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SOUTH AMERICAN-ARAB SUMMIT

Leaders endorse free trade

South American and Arab leaders join in endorsing free-trade rules that benefit the poor and greater cooperation between the two regions.

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Associated Press

BRASILIA - Banding together to counter the dominance of rich countries, South American and Arab leaders endorsed a declaration Wednesday calling for free-trade rules that benefit the poor and closer political and economic ties between the two far-flung regions.

Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, a socialist, and American-backed Iraqi President Jalal Talabani were joined dozens of other nations in approving a declaration at the end of the two-day Summit of South American and Arab Countries that also denounced terrorism, U.S. sanctions against Syria and Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories.

"For me, this meeting marks the beginning in a new historical moment in our relations," said Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the summit's host. "The relationship between South America and the Arab countries will never be the same again."

The summit brought 9,000 troops to the Brazilian capital in the tightest security seen here in years. Tanks were posted outside the convention center, ringed with barbed wire, where 15 heads of state and top officials from 34 South American, Middle Eastern and North African nations met.

The leaders agreed trade liberalization talks promoted by developed nations like the United States will benefit the global economy, but said current trade rules "widen the gap between developed and developing countries."

Pushing a goal he has pursued since becoming the country's first elected leftist leader, Lula da Silva urged participants to fight for free-trade rules that improve life for the developing world's masses instead of benefiting just wealthy nations and corporations.

While the leaders stressed commitment to protect intellectual property rights, a key U.S. issue, the declaration said "intellectual property protection should not prevent developing countries from access to basic science to technology, and from taking steps to promote national development, particularly concerning public health policies."

Brazil has repeatedly threatened to break patents on AIDS drugs produced by big pharmaceutical companies in a bid to win lower prices for its internationally recognized AIDS treatment program.

And the United States has complained that Brazil and other countries are not doing enough to stop rampant pirating.

Arab states chose to focus their energy on the Palestinian crisis. The final declaration demands that Israel disband settlements and retreat to its borders before the 1967 Mideast war.

The summit lost luster with the absence of the strongest voices in the Arab world, including the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. In all, seven of 22 Arab heads of state attended, while eight of the 12 South American leaders came to Brasilia. The United States requested to attend as an observer, but Brazil refused.

