

## Gloomy Days for Bush

During the Fourth Summit of the Americas, Bush didn't succeed in giving a significant impulse to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

By Karen de la Hoz

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The President's approval rating is the lowest since the beginning of his first term in office, the FTAA isn't making progress, the subject of human rights is getting ever more complicated, and protests against him are increasing.

George Walker Bush is plummeting. A year since his re-election, the President of the United States has the lowest approval rating since the beginning of his first term and, judging by the protests that are taking place these days in South America, his international approval rating is also low. The FTAA isn't making progress; more people oppose the war in Iraq every day; and Bush's closest political colleagues are caught in political scandals. To complete the picture, human rights organizations continue drawing attention to the irregularities in Guantánamo and have made their disapproving voices heard in the recent Washington Post reports about the establishment of secret prisons in Eastern Europe. According to a poll carried out by Zogby International and published on Friday, November 4<sup>th</sup> by IBLNews, the approval rating for George Bush is at 39 percent. "It's the lowest that we have recorded thus far," indicated John Zogby, the political researcher and director of the survey.

The television channel ABC News and the newspaper The Washington Post agree with Zogby and showed that in addition, the level of disapproval for the president is at 60 percent. A poll carried out by CBS is the least encouraging, showing that support for President Bush is only around 35 percent.

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### Protests

But if President Bush is unpopular in the United States, he is at least as unpopular in Latin America. His attendance at the Fourth Summit of the Americas, which concluded yesterday in Mar del Plata, Argentina, was marked by multitudes of protests against both his presence and his policies.

The protests weren't limited to Argentina. In Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, and Panama hundreds of protestors marched against the leader, and in Cuba a "counter-summit" took place with a day-long populist event protesting the economic embargo, which

is a burden for the island. This economic embargo will probably be rejected by the UN General Assembly next Tuesday, November 8, yet another setback for Washington to add to its unlucky series of setbacks and blunders in the last few months.

Chants like “Bush is a fascist, he is the terrorist” and declarations such as “Mar del Plata is the tomb of the FTAA” expressed the opposition to Bush which, according to the historian Roberto González Arana, reflects “a growing uneasiness in international opinion with respect to the role the United States plays in different events relating to their human rights policy, such as in the cases of Iraq and Guantánamo.” In addition, González Arana affirms that “Argentina is influenced by the fact that Kirchner’s government is backed by many left-leaning sectors, and also that the United States is blamed for the crisis that occurred in Argentina in 2002, as the International Monetary Fund pressured the country greatly.”

In this same sense, David Edeli, analyst for Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch in Washington D.C., points out that the rejection of Bush is explained by the fact that “the policies that the President has proposed for Latin America have not had good results, and in Argentina more than anywhere else it has been shown that the liberalization of financial services and capital flows dealt a nearly fatal blow to the economy.” Similarly, Edeli affirms that “the results have been very similar throughout Latin America, resulting in increased inequality between the rich and the poor, and a decrease in the level of access to services and to drinking water,” something that negatively affects the image that people in the continent

have of Bush.

### **The FTAA**

The main objective for the Fourth Summit of the Americas has received little attention. The slogan “create work to confront poverty and strengthen democratic governance” could hardly be heard behind the strong voices that shouted “No to the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas).” The biting proposal from the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez to “bury” the trade project put forth by the United States, and observe a minute of silence for it aroused exultation among the Latin American Left and concern among the Right, who find themselves farther and farther away from achieving an agreement.

For David Edeli, it is not feasible that an FTAA agreement be reached in the short term. The analyst considers that “the biggest economies in South America have taken a very intelligent position, as it does not make sense to negotiate right now with the United States, before considering the results of the Doha Round negotiations of the World Trade Organization that will take place in December.”

During this round of negotiations, the liberalization of trade barriers and other issues, which will benefit developing nations above all, will be negotiated, including tricky topics like agriculture and the trade of services. It is possible to obtain important concessions in these areas.

In this sense, David Edeli affirms that “what Brazil and Argentina are seeing is that there is no reason to enter into an

agreement with the United States under the terms that they know will be harmful for their economies. The same should apply to Colombia, as it would be incredible for the Andean countries to sign the free trade agreement before the Doha Round, as the topic of agriculture will be discussed there. That is, signing something with the United States now—when the country isn't conceding anything in the negotiations and without knowing how the Doha Round will conclude—would be an enormous mistake.”

Roberto González Arana maintains a similar position. The historian doesn't think it is possible for the FTAA to be finalized in the near future, “and a sign of this is that the United States is going about favoring regional trade agreements. They already achieved this with Central America and with Chile, and now they are trying to do the same in the Andean countries (Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru), precisely because it is understood that with the governments of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and certainly Venezuela it is not likely that the FTAA can have any success, as it does not have the support from strong and influential countries in the region.

### **Human Rights**

The topic of human rights is not any easier. The United States has received constant criticism from NGOs that ask for an end to abuses in prisons like Guantánamo. For example, Amnesty International recently launched a campaign asking President Bush to shut down the prison in which approximately

520 people are in “unprecedented legal limbo,” without charges or trial and suspected to have been involved in terrorist activities.

But Guantánamo is not a unique case. In recent days a report for the Washington Post claimed that the United States has secret prisons in different countries in Eastern Europe. In addition, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, Chief of Staff for ex-Secretary of State Colin Powell, recently affirmed that the orders that drove the U.S. military soldiers to torture prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan came from the office of Vice President Dick Cheney.

And what's to say of the conditions imposed on the UN to visit Guantánamo? The denial to allow UN personnel to interview those who have been detained because of the “War on Terror” further undermines the prestige of the Bush administration in human rights matters, something highlighted by Avi Cover of the organization Human Rights First. He warned that “denying international experts of human rights the possibility to visit prisoners maintains the secret curtain over the detention practices employed. Doing this only generates more questions over what is being covered up, and it undermines the U.S. position in the international community,” said Cover.

The situation is not easy for Bush, and it is likely that during the next few months United States citizens will ask themselves more and more frequently if reelecting Bush was a good idea.

Note: This article was translated from Spanish by the staff of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch.