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LATIN AMERICA

We need these trade deals

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WASHINGTON -- On Monday, several hundred citizens of the Americas -- members of civil society, faith groups and nongovernmental organizations from nations across our hemisphere -- joined President Bush here for the White House Conference on the Americas. The goal was to strengthen and expand the consensus behind democracy and free markets that defines nearly our entire hemisphere today.

A dream long denied

That this event was even possible speaks to how close the men and women of the Americas are to realizing the founding promise of the New World: that all people, not just elites, deserve the opportunity to make a break with the past and begin life anew -- to replace poverty with prosperity, injustice with dignity, oppression with freedom.

To be sure, the pursuit of this vision in our hemisphere has been long and imperfect. For indigenous people and minorities, the dream of a better life was long denied and is still too often deferred. But over many centuries, the people of the Americas have overcome slavery and colonialism, military caudillos and communist revolution, and we have built a common commitment to political and economic freedom.

As Monday's conference made clear, the ties that bind our hemisphere touch every sphere of human interaction. More than any region in the world, the nations of the Americas are an alliance of peoples -- united through enduring connections of travel, trade, tourism, and family.

A better life

The main challenge now and the focus of Monday's conference was to strengthen the link between democracy and development. People in the Americas have worked hard to build democratic institutions and free market economies, and now they want their governments to help them achieve opportunity, prosperity and a better life.

We must not confuse this impatience with democratic capitalism for a rejection of it. The citizens of the Americas do not want to choose between democracy and development. They want both. Witness the 11 elections in our hemisphere last year, in which voters overwhelmingly chose leaders who are committed to governing democratically, to expanding free markets and free trade, and to delivering on their people's high hopes for social justice.

Under President Bush's leadership, the United States is doing its part to help, and there is no partisan price tag attached to our partnership.

Ideologically blind

Our vision of social justice is ideologically blind. Where governments in our hemisphere are committed to democracy and working to meet the basic needs of their people, they are finding a friend in the United States. They are finding an ally in their quest to expand access to housing and healthcare, to educate their people and to create jobs.

None of this is possible without economic growth, and the citizens of the Americas know this. That is why they are electing leaders who will fight for free trade. Here it is we, not they, who face a critical test. Some of our strongest democratic allies -- Panama, Peru and Colombia -- have made strategic commitments to us through their trade agreements. These are commitments made by democratic leaders, reflecting the deepest aspirations of their people.

The agreements we have negotiated are good and fair. Walking away from them now means walking away from the millions of people in these countries who believe that trade and investment are the key to their prosperity and well-being. It means walking away from our commitment to fight poverty and promote opportunity, and the consequences would be felt in the region for years to come.

Not giving up

This debate is about much more than domestic economics; it is about our foreign policy. Put simply: Does the United States support our democratic allies in the Americas, or not? Do we believe in our own principles, or not? The citizens of our hemisphere are not giving up on democratic capitalism, and we cannot afford to give up on them.

We should be absolutely clear of the consequences for doing so. There are some in the Americas today who believe that authoritarian rule is the only path to sustainable development and social justice. If the United States does not stand with the true democrats of the Americas, who want to better their people's lives not dominate them, then we will demonstrate exactly what the new American autocrats are arguing -- that freedom cannot deliver real benefits and that democracy is a road leading only to false hopes and empty promises.

It is this kind of archaic prejudice that, for centuries, the people of the Americas have sacrificed so much to disprove and overcome. That is why democratic modernizers across the world have always looked to this hemisphere for inspiration in their own struggles. It was true in past centuries, and it is true in this century.

By making democratic development work in the Americas, we show the world that it is possible anywhere. We give hope to impatient patriots in places like Zimbabwe and Burma, Iraq and Afghanistan, and sadly still in Cuba, who long to begin their own journey toward liberty, prosperity and social justice. The promise of the New World may have begun in this hemisphere, but it is a universal vision spanning the globe and it is why the Americas will always matter.

Condoleezza Rice is the U.S. secretary of state.