

U.S. Wins Trade - Zone Agreement at Summit

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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MONTERREY, Mexico (AP) -- Rich and poor nations alike walked away from this week's 34-nation summit with victories: The developing world kept the meeting focused on social issues, while the United States regained several old friends in the region.

The democratically elected heads of state attending the special Summit of the Americas signed a declaration Tuesday pledging to stick to their timetable on ending negotiations for a hemisphere-wide trade zone known as Free Trade of the Americas.

Canada and Mexico won the biggest prizes from the United States. President Bush told Canada it will be eligible for a second round of U.S.-financed reconstruction contracts in Iraq valued by the administration at about \$4.5 billion.

On Monday, Mexican President Vicente Fox accepted an invitation to visit Bush's Texas ranch and praised his proposal to allow migrants to work temporarily in the United States.

The mention of a timetable for the free trade agreement was a victory for the United States, but it did not go as far as U.S. officials wanted. It eliminated any mention of a 2005 deadline for the accord -- mentioned in earlier drafts -- but called for nations to stick to their "original timetable."

In previous trade negotiations, ministers agreed to try to complete the agreement by next year. However, some Latin American nations say that is too soon. Countries at the Organization of American States summit also committed to improving the education, health and general standards of living for the hemisphere's people -- a boost for developing nations who fought to keep the meeting centered on social concerns.

The United States failed to get a clause included in the declaration that would evict corrupt countries from future summits, a tough goal given the difficulty of defining corruption.

"I think the U.S. got all it could," said Sidney Weintraub, director of the Americas Program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. The meeting "really did accomplish the objectives."

The key now is whether the good intentions proclaimed by leaders from Canada to Chile will lead to concrete results in the future.

"The promises that are made in summits are promises without specific dates as to when they're going to be acted on," Weintraub noted. "They express intentions of what they'd like to see happen, and there are things that do happen.

But there are literally hundreds of things" that never go anywhere.

Perhaps the summit's major achievement is that it helped create at least the illusion of good will and cooperation in the hemisphere, Weintraub said.

Unquestionably the biggest winners of the summit were Fox and Bush, who used the gathering to demonstrate a rekindled friendship.

Bush's proposal allowing foreign workers with jobs to live temporarily in the United States likely will win him support from Latin voters in November while renewing Mexicans' faith in Fox.

Fox made a migration accord one of his major policy initiatives, along with major economic and labor reforms. But they have gone nowhere during his first three years in office.

The U.S.-Mexico relationship soured after the Sept. 11 terror attacks and Mexico's failure to back the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

“Clearly from the standpoint of U.S.-Mexico relations, the summit was a success,” said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “It was a win-win situation for both presidents.”

Bush also used the summit to further his mission of smoothing over relations with allies who opposed the Iraq war, announcing Tuesday that Canada could bid for lucrative Iraqi reconstruction projects.

America's relations with Canada were strained when former Prime Minister Jean Chretien stood with France, Germany and Russia in refusing to join the United States in the war on Iraq because they said the invasion lacked U.N. authorization.

New Canadian Premier Paul Martin -- one of 14 leaders to take office since the last Summit of the Americas in Quebec in 2001 -- made improving relations with the United States a high priority.

Even Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez -- the only leader to sign the final declaration with reservations because of his opposition to free trade -- took away a summit prize: A clause that the leaders would consider his proposal to create an international humanitarian fund.

Chavez entered the summit by calling the gathering a "waste of time" and pushing for a plan that would unite Latin American countries economically before joining them with the United States and Canada.

He told reporters late Tuesday that he skipped the summit's lunch because he was on the phone with Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi planning a summit between Latin American and African nations.

Chavez calling the Bush administration's policies toward his country contradictory since Bush indirectly criticized the state of democracy in Venezuela.

There was not the only bilateral feud to spill over into the general summit arena. Bolivia and Chile exchanged heated words and held dueling news conferences over a 125-year-old land dispute that has caused strained relations between the two South American countries.

Still, all issues, no matter how contentious, were discussed "in a constructive, cordial environment," Fox said. In side meetings and plenary sessions alike, "a message of growing optimism was repeated."