

Violent demonstrations greet Bush's Latin America tour

AFP, Sao Paolo

US President George W. Bush arrived in Brazil Thursday amid protests at his visit that turned violent at the start of his five-nation Latin America tour.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city and financial capital, a massive demonstration poured down the main avenue. Protesters carried signs reading "Bush out of Iraq" and "Down with the Number One Terrorist George Bush."

Organizers said the demonstration drew at least 30,000 people; police put the number at 10,000.

The peaceful demonstration turned violent after a group of protesters entered a prohibited area along the avenue.

Protesters hurled rocks and sticks at police, who fired tear gas and rubber bullets. The clash left 16 police officers and some six protesters injured.

Meanwhile, marchers marking International Women's Day chanted anti-Bush slogans.

"The women are demonstrating to say 'no' to North American imperialism, 'no' to neo-liberalism and 'no' to the domination of one people over another," Maria Fernanda Marcelino, member of the march organizing committee, told AFP.

Hours before the US president landed in Sao Paulo, some 200 members of a far-leftist group hurled rocks at the US consulate. On Wednesday, thousands of Brazilian farmers had occupied offices to protest against agrobusiness and Bush.

In Colombia, on the second day of anti-Bush demonstrations, hooded protesters threw rocks and



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators march in protest of the visit of US President George W. Bush on Thursday in the main avenue of Sao Paulo, Brazil's economic capital.

firecrackers at riot police using water cannon in a pitched four-hour battle. No injuries were reported.

"Murderer of Iraqis not welcome in Colombia" said one sign. "Get out, evil emperor Bush," said another, ahead of the US leader's arrival on Sunday.

Bush, who has been accused by critics of neglecting Latin America,

pledged this week to back social justice and prosperity in the region and unveiled new aid schemes for education, housing and health.

But he faces a region that has recently elected or re-elected leftists who oppose his views, including in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela where President Hugo Chavez has called Bush everything

from a "tyrant" to the "devil."

Chavez, the closest ally of Cuba's communist leader Fidel Castro, arrived in Argentina late Thursday for a two-day trip that will also take him to Bolivia. Although the firebrand Venezuelan has said the timing was a coincidence, he will take part in an anti-Bush protest in Buenos Aires.

When Bush visits Uruguay on Friday, Chavez will headline an "anti-imperialist rally" in a 40,000-seat Buenos Aires football stadium. Anti-Bush demonstrations were also planned in Uruguay.

Bush and his policies, particularly the Iraq war and the fight against drug trafficking, are widely unpopular in Latin America.

In Brazil, trade unionists and leftist movements, including the Workers Party (PT) of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, planned more protests during Bush's stay.

The White House downplayed the protests.

"The president enjoys traveling to thriving democracies where freedom of speech and expression is the law of the land," said Gordon Johndroe, a White House spokesman.

"He brings a positive agenda that will demonstrate the benefits of democracy in such areas as economy, health, education, housing for Brazilians as well as all the citizens of the hemisphere," Johndroe said.

In addition to Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia, Bush will visit Guatemala and Mexico during his trip, which ends on Wednesday.

In Sao Paulo, he was scheduled to meet Lula on Friday to discuss trade and a partnership on the production and use of ethanol, an alternative fuel. The two countries are the world's biggest ethanol producers.

RESTORING SELF-RULE

N Ireland leaders urged to seize 'historic' chance

AFP, Brussels

Britain and Ireland urged Northern Ireland's newly-elected leaders yesterday to seize an "historic" opportunity to restore self-rule in the British-run province this month.

The elections Wednesday left the two main parties cruising towards control of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast, with the Protestant Democratic Unionists (DUP) marginally ahead of the Catholic Sinn Fein.

But all eyes are now on firebrand DUP leader Ian Paisley, who is under intense pressure to strike a power-sharing deal with Sinn Fein -- the political wing of the Irish Republican Army -- by an all-or-nothing March 26 deadline.

"We urge the parties to take on this challenge and to set Northern Ireland on a steady course for the future," British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern said in a joint statement.

"Restoration of the devolved institutions represents an opportunity of historic proportions. It must not be missed," said the pair, who held a press conference in the sidelines of a European Union summit in Brussels.

Britain and Ireland set the deadline for new members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to agree on forming an executive

between Protestant and Catholic parties -- otherwise the assembly will be axed and the province ruled from London indefinitely, with Dublin's participation.

But there was no sign that the DUP would agree to share power with Sinn Fein, as the two parties made gains at the expense of moderates.

"I'll not go into government with a party until its fundamental belief and practice is democracy," Paisley said, according to comments cited by The Guardian newspaper.

The conservative DUP received 30.1 percent of first preference votes, (up 4.4 percent from the 2003 election), while socialists Sinn Fein got 26.1 percent (up 2.6 percent). Paisley and Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams easily retained their seats.

With 72 of the 108 seats filled, the DUP had 25 seats, up two and Sinn Fein 24 seats, also up two.

Full results from the complex single transferable vote system were not expected before late Friday.

Set up under a landmark peace deal in 1998 that largely ended 30 years of sectarian bloodshed, the assembly at Stormont in Belfast was suspended more than four years ago amid cross-community mistrust. Power was returned to London.

Sinn Fein favours integration into the Republic of Ireland, while the DUP wants to keep the province as part of the United Kingdom.

As the DUP and Sinn Fein prepared to meet Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain, he insisted the deadline was absolute.

"It is either a functioning executive with powers devolved on March 26 or it's dissolution and the politicians stop getting paid, Stormont closes down and we pack up Northern Ireland politics, maybe for years to come," he said.

"There has been a culture of deadlines coming and going in Northern Ireland -- sometimes for good reasons -- over the last decade.

"We have now got to the point where there has been such transformation and the people have spoken with such force and clarity that it really is put up time or shut up time."

Blair -- desperate for a legacy other than the divisive war in Iraq -- wants a settlement before he steps down in the coming months. An agreement would also suit Ahern, who is expected to call a general election in May or June.

But as with the 1998 peace accords, the wrangling seems set to go to the last minute.

Bill Gates still top dog but rising billionaires catching up

AFP, New York

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates is still the richest man in the world, but his lead over other entrepreneurs is narrowing, according to Forbes magazine's list of billionaires published Thursday.

Despite Gates leading the rich list for a 13th straight year with a tidy nest egg of 56 billion dollars, US investment guru Warren Buffett's personal fortune climbed to 52 billion, halving the software mogul's lead.

There were now a record 946 billionaires in the world, up more than 150 from last year, with Forbes attributing the increase to a commodities boom, the march of technology and the relative weakness of the US dollar.

The list's total net worth grew 35 percent from last year to a staggering 3.5 trillion dollars, with Mexican telecoms mogul Carlos Slim Helu

jumping into third place with a massive 19 billion dollar increase in his net worth.

"This growth in the billionaires list is a mere reflection of a dynamic global economy. More people are better off on this Earth than ever before," said Steve Forbes, the magazine's editor in chief, unveiling the list.

"This boom goes beyond commodities. One of the things that has facilitated this global boom, bringing hundreds of millions of people into the global economy is, of course, technology," he added.

"This is the richest year in human history."

While the 20th annual list was dominated as usual by US businessmen, Russian oligarchs and Asian entrepreneurs -- especially those from India and China -- were increasingly making their presence felt.

Some 36 Indian billionaires led



Bill Gates

by steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal now featured on the list boasting a total wealth of 191 billion dollars between them, knocking out Japan after two decades as the leading Asian power on the list.

Japanese businessman Yoshiaki Tsutsumi, whose real estate assets once made him the richest man in the world, slid off the list all together, with Softbank chief

Masayoshi Son taking the top Japanese spot with 5.8 billion dollars.

But even India's dominance would be overturned if China and Hong Kong were lumped together with their total of 41 billionaires, led respectively by Hong Kong property magnate Li Ka-shing and China's paper manufacturer Yan Cheung.

"It was a sizzling year in Asia. Both India and China saw huge gains," said Forbes associate editor Luisa Kroll, who oversaw the report. "It seems we just can't get away from billionaires."

In Europe, the most excitement came from Russia and Spain, Kroll explained, with 10 new Spanish names on the list and 19 Russian newcomers.

"The Russians are, on average, 46 years old. That's 16 years younger than the average 62-year-old billionaires," she said.

Forbes, however, urged some caution, saying some of the fortunes in the former Soviet Union did not appear sustainable in the long term.

"If there is a fall-off of commodity prices ... does it have the breadth and depth to take up the slack?" he asked of the Russian economy.

Oil kingpin and Chelsea football club owner Roman Abramovich remained the top dog in Russia with 18.7 billion dollars, with his 52 billionaire countrymen owing their fortunes mainly to oil, steel, mining and metals.

The richest woman on the list was Liliane Bettencourt, 84, of France, the daughter of L'Oreal founder Eugene Schueller, who ranked at number 12 with 20.7 billion dollars.

US likely to pass Japan sex slave bill this month

AFP, Tokyo

A US congressional committee will likely pass this month a controversial bill demanding Japan's apology to World War II-era sex slaves, a lawmaker was quoted as saying yesterday.

Japan's conservative government has been lobbying hard against the bill, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently provoked outrage by insisting that Japanese soldiers did not coerce so-called "comfort women" into army brothels.

Thirty-six lawmakers of the 50-member House Committee on Foreign Affairs have shown support for the resolution, the Yomiuri Shimbun said, quoting senior member Eni Faleomavaega.

The Democratic congressman from American Samoa told the newspaper that the bill would likely pass before a two-week

recess in April and sent to the full House unless the Japanese parliament issues an apology first.

But in a nod to Japanese sensitivities, Congress may suspend deliberations during Abe's expected visit to Washington in late April, the daily said.

The bill -- sponsored by Representative Mike Honda, who spent part of his childhood in a wartime internment camp for Japanese-Americans -- demands an apology by Japan and outright recognition of its involvement in sexual slavery.

The bill gained momentum after the Democrats took control of Congress in January from President George W. Bush's Republicans.

Historians say up to 200,000 young women, mostly from Korea but also from China, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan, were forced to serve as sex slaves in Japanese army brothels.

Pak cleric faces trial for killing minister

AFP, Islamabad

An Islamic cleric accused of shooting dead a female minister because she was not wearing a veil went on trial yesterday at an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan, court officials said.

Mohammad Sarwar was indicted at the court in the central city of Gujranwala 17 days after he allegedly gunned down Zilla Huma Usman, the social welfare minister for Punjab province, at a public meeting.

The killing shocked this conservative Islamic nation and brought strong condemnation from the

country's moderate President Pervez Musharraf, who has vowed to tackle religious extremism.

The bearded 40-year-old cleric was driven to the court in handcuffs under tight police security, witnesses said.

The court heard evidence from the victim's brother and her driver, who seized Sarwar after the shooting.

Sarwar later pleaded not guilty, his state-appointed defence lawyer Tariq Mahmood told AFP. Mahmood said he had been appointed by the court after Sarwar told the judge he was poor and could not afford to hire legal help.



PHOTO: AFP

Greek Cypriot National Guard soldiers present arms during the raising of the Greek (R) and Cypriot national flags at Ledra Street, the main commercial thoroughfare in the world's last divided capital, Nicosia, yesterday. A concrete wall in Nicosia symbolising the decades-old Cyprus conflict was demolished by Greek Cypriots early yesterday to make a crossing point.