr. Bush claims that this policy creates jobs both in the United States and in Central America by opening new markets for businesses. Critics of the trade agreement say that the policy subjects poorer countries to exploitation by businesses from richer countries.

While in Guatemala, Mr. Bush visited a lettuce-packing plant started by a local farmer that now sells its produce to Wal-Mart Central America and McDonald's, the New York Times reported.

### **Drawing fire**

When he came to office six years ago, Mr. Bush said he would pay more attention to Latin America.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in the United States, however, the administration switched its focus to the Middle East.

"It's a visit after six-plus years of neglect," said Sidney Weintraub, a longtime U.S. diplomat and specialist in Latin America, the Washington Post reported. "There's little that the Latin Americans expect from him anymore."

In those six years, the number of Latin American governments critical of the United States has grown.

One of the Bush administration's biggest critics is Venezuela's leftist revolutionary president Hugo Chavez, who repeatedly calls for Latin Americans to reject U.S. "imperialism" in the region.

Chavez has used his country's huge oil profits to fund social projects in his own country and abroad. Anticipating Mr. Bush's visit, Chavez embarked on a tour of Latin America to counter the U.S. president's statements.

For its part, the Bush administration has tried to downplay Chavez's influence and highlight its own commitment to social progress in the region.

At a press conference in Sao Paulo, Mr. Bush refused to mention the Venezuelan president's name, but said, "I don't think America gets enough credit for trying to help improve people's lives."

-- *Compiled by Noah Buhayar for NewsHour Extra*

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