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## LATIN AMERICA TRIP

# Bush's last stop: Panama

**President Bush ended his trip to Latin America in Panama, facing questions about unexploded ordnance -- but no protests over trade. Some observers said he had little to show for his five-day trip.**

BY William Douglas

Knight Ridder News Service

**PANAMA CITY, Panama** - Fresh from bruising discussions over free trade, President Bush Monday wrapped up a Latin American tour in pro-free trade Panama -- and got hit with complaints about unexploded bombs in former U.S. military bases here.

Panama President Martín Torrijos complained that U.S. efforts to remove the ordnance after the U.S. military closed its bases here were insufficient. The bombs, some of which may contain deadly mustard gas, date back to World War II. The U.S. military used Panamanian soil for secret tests.

Panamanian officials maintain that Washington must remove the ordnance under a 1993 international chemical-weapons convention that both countries signed. U.S. officials have said they have met their obligations, but Bush appeared willing to reconsider before he returned to Washington Monday evening.

"We had obligations under the treaty, and we felt like we met those obligations," Bush said during a news conference with Torrijos. "And so we have a disagreement that we will continue to discuss."

Despite the questions on bombs, Bush's session with Torrijos was a welcome change from the other stops on his five-day, three-country tour of the region, where he found strong opposition to the U.S.-backed proposal for a Free Trade of the Americas agreement at the Summit of the Americas in Argentina and on a later visit to Brazil.

U.S. officials have been negotiating multilateral free trade agreements with Panama and the Andean group of nations made up of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

In the end, Bush couldn't get the Summit of the Americas, in its fourth such meeting in a process launched in Miami in 1994, to repeat the routine endorsement of the FTAA, a zone that would stretch from Alaska to Chile. The summit ended with 29 nations saying they favored the FTAA, and five expressing varying degrees of opposition.

"President Bush did not do well," said Bruce Bagley, an international studies professor at the University of Miami. "He received an underwhelming reception both on U.S. security and trade issues. His leadership has clearly been weakened."

Administration officials disagree with that, saying Bush succeeded in building an informal consensus to keep free trade talks alive.

"Very quietly, Bush got an endorsement of 29 of the 34 Summit of the Americas countries," said Eduardo Gamarra, the director of Florida International University's Latin American and Caribbean Center. "He met with presidents from Central America Free Trade Agreement-Dominican Republic countries and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to CAFTA. So I'm a little hesitant to say this was all a defeat for Bush."

Bagley also said he disagrees with the general view in the Latin American media that the split over the FTAA at the Summit in Argentina was a big victory for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, the anti-Bush leftist populist who said he attended the summit to kill and "bury" the FTAA.

"If the administration is capable of putting together a better deal on the FTAA, particularly on agricultural issues, they can get greater Latin American support for U.S. leadership on free trade," Bagley said.

Brazil's president made it clear Brazil would consider FTAA if Washington agrees to trim subsidies to U.S. farmers and takes other steps to open its market to Brazil imports.

Bush also made little evident headway toward improving his and America's image in Latin America.

Polls in the region conducted before the weekend summit showed Bush is wildly unpopular, largely because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Thousands of protesters greeted him during the summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina; a small number shadowed his stop in Brasilia.

"The deck is completely stacked against him," Gamarra said, citing discontent with his policies on Iraq and Cuba. "It will take more than visiting Lula and attending a summit to fix that. I don't think he's going to be able to do it."

But he's trying.

Bush played tourist Monday for the first time on his tour. He visited the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal and briefly manned the controls, allowing a ship to pass through.

Afterward, he went to a baseball diamond and tossed a ball around with some Panamanian youths.