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SOUTH AMERICA

Mercosur Parliament to meet in March

BRASILIA - (AP) -- A new international parliament was born on Thursday -- one that can pass no laws and so far has few members. Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva outlined lofty -- if unspecific -- goals for the new Mercosur Parliament at an inaugural ceremony for it in Brazil's Senate chambers.

Lula da Silva said the parliament would promote "democracy, liberty and peace and sustainable development with social justice" as well as encouraging integration among the five Mercosur nations, which have struggled for years to give some muscle to a trade bloc that has served more as a symbol of regional identity than as a functioning free-trade zone.

Initially, the parliament will have no power other than persuasion, serving as an advisory committee for the foreign ministers of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Venezuela.

Each nation's congress will name 18 deputies to the 90-member body, which is supposed to begin meeting in March at its permanent home in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo. They have to decide how it will function and what it will talk about.

In the long term, the parliament is intended to help unify legislation in the member nations and foster greater cooperation.

It was not immediately clear how legal unification might be achieved or what form it might take, although for years there has been a discussion of a common Mercosur currency along the lines of the European Union's euro.