FTAA takes stage in Senate race

Police conduct during the FTAA protests is a top issue as all three
Democratic candidates for Senate appear for the first time together before a
large audience.

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ORLANDO - The pepper spray and rubber bullets used against FTAA protesters
last month came back to haunt Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas Sunday as
thousands of Democrats gathered to get their first look at his bid to become
a U.S. senator.

Just before he took the stage to address activists, one of his rivals for
the Democratic nomination made certain to raise the controversy -- drawing
applause from labor organizers in the audience who have assailed Penelas
over police control. In particular, the city of Miami police, which responds
to a separate municipality, has come under criticism of their handling of
the protests at the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Miami.

U.S. Rep. Peter Deutsch of Pembroke Pines, who has already accused Penelas
of illegal fundraising and letting down Democrats during the 2000
presidential election recount, told delegates to the state party's annual
convention that "peaceful union members" were ``rounded up, pepper-sprayed
and arrested.''

"This is America, my friends, and it should not happen here," Deutsch
said.

The congressman didn't mention Penelas by name -- a stark contrast to
previous attacks in which he has lambasted Penelas in person -- but his
target was clear on a day that the race's three contenders faced more than
3,000 activists.
Penelas met privately with labor leaders over the weekend to discuss the
FTAA protests, in which police from Miami-Dade County, Miami and other
municipalities have been criticized for their tactics.

The president of the state AFL-CIO, Cindy Hall, said her members are
prepared to hold the mayor accountable.
"I told him, there was nobody in charge," Hall said.

Speaking to reporters Sunday, Penelas waved off threats to his candidacy,
saying he supports any investigation of police misconduct but backs his
police force, which worked alongside 39 other police agencies as trade
ministers from Latin America met to hammer out a free-trade agreement.

"They belong to labor unions, too," Penelas said of the police. ``They got
spit at. They had manure thrown at them. They had paint thrown at them. They
were insulted. I'm going to stand up for them, too."

"I will not make a blanket indictment of our police officers, I'm not going to do that," he said. ``I have a responsibility as mayor to make sure we look out for the welfare and safety of all the people who live and visit our community, and I will not compromise that."

OUT OF THE FRAY

Caught in the middle was the race's apparent front-runner, former Education Commissioner Betty Castor.
Castor, who has striven to remain above the fray, did not mention the controversy in her speech and grew uneasy when questioned about it afterward.

"I haven't given a lot of thought about who's to blame," Castor said. ``I've made a decision to run a positive campaign and not get involved in finger-pointing."

In many ways, Sunday marked the official start to the Democratic primary to replace retiring Sen. Bob Graham.
It was the first time all three candidates appeared together before a mass audience of influential insiders since Graham announced he would not seek reelection.

While Castor lags behind Deutsch and Penelas in raising money, she easily topped both in a recent statewide poll conducted for The Herald and The St. Petersburg Times.

The three outlined general campaign themes, bashing Republicans and promising to shore up Medicare and Social Security.

Penelas and Castor offered slick campaign videos, touting biographies and accomplishments.
Yet complaints over police brutality pose a delicate dilemma for Penelas and offer the latest reminder that his record as mayor of the largest county in Florida will come under intense scrutiny.

Business and civic organizations in Miami have lauded the police reaction, saying it proved Miami could peacefully handle a controversial event -- a critical element in the state's campaign to lure the headquarters of the proposed FTAA to Miami.

But labor organizations -- critical in a Democratic primary for campaign cash, volunteers and voters -- are demanding state and federal investigations into the police response.

Penelas made no mention of the dispute in his speech but took pains to note his father's first job was at a hotel, where he was a member of an employees union.

Penelas' presentation appeared designed to stem some of the criticisms Deutsch has lobbed his way, such as calling Penelas a "pathological liar" and accusing him of illegal fundraising.

Penelas boasts in his campaign video that he made ethics and anticorruption a central part of his mayoral administration. He bragged of requiring all

county employees to take ethics classes.

In his speech, Penelas took on assertions that he was absent during the 2000 election campaign and the recount when he could have helped put Democrat Al Gore in the White House.

WITHIN THE PARTY

Deutsch, who has been criticized for his blatant attacks on a fellow Democrat, coyly renewed the debate, telling the crowd that during the 2000 election, ``Some watched from the sidelines, but you and I took sides.''

Even one of the party's presidential candidates, Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman, couldn't help but hint at Penelas' lack of visibility in 2000. "I didn't see the mayor very much during the campaign," said Lieberman, who was the vice presidential candidate that year. ``But that's all I can tell you. Whether he was working or not, I know he supported Al Gore and me, but how much he was working, that's up to the people.''

Said Penelas during his address: ``No matter what you hear from others, I am a proud Democrat. I always have been, always will be.''

Without naming Deutsch, Penelas said in closing: ``Let's come together as a party. Let's have a spirited contest of ideas, not insults.''

Herald staff writer Peter Wallsten contributed to this report.