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ARGENTINA

FTAA in trouble, not dead, minister says

Argentina and its Mercosur partners -- Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay -- are ready to resume talks 'as long as they're equitable,' according to Rafael Bielsa, Argentina's foreign minister.

BUENOS AIRES - (EFE) -- Argentina's foreign minister says the U.S.-pushed Free Trade Area of the Americas project to create a hemisphere-wide economic bloc, while in serious trouble, is not dead.

"It would be most correct to say that it depends on the willingness of some parties to negotiate," Rafael Bielsa said in an Op-Ed piece appearing in Monday's edition of the Argentine daily Clarin.

The FTAA, as the proposed deal is known, "has failed so far due to the imbalance in the negotiations, but neither is there any impediment nor demand that is stopping us from moving forward," the minister said.

Bielsa stressed that Argentina and its Mercosur partners -- Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay -- are ready to resume talks "as long as they're equitable," citing the Southern Cone bloc's "commitment and permanent interest" in the FTAA and other proposals oriented toward achieving substantive improvements in international trade.

But he pointed to the need for the negotiating process to avoid "confrontational scenarios" and thwart "hegemonic projects," perhaps a veiled reference to the aims of the United States in pushing for the creation of the 34-nation free trade area.

The foreign minister said Mercosur governments are obliged to safeguard the prosperity of their respective peoples, which, in the context of the FTAA talks, means "substantially improving access to [U.S.] markets."

Argentina, Brazil and other large-scale agricultural nations say the huge subsidies that Washington pays U.S. farmers distort trade and must be reduced or eliminated if progress toward freer commerce is to be made.

Negotiations for the FTAA, involving every Western Hemisphere country except Communist Cuba, were launched in 1998 during the 2nd Americas Summit in Chile with the aim of having an agreement in place by January of this year.

Just as Mercosur has failed to win concessions from the United States and Canada on the issue of farm subsidies, the talks have also reached no accord on market-opening measures in the realms of services and investment.