

Free Trade Area of the Americas stumbling blocks remain

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MIAMI -- This steamy, Latin-flavored cauldron of a city got an early taste Wednesday of the protests expected next month when leaders of the Western Hemisphere's 34 democracies gather to hash out a free-trade agreement.

Twenty anti-globalization demonstrators tried to enter the posh Biltmore Hotel in nearby Coral Gables where hundreds of U.S., Latin American and Caribbean politicians, government officials and business leaders gathered to talk trade and hemispheric relations.

The protesters were rebuffed by police blocking the main entrance. The demonstrators soon dispersed. But not before claiming victory.

"They're locking the door on us," shouted Eric Rubin, director of the Florida Fair Trade Coalition. "This is what democracy looks like, folks. This is what the FTAA looks like."

Rubin and thousands of other globalization opponents are expected to take to Miami's streets Nov. 20 and 21 to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Trade ministers, and perhaps some national leaders, will gather here to try to break logjams threatening the proposed hemisphere-wide common market that would stretch from Canada to Chile.

Wednesday's display of dissension in the streets mirrors to some extent the uncertainty shared by many of the hemisphere's establishment figures over the need for such a trade pact. A number of ministers and trade experts voiced doubts at the Americas Conference over the likelihood that the free-trade agreement will be reached by its January 2005 deadline.

Atlanta, which is campaigning to land the FTAA headquarters, anxiously anticipates a deal. Yet its chances were dealt something of a blow Wednesday when corporate stalwart United Parcel Service, headquartered in Sandy Springs, publicly backed Miami's bid for the FTAA secretariat.

"We have had operations in Miami since 1988," said UPS international spokesman John Flick. "Our headquarters for Latin America are out of Miami. We have a large investment at the Miami airport."

Jose Gonzalez, who heads Hemisphere Inc. -- the nonprofit leading

Atlanta's campaign -- couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

Plenty of competition

Atlanta and Miami are competing against Panama City, Panama; Puebla, Mexico; and Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, for the coveted FTAA secretariat that might translate into hundreds, possibly thousands, of jobs.

Cancun in Mexico as well as Houston, New Orleans and perhaps even Rio de Janeiro in Brazil are also rumored to be considering joining the headquarters competition.

Miami, with its long-standing business and cultural ties with the region, is considered the U.S. front-runner. Its headquarters-search team spent Tuesday and Wednesday buttonholing delegates at the conference and extolling the virtues of the Magic City.

"Florida is, absolutely, the largest trading partner with all of these countries with the exception of Mexico," said Jorge Arrizurieta, executive director of Florida FTAA Inc., the group spearheading Miami's charge. "We are already the undisputable gateway to the Americas."

Privately, Latin American officials acknowledged a preference for Miami. They mentioned the ease of traveling here; the cultural closeness they share with this overwhelmingly Latin city; the shopping, educational and banking amenities; and more.

But there is no guarantee an FTAA agreement will come to pass. Brazil and the United States, in particular, remain divided over import quotas, tariffs and agricultural subsidies.

"We are guided, like all countries in the region, by our national interests. We are defending our national interest," said Rubens Antonio Barbosa, Brazil's ambassador to the United States. "We think that the FTAA should be comprehensive and ambitious in the sense that everything should be on the table."

Peter Hakim, president of Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank, responded that both Brazil and the United States must play ball for the FTAA to come to fruition. He doesn't think that's likely, though, especially with an upcoming U.S. presidential election.

"Frankly, I don't get the sense either in Washington or Brazil that there is really a readiness to take political risks and to spend political capital to make concessions," he said Tuesday. "There's not much momentum there that this has to be done."

Bush committed

Bush administration officials insist the president remains committed to the FTAA. Nonetheless, the White House continues to seek bilateral trade agreements with numerous Latin American and Caribbean governments.

"It's so self-evident to us that we are surprised when people question our commitment to the FTAA," Otto Reich, U.S. special envoy for Western Hemisphere initiatives, said in an interview. "This is one of the president's priorities."

Later, Reich compared anti-globalization protesters to "the Luddite movement of the 19th century."

Demonstrators insisted Wednesday there's nothing backward about their FTAA opposition. They said they support "fair trade" agreements that favor the working poor and not the corporate rich.

From 10,000 to 100,000 demonstrators are expected in Miami during next month's ministerial meetings. Their goal is to scuttle the FTAA, "which goes against basic, fundamental tenets of democracy," Rubin said.