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Social/Political Issues

The beef industry workers protested in the downtown of Buenos Aires and blocked the traffic. The leader of the labors told that the government has increased the prices of beef slaughtering and the almost 10,000 workers are going to free from job due to closure of beef industries. He said they do not want subsidies but they want their jobs back.

Argentina's court sentenced the last military ruler over the country Mr. Bignone for 25 years. He was ruling over the country from 1976-1983 and it is said by the government that 13,000 people were killed during that dictatorship but the human rights group told more than

30,000 people were killed. It is said that he was having his own torture cells where the people were killed or punished.

Geo-strategic Issues

The president of Russia Dimitri Medvadev visits Argentina and met his counterpart there. This is the first ever state visit of any Russian president in last 125 years. Russian president said that Argentina is a big trade partner of Russia since many years but last year global financial crisis affected the relations between both countries which are overcome now. Both of the presidents made several agreements in various fields as space technology to nuclear technology. Russian president said he will cooperate with Argentina for developing its nuclear technology if it use for peaceful purposes. Also Russia made a deal with Argentina to supply new weapons and weapon technology.

Argentina's minister of science, technology and productive innovation Dr. Lino Baranao visited Qatar along with one another minister. He made some educational agreements to boost their ties in the field of education and technology. The minister said that Argentina will exchange the students with Qatar for study purposes and the students will come to Argentina for medical, arid studies, bio technology and food production etc.

The Prime Minister of Vietnam also visited Argentina last week. Prime Minister Dung said his visit is just to increase relations between Vietnam and Latin American countries especially Argentina which is the third largest economy of Latin America. The relations between Argentina and Vietnam were established in 1973 and both countries are enjoying relations since that time. Both countries signed many agreements in the fields of science, technology and energy etc.

One of the Argentinean foreign ministry's top official met with Chinese vice commerce minister and urged to decrease trade tensions between both countries by negotiations. He said the strategic partnership between both countries is worthy as both countries' stance on many things is common like stance on the reform of global financial system, climate change and free trade etc. Chinese minister also said that both countries are having worthy relationships and China is ready to invest in Argentina in different fields as mining, textile, light industry, home appliances and clothing etc.

Report Summary/Brazil

Geo-strategic Issues

Some commercial officers of Brazil visited Multan's chamber of commerce from Brazilian embassy and pledged to increase their relations in different fields. They said that Brazil will give ethanol bio fuel technology to Pakistan for the alternate source of energy. 90 percent of Brazilian transportation is on ethanol technology. They were on the visit of South Punjab and

have had a meeting with industrialists. They said in next few months the ambassador of Brazil will visit Multan to make these agreements as final. Brazilian officials also ensured to cooperate in steel and poultry sector as Brazil is one of the largest steel producer of the world while Pakistan is exporting textile and sports products to Brazil.

The president of Brazil said in the conference that the BRIC countries are struggling to create good global governance. First these countries are implementing this policy within their country and then the BRIC countries would be able to protect global security as they will solve the problems of climate, food and produce energy. The president Lula also said that global justice is very necessary in the world which would be utilized by the world's emerging powers.

Challenging the existing global power structure, BRIC nations called for urgent reforms of the United Nations and sought international financial institutions to accommodate rising powers even as they pitched for inclusion of India and Brazil in an expanded UN Security Council. Firstly only Brazil was in this agenda but now India has also taken under consideration of BRIC countries for the inclusion of UNSC.

In the BRICs' conference the president of Brazil and China told that they are agree to invest a joint project in the exploration of oil and to build infrastructure. The project is named as Joint Action Plan which overlaps coordination of both countries in various fields. Both countries will expand their relationships in the fields of science, space technology, plant development and mining. Mining means the development and exploration of minerals like iron, ore, nickel, copper and coal etc. China is going to invest \$5 billion in Brazil to build a steel factory which is the largest Chinese project in Brazil. Also both of the countries are offering their languages to other country as Portuguese will be taught in Chinese universities and vice versa. The leaders of both countries said it is to increase public to public relations of both countries.

Brazil and India also made several agreements in different fields of mutual interests by joint agreement of trade. The agreements overlapped the fields of defense, science and technology. Technology means in nuclear technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, marine science and space technology. Brazil will supply new arms to India by this agreement and missile technology. Both countries are increasing their relations in defense fields mostly as they are going to appoint their defense attaches in other country.

As for as Russia is concerned, Brazil and Russia also made many agreements in many different fields. The president Medvadev of Russia said BRIC countries should also focus on combating terrorism and drug trafficking issues rather only focusing on economic issues or increasing their trade. He was saying in response of two suicide bomb blasts in a metro in Russia which took the lives of several people.

Brazilian president said that Sinopec is China's oil company which is buying 200,000 barrels of Brazilian oil which is the largest oil buyer company from Brazil. The relationships are not limited to the economic and political levels from both sides, but also both of the countries are

expanding their strategic relationships. It is clued that next year both Brazil and China are going to launch fourth satellite which also a great achievement of both countries' strategic relations.

Then the BRIC countries pledged to run their trade in yuan rather US dollar. The president of China Mr. Hu had to leave for China from the BRIC conference when a disastrous earthquake took lives of hundreds of people in a province of China.

The foreign minister of Brazil stated that Iran's nuclear program was also discussed in the BRICs meeting and we say that Iran must cooperate with the international community. He said we are supporting Iran's nuclear program if it is for peaceful purposes and not for creating an atomic bomb. As the US is reiterating that Iran is gaining nuclear technology to create a nuclear bomb, not for creating energy.

In the eve of second BRIC summit the representatives of BRIC countries gathered according to a pre-planned schedule and discussed issues related to environment. The representative of China said that the developed countries should contribute more as they have their much part to disturb the environment by gas emission. He also defined that China has set its role to keep the environment clean by reducing greenhouse gas emission. The representative of Russia also spoke on the issue later and said that it is on human beings that how they want to see the environment as they can keep it clean or harm by their policies. After all the representative of Brazil said that all these things are good if these would not remain just dialogue but it's implementation must be ensured.

The minister of trade and energy was complaining that Brazil is getting every opportunity of investing in Egypt but Egypt has not such opportunities in Brazil. He was saying that Brazil is exporting many things from Brazil but do not have any such opportunity of investment. The Brazilian president said Brazil is already an agricultural country which cannot import agricultural products from Egypt and as for as other kind of investment is concerned, two major Egyptian companies are already working in Brazil as Marcopolo and Randon. Egyptian minister wished to increase every kind of relationships with Brazil in future.

Report Summary/Chile

Social Issues

Chile's president Sebastian Pinera announced his \$8.43 billion plan for the reconstruction of affected areas of Chile. He said the reconstruction would be done by increasing the tax, new government debt and withdrawal from the country's copper savings. President Pinera also announced the plan for the reconstruction of port of Coronel which was affected by the tsunami on 27th February. That disastrous tsunami took the lives of 500 families and several were injured. Last week many of the Chilean people tried to gather before the president house to submit their application for the construction of their houses but police scattered them.

Chile is the world's largest wine producer and exporter but the earthquake was a major setback in wine's export. The earthquake caused the damage of 125 million liters of wine as every year Chile is exporting 695 million liters valued wine at \$1.4 billion. It is said that the earthquake would not affect the harvest of wine this year but may be it does as men are busy in reconstruction of their houses and women are taking care of their children who are unable to go to schools due to lack of infrastructure. It is also said that this year there would be less production of wine but it is good for US wineries as they could export more wine in the world market.

Chile's Catholic Church has apologized from the families which were victims of child abuse by pedophile priests. Pedophile priest was showed in a video clip having sex with some children in different times which became a one of the major issue in the country. Later the pop of Catholic Church said these acts are really shameful and Catholic Church can never allow such activities and he apologized.

Report Summary/Mexico

Social/Political Issues

President Felipe Calderon said that most of the dead in drug war of Mexico were criminals and very few were common citizens. He was saying that 90 percent of total numbers are those who belong to the drug cartels or criminal groups. In the eve of his address the drug cartels killed a woman and his 8 year old son along with a federal police officer and some other citizens. It is said that the killing ratio increased when the Mexican forces killed the boss of drug cartels in December who was titled as 'boss of bosses'.

Sex trafficking is also increasing in Mexico as women are taken to United States. Now the government of Mexico has started a campaign to stop sex trafficking with the United Nations' project Blur Heart Campaign but it is said that it has also not been much affective to stop or reduce the sex trafficking. Mexican government is going to conduct the survey over this issue to know the reason of this problem.

Geo-strategic Issues

United States' first lady Michelle Obama visited Mexico alone and it was her first trip abroad as first lady. She came to Mexico and met with Zavala who is Mexico's first lady. Both of them addressed before youth of Mexico that it is true if there are not much jobs for youth they go for such criminal activities or drugs. But she said we have to create economic opportunities and we have to fight against the drugs and other social crimes in the country. Both of the ladies also visited children schools and met with the children. Michelle Obama is running a campaign against the obesity of children in United States which was also introduced in Mexico. She said our husbands are busy in major political and economic issues but we are here to address subtle issues.

It is said that the drug cartels of Mexico has set their target towards US citizens or officials in Mexico. Since last two or three months US citizens and officials are on the target of drug criminals as they have killed many US citizens in the city. Now the government is also taking it seriously as the death tolls have crossed the number of 22,000 since president Felipe Calderon took office in 2006. US ambassador to Mexico said that the drug violence is also disturbing the economy of Mexico as many of the foreign investors are ready to invest in the country but due to the circumstances of the country they are not coming.

Two senators of US said that now the plan of fence at the US Mexico border should start as it has been too late. This project was of president Bush administration but due to debate on it has been late. Now the senators are demanding to make a hard and physical fence rather than virtual fence. They are saying that it is easy to put hard fence and to get benefit from that rather than virtual fence.

Mexican government is mortgaging tax to the border city of Mexicali where an earthquake took place which caused the death of four people and damaged some buildings and plazas. President of Mexico was speaking in the favor of the inhabitants of that city that they would be provided loans to construct their houses and building again and their tax would be subsidized.

Report Summary/Venezuela

Social Issues

An expert of crimes told Venezuelan TV channel Globovision that Venezuela has become the world's most violent country as most of murders are happening in this country. He said Murder rate is currently at 52 homicides per 100,000 people per year, whereas Colombia's rate is 34 homicides per 100,000 people and Mexico's rate is 8 homicides per 100,000 people.

Political Issues

President Chavez attended the ceremony of Venezuela's failed military coup in Caracas. He was wearing a fatigue with a red hat just like soldiers and addressing to the soldiers. It is said that almost everybody was wearing red t-shirt with a red cap at that day to show sympathy with Chavez's socialism. Actually Venezuelan are celebrating their 200 years of independence from Spain. Chavez told his soldiers to defend his country and socialism at any cost even they have to lose their lives. Chavez said Washington was behind that failed military coup in Venezuela and the US is always trying to collapse socialism from Venezuela but our soldiers will defend our country and socialism.

Geo-strategic Issues

Chavez said US is trying to come in the region at every cost as now it has taken seven military bases in Colombia by the name of tackling drug cartels in the region. He said actually

US forces came into the region to attack on Venezuela and if Venezuela gets any kind of attack, it is ready to defend every kind of foreign attack. It is said that critiques on Chavez are these that his mentor is Fidel Castro who is a dictator in Cuba and Chavez is following his policies. Fidel Castro arrived in Venezuela to attend the ninth ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Americas) summit and he was welcomed warmly by the government of Venezuela as Chavez called him his mentor.

In ALBA meeting the president Chavez said that Venezuela has a talented people in science and technology so we have not in need of getting help from others and both countries (Cuba and Venezuela) will cooperate in every field and no one can make them separate or keep them away in cooperation by putting pressure. According to the new agenda of the meetings, both countries will hold quarterly meetings now onwards to discuss the common issues.

Colombia has warned its citizens to travel to Venezuela after the detention of eight Colombians from Venezuela. Last week Venezuelan government caught eight Colombian citizens and charged them that they were busy in espionage. The relationships between both countries have been spoiled after the allowance of US forces in Colombia on the urge of Colombian government and both countries have stop trade between each other. In a response of this statement of the president of Colombia, the president Chavez of Venezuela said that the Colombian government has no moral limitations.

Later the foreign minister of Colombia said that we do not want hateful relationships with Venezuela but we want peaceful relationships. He said we want such relationships with Venezuela where both countries respect each other and which base on respect. In this regard United States' president Barak Obama tried to play a wide role as mediator but the experts say that US could not success in developing a good relationships with Venezuela as it was expected before.

Venezuela has offered many oil companies from China, Russia, Japan, Europe and United States as well. Firstly the relationships were not good so at that time US oil companies were not involve in exploration of oil in Venezuela but the government minister said that the country has never been discriminated with anyone in this case. Always the government has invited the companies from everywhere and who so ever is wanting is granted permission for the exploration.

Malaysian Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir said that Malaysia and Venezuela should boost trade relations with each other. He said that Malaysia is importing 98 percent of its crude oil from Venezuela and importing electronic things to Venezuela like computers, projectors and TV etc. Malaysia is Venezuela's 35th largest trading partner in the world. Argentina has also become Venezuela's supporter in the region and increasing trade with Venezuela. Recently the presidents of both countries met and made some

agreements in the field of energy and food etc. Argentina will set up Venezuela's electric plants in different fields as electricity shortage became a plague in the country.

Chavez said that China is going to lend \$20 billion to Venezuela and the Chinese companies are coming to Venezuela for oil exploration. Other than China, Venezuela has welcomed Uruguayan, Iranian and other European countries' companies to explore oil in southern part of Venezuela. Venezuelan government claims that it exports 400,000 barrels of oil to China but Chinese government's data shows that it is 132,000 barrels per day. Other than this both countries are increasing relationships in strategic field as well. China and Venezuela has launched a joint satellite and China sold Chinese aircraft to Venezuela. But it is said that China's favor to Venezuela is to ensure oil from Venezuela.

Economic Issues

According to the IMF report Venezuela's economy will contract this year as compare to the other South American countries. It is said that the contraction in its economy is due to the electricity shortage in the country. Venezuela could not recover from the economic crisis but almost all other countries of the world recovered from the economic crisis.

Detailed Report/Argentina

Argentine Meat Workers March to Protest Job Cuts (Update1)

April 14 (Bloomberg) -- Argentine meat workers marched to the labor ministry, disrupting traffic in downtown Buenos Aires, to protest expected job cuts amid fears that falling beef production will lead to plant closures.

"Some 10,000 workers risk losing their jobs," Alberto Fantini, secretary general of the Meat Industry Workers Union, who led the protest in the Argentine capital, said today in an interview. "Lots of plants are not working and while the government assures we get paid for the equivalent to 140 hours work a month, we want jobs not subsidies."

Argentines, who ate a record 72 kilograms (159 pounds) of red meat per person last year, may cut consumption by 8 kilos in 2010 because of declining supplies and rising prices, according to the Agriculture Ministry. Argentines see prices overall rising 30 percent over the next year, according to the median estimate in a monthly survey by Torcuato Di Tella University.

Argentina is expected to have 4 million fewer cattle head this year after a drought and above-average slaughtering rates in 2008 and 2009 reduced herd sizes. Farm groups such as the Argentine Rural Society have said slaughter rates increased because the government regulated prices and exports eroded profit margins for cattle breeders.

The Agricultural Ministry on April 6 increased the minimum cattle slaughter weight for the second time in two months in a bid to curb declining supplies.

Slaughtering heavier cattle will increase the amount of beef inventory, the government said. The weight will be raised to 165 kilograms from 154 kilograms as of May 1.

Argentina's last dictator gets 25 years in prison

Buenos Aires, Argentina (AP) — Argentina's last dictator was convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison Tuesday for torture and illegal detentions committed during the nation's 1976-1983 military regime.

Reynaldo Bignone, 82, shared responsibility in 56 cases involving break-ins, robbery, illegal detentions and torture in one of Argentina's largest torture centers, the Campo de Mayo military base, the tribunal ruled.

"Today is a good day for Argentines," said Estela de Carlotto, president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza Mayo human rights group. "We are in agreement (with the ruling), but a lot remains to be done. There are hundreds more accused."

Bignone was de facto president from 1982 to 1983, but the crimes he was convicted of were committed between 1976 and 1978, when he was second-in-command of the Campo Mayo military base.

In the same ruling Tuesday, five other retired military officers received sentences ranging from 17 to 25 years, while a former police official was absolved.

The verdict was read by judge Marta Milloc in a small indoor stadium to hold all those in attendance, mainly family members of the victims and representatives from human rights groups.

Bignone, who is currently under house arrest, was not present.

He was appointed president by the military junta in the waning years of the dictatorship and it fell to him to protect the military as Argentina returned to democracy. He granted amnesty to human rights violators and ordered the destruction of documents related to torture and disappearances of political opponents before agreeing to transfer power to the democratically elected Raul Alfonsin.

Argentina's courts and congress eventually overturned the amnesty, and President Cristina Fernandez has made a priority of prosecuting leaders of the dictatorship.

Bignone has denied responsibility for the crimes in past court proceedings.

Before the sentence was read, Bignone said it has never been demonstrated that "more than 8,000" people disappeared during the dictatorship.

"In times of peace the disappearance of a single person mean one thing and in times of war it means something else," he said.

An official report listed 13,000 people killed during the 1976-83 dictatorship. Human rights groups say 30,000 died.

Argentina seeks to boost education ties

Argentina is initiating steps to boost co-operation with educational and scientific institutions in Qatar to develop this country's science, research and technology in coming years, the South American country's Minister for Science, Technology and Productive Innovation Dr Lino Baranao has said.

Speaking to Gulf Times yesterday, Dr Baranao who was in Qatar on a two-day visit, said there would be more agreements in future for co-operation in science, technology and research with Qatari institutions, including the Qatar Foundation.

The minister said Argentina has agreed to provide technical expertise to local institutions in different areas, including those involved in carrying out medical research, bio-technology, food production in arid areas, food processing and renewable energy.

As part of the emerging tie-ups between the two countries, Argentina has agreed to work more closely with Qatar in education and training of human resources in different sectors, Dr Baranao said.

"We are also working out plans to send students from each country to the other for some useful exchange programs aimed at bolstering relations between the two countries", he added.

Dr Baranao said there is huge scope for strengthening bilateral relations and added that the visit by HH the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to Argentina in January this year had gone down well with the people of his country.

"Qatar's desire to strengthen ties with South America was very much appreciated by our government during his visit," he said.

"Argentina's keenness to buy gas from Qatar is part of our desire to strengthen relations with this country", the minister added.

Recalling that the South American region has historic relations with the countries of the Middle East, including the GCC states, the Argentine minister said though only about a couple of hundred Argentine nationals live in Qatar, people from his country are working in such sectors as aviation, oil and gas, education and different areas of engineering.

"Qatar Airways, to my knowledge, has employed a number of pilots from Argentina, Dr Baranao said and added: "We are eagerly waiting for the launch of a direct flight between Doha and Buenos Aires, as announced by Qatar Airways earlier this year."

At present, Argentineans travel via Sao Paulo to Dubai en route to other destinations in the Gulf region, the minister said.

The launch of a direct flight would facilitate frequent visits, he said.

To a question, the minister said that about 10% of the Argentine population consisted of migrants from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestinian territories. The combined number of immigrants from the Middle East would be a little over 4mn, Dr Baranao said.

The Arab migration to South America started some 150 years ago.

The minister recalled that his country's former president Carlos Saul Menem is of Syrian descent. Two of the ministers of the present cabinet of Dr Christina Fernandez Kirchner had their ancestors coming from the Middle East, he said.

Dr Baranao evinced keen interest in learning about the Spanish-speaking communities in the region, in particular in Qatar. "Closer ties between various groups would ultimately lead to not only a better understanding of themselves but also with the people of this region, with whom different nationalities of South America have historical ties," he said.

Dr Baranao's visit to Qatar was part of his official tour of the region, which included some assignments in Kuwait as well.

The minister said that during his Kuwait visit, Argentina signed some agreements with some educational and scientific institutions there. "I also had the opportunity to visit some ministers of both Qatar and Kuwait during this visit, which is my first ever to the region," he said.

Argentina has diplomatic missions in UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The ambassador to the UAE, Ruben Eduardo Caro, under whose jurisdiction Qatar comes, and Argentina's National Director of International Relations (in the ministry of science, technology and productive innovation), Agueda Menvielle, also accompanied Dr Baranao on his visit.

Vietnam PM visits Argentina

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung led a delegation to Buenos Aires Thursday, beginning his official visit to Argentina, the government said in a report on its website.

The visit indicated Vietnam's determination to strengthen its relationship with Latin America and Argentina, the government website said.

Vietnam and Argentina established diplomatic relations in 1973. Since then the two countries have signed many agreements to promote cooperation in various sectors including trade, agriculture, technology and energy.

Trade between Vietnam and Argentina surged to US\$634 million last year, from \$400 million in 2008. Vietnamese exports were mostly of garment, footwear, rubber, furniture and food products.

Argentina, the third largest economy in Latin America, posted a 0.9 percent economic growth last year as it was affected by the global financial crisis. The economy expanded 8.2 percent on average in the 2003-2008 period.

Moscow seeks to expand influence in South America

Buenos Aires: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev arrived in Argentina on Wednesday on the first visit by a Russian head of state to Argentina, touting Moscow's drive to expand its presence and influence in Latin America.

"Russia has come back to South America," Medvedev said at a news conference with Argentine President Cristina Kirchner.

"In my view, all global major players should be present in Latin America," he said. "So I hope no one is hurt by this. And if they are hurt, we couldn't care less."

Medvedev, who arrived here from a nuclear summit in Washington, earlier talked up business opportunities for both countries at a session with Argentine business leaders, expressing hope trade would continue to grow after a 30-percent downturn during the global financial crisis.

The two inked deals on nuclear energy, trade, space, transportation and sports.

"The world has changed," Kirchner said. "We are no longer a back yard of any state."

The Kremlin said in a statement that Russia was keen to diversify its trade with Argentina, which stood at just \$2 billion (Dh7.35 billion) in 2008 and is largely limited to meat, fruit and mineral fertilizers.

Russia and Argentina are considering cooperation in oil and gas and shipbuilding, with Moscow also hoping to sell arms to Buenos Aires.

Partner

"Argentina remains one of our largest Latin American partners, and I am confident we will be able to fill the gaps which emerged due to global financial crisis through new projects," Medvedev told the business leaders.

Argentina has expressed interest in Russia's air defense systems and aviation aircraft as well as vessels and helicopters that could help the country with its Antarctic program, the Kremlin said. Anatoly Isaikin, CEO of arms exporter Rosoboronexport, said he would sign the first defense contract to deliver two transport helicopters Mi-171s to help Argentina's scientific research in the Antarctic.

The two countries are also considering cooperation in nuclear and space industries.

Sergei Kiriyyenko, CEO of the Rosatom Corp, said he would be signing a nuclear deal that "will allow cooperation in the sphere of building nuclear power stations".

"This year Argentina will decide what to build and where," he said.

He said Russia would offer to build its third-generation reactor with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts, but declined to give an estimate of the price if Moscow is awarded the contract.

"The price of one reactor for such a station begins at \$4.5 billion," Kiriyenko said, adding that Argentina was looking to build two reactors.

"We expect the movement on this project will be dynamic and mutually beneficial," Medvedev said.

Argentine Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana told local radio the two countries signed more than 10 agreements during Medvedev's visit, which he said marked "the first time in 125 years" of bilateral relations that a Russian head of state travelled to Argentina.

A dinner in his honor was to be held at the opulent San Martin palace and crown Medvedev's lightning trip to the country.

On Thursday, Medvedev travelled to Brazil where he joined the leaders of Brazil, India and China in a second summit of the world's major emerging economies known collectively as the BRIC countries.

Russia hosted the first BRIC summit in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg last year.

The Russian leader is making his second trip to Latin America since he became president in 2008. In November that year, he made a four-nation trip to Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba.

Argentina values strategic partnership with China: official

The Argentine government values its strategic partnership with China, an Argentine official said Monday.

Nestor Stancanelli, top international economic negotiator of the Argentine Foreign Ministry, met here with Chinese Vice Commerce Minister Jiang Yaoping to discuss bilateral trade and economic ties and some global economic affairs.

The recovery and re-balance of the global economy calls for common efforts of all countries around the world, said Stancanelli.

Developed countries should not shirk their responsibilities on this issue, or pass the crisis onto the developing countries, he added.

Argentina and China have common stances on many issues such as the reform of the global financial system, free trade and climate change, he said.

The Argentine government hoped to solve the problems in bilateral economic and trade relations through dialogue and consultation with China, and further expand the scale of trade and investment, he added.

Jiang said Argentina has already become a major trading partner of China in the Latin American region as bilateral trade has grown rapidly in recent years.

The Chinese government also values its trade and economic relationship with Argentina, hoping to push forward bilateral trade and economic cooperation to a higher level, said Jiang.

China encourages Chinese enterprises to invest in Argentina, especially those in the sectors of mining, light industry, textiles and clothing, home appliances and electronics, he said.

Argentina has greatly increased trade remedy investigations against Chinese products since last year, and has failed to keep its promise of recognizing China's market economy status. The Argentine moves have brought negative impacts on bilateral trade and economic ties, said Jiang.

China hopes Argentina could refrain from taking trade remedy measures against Chinese products, taking into account the importance of the economic and trade relationship, he said.

China is willing to work with Argentina to deal with the problems in bilateral economic and trade relations through dialogue and consultation, and is reluctant to see protectionism in the way of sound development of trade and economic ties, said the Chinese official.

Detailed Report/Brazil

China's Hu Cuts Short Brazil Visit after Qinghai Earthquake

April 15 (Bloomberg) -- Chinese President Hu Jintao cut short a visit to Latin America after 930 people were reported dead or missing in yesterday's earthquake in a remote western part of the country.

About 100,000 people have been displaced since the 6.9- magnitude quake flattened the town of Jiegu in Qinghai province, Zou Ming, director of disaster relief for the Ministry of Civil Affairs, said today in Beijing. Fifteen thousand homes were destroyed, 617 people are dead and 313 are missing, he said.

The deaths of 66 students and 10 teachers in school collapses echoed the nation's last major temblor in 2008.

Hu decided to return home to take charge of the crisis, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim told reporters in Brasilia. Premier Wen Jiabao arrived in the quake region today, China Radio International reported.

Rescue efforts are being hampered by the town's remote location about 800 kilometers (497 miles) from the provincial capital of Xining. More than 85 percent of the homes were destroyed in Jiegu, part of an ethnic Tibetan region more than 4,000 meters (13,123 feet) above sea level.

"Because of the high altitude many members of the rescue team as well as sniffer dogs are suffering from altitude sickness," Miao Chonggang, deputy director of the China Earthquake Administration, said at the same Beijing briefing. "This kind of long distance rescue operation is a major difficulty."

'Enough' Relief Workers

In Beijing, Zou of the Civil Affairs Ministry, said sufficient supplies would arrive within two days. There are some 10,000 rescue and medical personnel in the area, which is "enough," he said at a press briefing.

Among the dead are children and teachers who were crushed in demolished schools, the official Xinhua News Agency said. The collapse of classrooms in neighboring Sichuan province during a May 2008 earthquake that killed about 90,000 people sparked protests from grieving parents and accusations that corrupt officials ignored sub-standard construction practices.

Only 10 percent of houses at the quake site were made from cement, Miao said, adding that the predominantly mud, wood and brick buildings were almost all flattened.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs is sending 5,000 tents, 50,000 cotton coats and 50,000 quilts to the region, Xinhua reported.

Airstrip Reopens

Hundreds of rescuers headed to the site after a damaged airstrip reopened late yesterday, said a spokesman for the Qinghai government's news department who would only give his surname, Zhang. A single road leading to the area is too narrow for large vehicles, he said.

China Central Television showed residents digging through rubble with their hands. Others struggled through fire and smoke to reach people trapped under a collapsed hotel. Temperatures were forecast to drop as low as minus 3 degrees Celsius (26.6 degrees Fahrenheit). Electricity to the area has been cut, roads damaged and telecommunications disrupted. A reservoir cracked, and workers are trying to prevent flooding, Xinhua said.

The Red Cross is helping the government with search and rescue and has provided thousands of relief tents, said Paul Conneally, a spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva. Taiwan, which has been governed separately from mainland China since 1949, is sending a 23-person team to the area, Xinhua reported.

Rescue Efforts

Efforts "by every means" should be made to rescue those trapped, Hu, who was at a summit meeting this week in Washington, and Wen said in a statement posted on the central government's Web site.

Authorities have dispatched several thousand rescue workers, police, firefighters, soldiers and medical workers to the area, and Vice Premier Hui Liangyu flew in to oversee relief efforts. China Mobile Ltd., China Telecom Corp. and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd. are working to restore phone connections, Xinhua reported.

President Barack Obama's administration released a statement expressing condolences to the families of victims and offering help.

At least one-third of the buildings at the Yushu Vocational School collapsed, including a girls' dormitory and a multimedia center, Xinhua reported. Dozens of parents waited there for news about dozens of people believed to be trapped in the rubble.

Many of the buildings in the region, which has a significant ethnic-Tibetan population, are made of wood and mud, Xinhua said.

Ethnic Tibetans and Uighurs, in neighboring Xinjiang province, complain that they are discriminated against by the majority Han Chinese and haven't benefited from the country's economic growth. Deadly clashes broke out in both regions in the past few years, undermining the central government's main stated aim of ensuring social stability.

Qinghai has a population of 5.57 million, making it among China's smallest provinces. Its economy is only larger than Tibet's and in land mass, the 721,000-square-kilometer province is bigger than Texas. Qinghai was used as a nuclear weapons testing site.

Brazil to help Pakistan in Ethanol bio-fuel production

Multan: Around 90 per cent of transport business in Brazil rely on Ethanol bio-fuel, a by product obtained during sugar manufacturing and Brazil can transfer technology to Pakistan to promote this alternate source of energy.

This was stated by commercial officers from Brazil Embassy in Pakistan Mohammad Yasin and Farooq Irshad in a meeting with delegations of industrialists at the Multan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Thursday.

Brazil enjoys the status of pioneer in alternate energy resources and there exist vast potential of cooperation with Pakistan in this sector.

Brazil is rich in natural resources including oil but its 90 per cent transport was running on Ethanol bio-fuel, they said and added that their country could help Pakistan and transfer technology for ethanol bio-fuel production, agro-based industry including sugar besides high produce of sugarcane.

They said Brazil had come out of the IMF assistance plan in 2005 and since then did not look back while on way to growth and development.

They said Brazil possessed better technology for poultry production, its processing besides meat processing and has world's third largest steel industry, added that cooperation could also be extended to Pakistan in steel and poultry sectors.

The commercial officers said their visit to South Punjab and interaction with industrialists was meant to promote trade between the two countries. Pakistan was exporting only sports and textile products to Brazil but there exist potential to expand the bilateral trade volume.

They said Brazil ambassador to Pakistan would visit Multan within next few months to hold meeting with industrialists.

China, Brazil to Cooperate in Oil Search, Ore Trade (Update1)

April 15 (Bloomberg) -- China and Brazil agreed to cooperate in oil exploration and to build infrastructure needed to ship Brazilian iron, coal and other minerals to China, the governments said in a joint statement issued from Brasilia.

The countries will expand "development and processing of minerals such as iron, aluminum, nickel, copper and coal" and "to extend China's investment in Brazil, including investments in infrastructure to support exports to China," today's statement said.

The statement stems from a meeting in Brasilia, where Chinese President Hu Jintao is attending a heads-of-state summit that also includes Brazil, Russia and India. The four countries are among the fastest growing emerging economies, known as the BRIC nations.

China's pledge to cooperate with Brazil on oil exploration is in line with its goals of securing crude reserves overseas. The agreement comes two days after China Petrochemical Corp., Asia's biggest refiner, agreed to pay ConocoPhillips \$4.65 billion for its stake in Syncrude Canada Ltd.

"The two sides will deepen the bilateral partnership in the oil sector, with the participation of Brazilian companies in development and production in China and the participation of Chinese companies in development and production in Brazil," the statement said.

The countries also pledged to study the use of the real and the yuan, instead of the U.S. dollar, in bilateral trade. The statement didn't mention the value of China's currency.

Brazil, China seal steel pact, other deals at BRIC meet

The agreements were finalized during a meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva before a summit between Brazil, Russia, India and China.

The summit was brought forward a day because Hu was cutting short his Brazil stay to rush back to China to handle the aftermath of a devastating earthquake.

The steel deal involved the Brazilian company LLX, a subsidiary of the EBX group controlled by Brazil's richest man, Eike Batista, and Chinese firm Wuhan Iron and Steel.

The Chinese company would have a 70-percent stake, and the Brazilian one 30 percent in the facility to be opened in Rio de Janeiro state in three years' time.

"It will be the biggest Chinese investment in Brazil and the biggest by China abroad in this sector," Lula said in a joint news conference with Hu.

Batista said the plant's annual output of five million tons of steel would meet demands by Brazil's automobile, shipbuilding and oil platform sectors, with the excess to be exported to China, Batista said.

The other deals signed covered cooperation in culture, agriculture, politics, telecoms and space research.

2nd Update: Brazil Min: Iran Must Show Flexibility In Talks

Brazil's government appeared to harden its position regarding Iran's government and its nuclear program Thursday, saying the country must be flexible in talks with the international community.

In meetings with the leaders of China and India, "President [Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva] reiterated to them Brazil's position that it's important that Iran have the right to develop a nuclear program for peaceful means, but that it's also important that the international community has assurance the program isn't being used for military purposes," Brazil's foreign minister, Celso Amorim, told reporters.

"He further reiterated that applying sanction against Iran could be counterproductive," Amorim said.

Brazil, one of the nonpermanent members of the United Nations Security Council, has been reluctant to back a U.S. push for sanctions against the Iranian government.

Washington says Iran is covertly building a nuclear bomb, while Tehran says it is only pursuing civilian nuclear power.

Amorim said President Lula discussed the matter in talks with Chinese leader Hu Jintao and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"There was an exchange of ideas among them to seek a negotiated and peaceful settlement" on the question of Iran, Amorim told reporters.

The three leaders met in Brasilia in the context of the meeting of the BRIC countries, which also includes Russia.

A press officer from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Thursday confirmed that Chinese President Hu discussed the Iranian nuclear program with fellow BRIC leaders but declined to give further details.

Despite signs that Beijing's resistance to a fresh round of United Nations sanctions against Iran may be easing, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman reiterated early this month China's longstanding position that it "will continue to push for a peaceful solution to the Iran nuclear issue."

Also present at the meeting Thursday was South African President Jacob Zuma.

According to Brazilian diplomatic officials, Zuma also expressed to them the desire that the international community "exhaust all dialogue possibilities to arrive at a solution to the conflict" before considering application of further economic sanctions against Iran.

Brazil's Lula is scheduled to visit Iran for talks on the matter with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on May 15.

BRIC discuss climate change

Brazil: Representatives from think tanks of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) discussed ways to fight climate change at a seminar here Wednesday. The seminar, called BRIC Think-Tank Summit, gathered members of think tanks from the BRIC countries to examine the global economic situation and the role of BRIC countries in the post-crisis global transformation.

World countries need to take joint action to fight climate change, said Indian representative Samir Saran from the Observer Research Foundation. Chinese representative Wu Enyuan, with

the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said the developed countries had a bigger responsibility on carbon emission reduction as the current climate change is a result of some 150 years of industrialization process of the developed nations.

But he said the developing countries, including the BRIC nations, should take their fair share of responsibility as well, and adopt measures to fight global warming. “China has fulfilled its responsibility by taking practical actions in either energy conservation or environmental protection,” he said, adding that other BRIC countries have also committed themselves to carbon emission reduction. Brazil’s representative Eduardo Viola said that implementing these measures is more important than holding discussions.

Russian representative Nikolai Mikhailov said climate change unveiled the notion that human beings can treat nature as they want without caring about the consequences.

Only a radical change in their attitude could make a difference, he said.

The two-day seminar was held on the eve of the second BRIC summit scheduled for Friday in the Brazilian capital.

Brazilian President Lula: BRIC countries must forge a transparent system of global governance

Brazilian President Lula weighs in on the BRIC summit where Brazil, Russia, India, and China showed they are committed to building a joint diplomatic and creative approach to world issues.

The term “BRIC” was coined only 10 years ago as an acronym meant to capture the new reality that Brazil, Russia, India, and China together had come to account for 15 percent of the world’s gross domestic product.

We are countries where everything happens on a large scale. We represent nearly one-half of the world’s population and 20 percent of its land surface, and are rich in natural resources.

Today, the BRICs have become essential players in major international decision making. As such, we are acutely aware of our potential as agents of change in making global governance both more transparent and democratic.

This is the message Brazil offered at the second BRIC summit, held here in Brasília, where the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, and China gathered on April 15. We are committed to building a joint diplomatic and creative approach with our BRIC partners in order to tackle such global challenges as food security and energy production in the context of climate change.

The real baptism by fire of the group occurred during the financial crisis of the past two years. Far from diminishing our weight, our collective strategies enabled us to hold our own. In fact, the sound response of the four countries to the crisis of the developed world opened up new alternatives to the shabby dogma inherited from the past.

The collapse of financial markets revealed the failure of paradigms previously considered to be unquestionable. Truths about market deregulation collapsed. The ideal of a minimal state also collapsed. The easing of labor rights is no longer a mantra to fight unemployment.

When all these orthodoxies collapsed, the visible hand of the state protected the economic system from the failure created by the invisible hand of the market.

While some of the major countries let speculative excesses flourish, BRIC countries promoted growth focused on work and prudence. In Brazil, we never lost sight of the need to tackle social inequality, lifting 20 million Brazilians out of poverty since 2003 and making them full citizens.

At the Group of 20 summit, we proposed ant cyclical policies, market regulation, curbing tax havens, and renewal of the Bretton Woods institutions. On this last score, we are determined not to let the incipient signs of recovery in the global economy serve as an excuse for abandoning a democratic remodel of these organizations. The BRIC members have not injected nearly \$100 billion into the International Monetary Fund just to leave everything as it was before.

As a group, we will continue to advocate the democratization of the multilateral process of decision making. Developing countries have the right to be heard. Bridging the gap that separates them from the rich countries is not only a matter of justice: The world's economic, social and political stability depends on this. It is our best contribution to peace.

From our perspective as emerging economies, the resources that are needed to overcome hunger and poverty may be considerable but are quite modest when compared with the cost of rescuing failed banks and financial institutions that are victims of their own speculative greed.

At the same time, there is no use offering food and charity if the distortion in world agricultural trade still persists. Unfair subsidies in rich countries discourage local production, foster dependency, and divert resources that would be better used in development programs. For this reason, the conclusion of the Doha Round is critical.

The negotiating impasse on global issues is nowhere as serious as that on climate change. In line with this, the BRIC countries are committed to helping close the deal that was elusive in Copenhagen, Denmark. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions while maintaining robust growth in developing countries requires that everyone do their part – as the BRIC countries have been demonstrating with ambitious initiatives to mitigate their emissions.

For that reason, the large traditional polluters have a special charge.

The balance established by the Kyoto Protocol is essential for us to move forward together.

The international scene is cluttered with old problems, even as new ones emerge. Neither the BRIC members nor any other countries are able to face them alone. In the past, unilateralism has led to impasses, if not human catastrophes, such as Iraq.

In today's world, we must therefore rely increasingly on each other. For that to happen we must forge a more representative and transparent system of global governance that can both inspire unity of purpose and revitalize the collective will to seek consensual solutions. In this journey

toward a new world, the BRIC countries are committed to working together to fulfill our responsibilities.

An Asymmetric Trading Partnership

Brasilia, Apr 16, 2010 (IPS) - "Brazil must increase the added value of its sales" to balance its trade with China, said Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the only note of criticism in his references to the partnership between the two countries after they signed a Joint Action Plan.

Bilateral trade showed "spectacular" growth of "780 percent since the beginning of my administration" in 2003, and reached 36 billion dollars in 2009 in spite of the global economic crisis, Lula said.

But this trade is asymmetric. Brazil exports almost exclusively minerals and agricultural products, and imports Chinese manufactured goods.

The various agreements signed at Thursday's meeting in Brasilia cover the agricultural sector, including cooperation between research centers and phytosanitary (plant health) issues, aimed at expanding commodity exports from Brazil.

Agreements were also reached on oil exports, and on cooperation between the two countries' state oil companies for exploring Brazilian reserves of fossil fuels. The technology sector was also included, for example joint satellite launchings, a programme that has been developed over many years, as well as intellectual property.

But the main document signed by Lula and Chinese President Hu Jintao was the Joint Action Plan, which establishes guidelines for expanding and deepening all-round bilateral cooperation over the next four years.

The plan sets out goals, methodologies and initiatives in 11 areas. For instance, a Cultural Month of China in Brazil is planned for this year, and a similar event for Brazil will be held in China in 2011. In the sphere of education, scholarships and other exchange programs were announced, as well as the teaching of both languages at the two countries' universities.

The 9,857-word (in Portuguese) document also defines the tasks of a number of sub-commissions, coordinated by the China-Brazil High Level Coordination and Cooperation Commission, covering joint action in space cooperation, information technologies, science, agriculture, plant health, energy and mining, as well as more general issues like economics and politics.

The two countries have "universal vocations and global interests" in common that underlie the "strategic partnership" between Brazil and China, said Lula, who called Hu a "friend" and "statesman." He expressed deep condolences to China over the earthquake that hit the northwestern part of that country on Wednesday.

Because of the disaster, which killed over 700 people and injured thousands, Hu left Brasilia Thursday night, suspending his planned visits to Venezuela and Chile.

The BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) Summit, originally scheduled for Friday morning, was also brought forward to Thursday evening.

Hu's visit coincided with the fourth summit meeting of the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), established in 2003 as a coordinating mechanism to promote cooperation between countries and regions of the global South, including civil society.

The opportunity provided by the presence of the presidents and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was taken to convene a summit of the BRIC group.

At the presentation of the Brazil-China agreements, Lula referred to Brazil's economic progress, which together with China's rapid growth means the two countries have "the capability, and the obligation, to fight for a new world order."

This must replace today's "asymmetric, dysfunctional globalization," he said.

Today, Brazil is an agricultural power and the phytosanitary agreement signed with China will expand its agricultural exports. But Brazil should also increase its sales of technological products, like airplanes and their parts, because the two countries also cooperate on aviation and space technology.

The launching of the fourth joint Chinese-Brazilian satellite, possibly next year, is a sign of the strengthening of the bilateral partnership, Lula said.

The Chinese state company Sinopec is now the largest buyer of Brazilian oil, importing 200,000 barrels per day, Lula said.

The partnership extends to the sphere of international negotiations, as China has joined the Group of 77 (G77) countries that represents the developing world in multilateral bodies.

China's annual economic growth, at close to double digits, has created a large market for Brazilian agricultural and mining products, but analysts and the business community fear that the South American country may end up a mere supplier of raw materials. Closer bilateral ties have already led Brazil to refer to China as a "market economy," although economists in this country are sceptical of this description of the Asian power.

Hu said Brazil and China would diversify and increase bilateral trade, and expressed his thanks for the solidarity received in the wake of Wednesday's disaster. (END)

In Brazil, a goal for India

Brasilia, April 16: In a major departure from a six-decade-old habit of letting third world countries use India at multilateral fora, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday used his presence here at two such summits, instead, to significantly increase India's deepening ties with Brazil.

At the Prime Minister's farewell meeting with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on the Brazil's President's home turf, India and Brazil took a host of decisions to develop defense co-operation between the emerging powers on the world stage.

The meeting was held on the margins of a summit of the India-Brazil-South Africa (Ibsa) Dialogue Forum and another summit of Brazil-Russia-India-China (Bric).

An India-Brazil joint defense committee, set up as the fountainhead of such co-operation, is to be operationalized and its first meeting will take place in India this year, according to a joint statement here at the end of a bilateral meeting between Singh and Lula.

Brazil's President is prohibited from contesting for a third four-year term in office and will demit office later this year. Although Singh and Lula will meet again at some multilateral summits, yesterday's meeting was the Prime Minister's farewell call on the President on the latter's home turf.

The two sides resolved to pursue the joint development of high-technology military aircraft through continuing contacts already established between the defense research and development organization (DRDO) and Brazil's Embraer.

Embraer, one of the largest aircraft manufacturers in the world, tapping specific segments in defense aviation, is already supplying aircraft which are used by India as part of the country's squadron for movement of VVIPs within the country and often abroad.

The two sides have already appointed defense attaches in their respective embassies in Brasilia and in New Delhi to do the spadework for intensified military co-operation.

Brazil's defense minister Nelson Jobim made a landmark visit to India last month to prepare the ground for what Singh and Lula decided yesterday on bilateral defense co-operation.

Indo-Brazilian co-operation in this sector represents a significant diversification of India's quest for arms and defense technology.

Although Brazil has few external threat perceptions, it has traditionally developed a strong indigenous defense industry, co-operation with which will considerably increase India's options.

The joint statement said the two leaders reiterated the need for active enhancement of co-operation in science and technology, nuclear energy, space and defense for mutual benefit. They also noted that biotechnology, information technology, marine science, and nanotechnology have been identified as areas with significant potential for co-operation. Historically, other countries have exploited India's strengths for their benefit at multilateral fora such as the non-aligned movement or used New Delhi as a whipping boy at summits such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

Yesterday's Singh-Lula meeting represents a refreshing change from this practice.

Chinese President Hu Jintao also attempted to use these summits to China's advantage, but multilaterally instead of bilaterally. Beijing wants to join Ibsa and attempted to use the summit here to push its way into the group.

Singh said yesterday, however, that Ibsa is a forum for “South-South” co-operation and pointedly remarked that all Ibsa countries are democracies, implying that China is not and has no place in a group of democracies.

Medvedev Wants BRIC to Fight Terrorism and Drug Trafficking

The Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev, defended in Brasilia that the political strength of BRIC (the group of countries formed by Brazil, Russia, India and China) can be used not only for discussions of trade agreements, but to combat terrorism practices, drug trafficking and organized crime.

The proposal of the Russian President, who gave no details of how BRIC could perform in these cases, occurs after the double suicide bombing in late March, when two female suicide bombers killed 38 people in the Moscow metro.

With respect to the global crisis, like other heads of state and government who argued proposals in Brasilia for a more balanced multilateral system, Medvedev said the nations that comprise BRIC should seek balance and fairness in the international system, guaranteeing a specific output even for nations affected by global financial crisis.

"One of the most important issues discussed today in overcoming the economic crisis is the creation of a fairer and more egalitarian international system . All our discussions reflected a consensus regarding this issue," said the Russian president.

While Brazil, Russia, China and India do not form a political bloc or a formal trade alliance, BRIC has signed since 2002 a series of trade and cooperation agreements to boost its economic growth. Together, the four nations accounted for 15% of gross domestic product (GDP).

In a joint statement, the presidents of Brazil, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of China, Hu Jintao, Russia, Dmitri Medvedev, and India, Manmoahn Singh, defended the reform of the United Nations (UN). Experts from the four countries that form BRIC (economic bloc of emergent countries) also met in Brasilia during the 2nd Summit of BRIC.

In a statement, the leaders of the four countries said that the UN represents a central role in dealing with change and global threats. Precisely for this reason, the statement said, it is necessary to reform the UN so that the organization is more efficient, effective and representative.

On the global financial crisis, the joint statement of BRIC also asked that the G-20 (Group of 20 largest economies in the world) have a more proactive stance and formulate a coherent strategy for the post-crisis period.

The presidents of the BRIC countries also say that despite signs of improvement in the global economy, much still need to be done and argue that the world needs a more stable financial architecture, so that the global economy is more resistant to future crises.

Fighting hunger - as a way of combating poverty and hunger worldwide, the BRIC countries in a joint statement stressed that nations set out to create a storage system for agricultural data as the basis for a strategy of offering food to vulnerable populations. The same proposed policies would help to reduce global warming and still allow the development of innovative technologies in the field of agriculture.

"We call on the international community to make every effort to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality," says the document, which also notes the importance of adopting strategies for renewable energy, with "cleaner and more sustainable energy systems."

The meeting of heads of state of BRIC, in Brasilia, had as the central themes the global economic crisis and aid to poor countries, and was also marked by the meeting of experts from the countries to present and discuss the experiences between Brazil and Argentina to trade in local currency. BRIC is an informal economic bloc and not a trade association, such as Mercosur or the European Union.

The term BRIC was established in 2001 by the American economist, Jim O'Neil, to refer to the group of developing countries with common characteristics and, according to projections, will present the highest rates of growth over the next 40 years.

Among these characteristics are a stable political situation, manpower in the qualification process, recently stabilized economy, and good reserves of mineral resources. Production levels and export growth, the increase of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the reduction of social inequalities are also part of the characteristics.

According to O'Neil, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Brazil is to double one and a half by 2030. For the projection to be realized, the country should have an average growth of 4% per year until 2030. If the prognosis is correct, Brazil will arrive in 2030 as the fifth largest economy.

According to O'Neil's projections, in 2020 the real growth rate of China's economy will turn around 5% per annum, while in 2040 this figure will drop to a level of 3.5%. Still, it is expected that China's economy will exceed the U.S. as the world's largest by 2041.

For Russia, it is estimated that it might be the sixth biggest economy in 2050. In this case, the projections indicate that as early as 2018, the Russian GDP will exceed the Italian. In 2024, it will be greater than that of France, and by 2028 Russia will surpass the United Kingdom and Germany.

It is also expected that by 2050, India will have the third largest economy, behind only China and the United States. However, it is considered that the country needs to resolve issues such as its poor infrastructure and lack of trained manpower in sufficient numbers.

BRIC countries met for the first time in an official summit in June of last year in Russia. The central theme of discussion was the global economic crisis, which began in 2008 and the role of the dollar as reserve currency and its possible replacement.

Egyptian Minister Complains About Brazil's Eagerness to Export But Not to Import

"We'd rather buy from Brazil than from other places." The statement was made by the Egyptian minister of Trade and Industry, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, to Brazilian and Egyptian businessmen gathered at the Semiramis Intercontinental Hotel, in Cairo, on April 15, for business meetings.

He claimed that his country has historical and traditional relations with the United States and Europe, and said that stronger relations have been established with Brazil as a result of a new context in Egyptian economy, one of development of an environment favorable to foreign investment and expansion of international trade.

The Egyptian minister, however, emphasized that said relations must benefit both sides. Last year, for instance, Brazilian exports to the Egyptian market totaled US\$ 1.44 billion, whereas imports amounted to US\$ 87 million.

Speaking at the seminar, the Brazilian minister of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade, Miguel Jorge, stated that the Brazilian market is open to the Egyptians. "The Brazilian market is very open. Our tax rates on imports range from 10% to 12%," he asserted. Miguel Jorge said that he will be expecting a trade mission from Egypt to Brazil.

As in Iran, the Brazilian minister stressed that Brazil needs fertilizer suppliers, because it has one of the world's largest agricultural sectors and does not purchase the product from Egypt, which is a manufacturer. Miguel Jorge mentioned trade figures between Brazil and the Arab country, and said that more can be done.

According to him, Brazil is not only interested in trade with Egypt, but also in investment and partnerships. There already are Brazilian companies operating in Egypt - such as Marcopolo and soon, Randon -, as well as Egyptian ones in Brazil - there is an electric material manufacturing plant in the state of Minas Gerais.

Rachid underscored how relations between Egypt and Brazil have progressed in recent years. "Brazil used to be just an exotic place to us, because of the football, the coffee and the meat." According to him, however, the country surprised the world with its performance, realistic view, and hard work.

He highlighted the presence and relevance of Brazil in global forums. Rachid compared the growth of Brazil to the progress that his country has made over the last few years. He drew laughter from the businessmen while speaking of other similarities. "We love music, the beach, vacations, and we do not work that much every once in a while," he said.

The seminar, during which Rachid and Miguel Jorge gave their addresses, was held as part of the Brazilian trade mission's schedule in Egypt and region, promoted by the Brazilian Ministry of Development. In addition to attending the opening of the business meetings, minister Miguel Jorge also met with the Egyptian minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Ali Ahmed Abou Elgheif, with whom he discussed the strengthening of ties with Brazil.

According to the president of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, Salim Schahin, who is on mission and sat through the meeting, Elgheif claimed that Brazil has not yet realized how good a market Egypt can be. He also claimed that his country is politically open to Brazil.

Miguel Jorge was also received by the minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Amin Ahmed Mohamed Abaza, and by the secretary general of the Arab League, Amr Mussa. The secretary general praised the work of president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva for establishing closer ties with the Arab countries, and spoke of his "respect" to the Brazilian president.

"The Summit (of South American-Arab Countries) was very important," said Schahin, who emphasized that the Arab Brazilian Chamber played an active role in preparing the latter two, and will do so again in the next one, to be held in Peru. The work of the organization was highlighted by the Brazilian ambassador to Cairo, Cesário Melantonio Neto, who attended the meeting.

According to him, the Chamber plays a key role in providing support to Arab ambassadors in Brazil, and to Brazilian ones in the Arab world. The importance of the Arab community in Brazil was another topic discussed.

Mussa stated that the work of the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital, for instance, is "fantastic." The hospital is located in the city of São Paulo, was founded by the Arab community in Brazil, and is maintained by it as well.

Detailed Report/Chile

Chile's Pinera announces \$8.43B plan to rebuild

Santiago, Chile — Santiago, Chile (AP) - President Sebastian Pinera announced his \$8.43 billion plan Friday to finance Chile's reconstruction with tax increases, new government debt and withdrawals from the country's copper savings.

Pinera announced the four-year plan from the docks of the ravaged port of Coronel, which was hit by a tsunami after the Feb. 27 earthquake.

The president said one phase of his government's response was ending, as basic services returned to the affected southern regions and families recovered the remains of the nearly 500 dead. But the sense of urgency remains.

"We are now racing against the winter rains," Pinera said in imposing a deadline to provide 40,000 temporary shelters by June, when winter arrives in the southern hemisphere.

The natural disaster will cost Chile an estimated \$30 billion, more than two-thirds of which will be shouldered by the private sector and insurance companies.

Pinera, who assumed office March 11, proposed a temporary increase of the corporate tax rate and copper royalties paid by the country's major mining operations, as a well as a permanent increase of tobacco and high-end real estate taxes.

He did not specify how much local and foreign debt Chile would issue or how much the country would draw on the sovereign wealth fund that has grown to \$11 billion with the copper boom in recent years.

The proposed taxes would raise some \$3.14 billion for the four-year plan, and Pinera has promised cuts in government spending to provide an additional \$733 billion during that period.

The president also has suggested that Chile could sell state-owned businesses not tied to its core mining concerns, such as its 40 percent interest in the energy company Edelnor, valued at nearly \$900 million.

But Pinera's first major legislative proposal opened cracks in the political unity that marked his first month in office.

The center-left opposition accused the billionaire president of "privatizing the reconstruction" after he proposed tax incentives for private donations that would add roughly \$155 million to public recovery efforts.

Patience is also wearing thin among Chileans who have lived seven weeks in the quake-ruined region.

On Friday in Coronel, 300 miles (500 kilometers) south of Chile's capital, police prevented protesters from delivering a letter to the president with their complaints about reconstruction delays. Hundreds joined in demonstrations Thursday led by mayors around the nearby city of Concepcion, resulting in nearly 20 arrests.

Pinera has not shied from criticism either. His speech Friday included a broadside against the government of his popular predecessor, Michelle Bachelet. Without naming her, Pinera accused her administration of running up the fiscal deficit to 1.2 percent of Chile's gross domestic product this year.

Chilean wine industry to recover well after earthquake.

A new report finds that damage from the February earthquake in Chile was uneven across the wineries, but nearly 90 percent of the industry will recover relatively well.

“The earthquake’s impact reverberated in the heart of Chile’s wine production region, and raised fear that damage could be widespread,” said Rabobank Food & Agribusiness Research and Advisory Executive Director Stephen Rannekleiv. “However, damage appears to have been minimal and the industry is experiencing a setback rather than a crisis.”

According to the report, “Chilean Wine Industry After the Earthquake,” damages from the earthquake were kept to a minimum with wine losses estimated at 125 million liters, and infrastructure damages at approximately \$430 million.

“The greatest damage to the industry was the loss of wine stocks valued at \$200 million,” said Rannekleiv. “Considering that last year the industry exported nearly 695 million liters valued at \$1.4 billion, the numbers represent 18 percent of last year’s total exports.”

However, even before the earthquake, a 15 percent decrease in wine production – driven by spring freezes and a cooler summer – was forecast for 2010 when compared to 2009. While the earthquake did not have a significant impact on this year’s harvest, it did have two adverse impacts on the wine sector: irrigation problems and labor availability, which will increase costs for wine growers.

Collapsed canals and damaged irrigation systems at vineyards have reduced the flow of water. This raises questions about how much additional investment in irrigation will be needed for the next harvest. Additionally, there is some concern over the availability of labor. Men are tied up in the reconstruction effort, while women – who typically work during grape harvest season – are taking care of children displaced due to collapsed schools.

Further, cellars, tanks, stainless steel vats and oak barrels also suffered material damage from the earthquake. The industry estimates infrastructure losses at \$160 million plus an additional \$20 million in oak barrels. Although there are some winemakers without earthquake insurance, it is estimated that insurance will cover 90 percent of industry losses.

Finally, while there have been no reports of distribution difficulties, damage to road infrastructure presents some increased transport costs – largely due to additional distances and/or longer time required to cover most routes. Despite current challenges in the Chilean wine industry, Rannekleiv said, “the industry as a whole seems optimistic and firm in its decision to continue on the road to strengthening its presence in world markets.”

Implications for the U.S. Wine Industry

With damage from the earthquake and lower production expected not only from Chile, but generally a light crop across the Southern Hemisphere, there will be less bulk wine in the market place, which may be good news for U.S. producers.

“We expect there to be less downward pressure on prices from New World suppliers, which may allow U.S. wineries to regain some of their price footing,” said Rannekleiv. Additionally, Rannekleiv said, “the current situation in Chile alone would have a negligible effect on the U.S. market, but when coupled with Australia’s lighter harvest and a light crop in Argentina, U.S. producers may feel some price pressure relief.”

Chile Church seeks forgiveness for abuse

The Catholic Church in Chile has asked for forgiveness from victims of pedophile priests in the country, saying there were 20 known such cases.

"There is no place for a priest who abuses children. There is no excuse that can justify this crime," the head of Chile's bishops' conference underway in Santiago, Monsignor Alejandro Goic, told a news conference on Tuesday.

"To the people directly affected, and to communities that have seen scandalous motives in any priest, we ask forgiveness, and we appeal for these acts to be communicated to us," he said.

He said the Church was committed "to making sure these grave crimes are never repeated."

Goic said that, of the 20 known cases of pedophile priests, five had been convicted.

The appeal for pardon was one of the strongest yet from the Church over the pedophile scandal that is darkly tarnishing its image.

It followed words of contrition on Monday from Pope Benedict XVI, who admitted he led a "wounded and sinner" Church, according to the Vatican daily L'Osservatore Romano.

The waves of allegations sweeping the Church in Europe and the Americas had also been the backdrop to a tearful meeting between the pope and abuse victims on Sunday in Malta, one of the latest countries to be hit by sex abuse scandals.

In his third meeting with victims of child-molesting priests - the other two were during trips to Australia and the United States in 2008 - Benedict expressed his "shame and sorrow" over the scourge.

Detailed Report/Mexico

First ladies of Mexico and US press for social improvements that could solve bigger problems

Mexico City (AP) — Their presidential husbands establish official policy and formally pledge bilateral cooperation, but first ladies are often the ones who can most effectively draw attention to issues, Mexico's first lady said Thursday.

Margarita Zavala spent three days visiting schools and museums in Mexico City with U.S. first lady Michelle Obama. While they weren't talking about Mexico's rampant drug violence or the 275,000 Mexicans deported from the U.S. last year, it was clear the children and family programs they highlighted could help resolve such grim and entrenched problems.

"There are some issues which we (the first ladies) are freer to choose to address, like working with children and young people," Zavala told The Associated Press during an exclusive interview at the presidential residence.

Nearly 23,000 people have been killed in increasingly brutal drug-gang violence since Mexican President Felipe Calderon took office in late 2006 and promptly deployed more than 45,000 soldiers to battle the drug cartels. The troops have taken out several top drug traffickers — only to see new drug bosses quickly take their places.

The U.S. has supported the effort, providing helicopters, dogs, surveillance gear and other law-enforcement support through the \$1.3 billion Merida Initiative.

Critics say the army-led offensive is only fueling the war. For them, the real solution would be to reduce the heavy demand for drugs in the U.S. while stimulating the Mexican economy to provide other opportunities for would-be drug traffickers.

As the first ladies were meeting Wednesday night, six people were killed — including a mother and her 8-year-old child, a taxi driver and a federal police officer — and five wounded during an apparently drug-related gun battle on the main boulevard of the Pacific coast resort city of Acapulco.

President Barack Obama and his top Cabinet officials have repeatedly visited Mexico to underscore their shared responsibility for violence stemming from drug trafficking, but Michelle Obama and Zavala are pressing for social programs that, in the end, may present more subtle and effective solutions.

"Attending to the lack of educational and employment opportunities in Mexico would be important measures to stem immigration and the number of young people that enter into the drug trade," said Maureen Meyer, a Mexico expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, which promotes human rights and democracy in the region.

Meyer said key elements of violence-prevention programs include items the first ladies have pressed for: providing alternative educational and recreational opportunities, counseling services and job training for young people.

"If young people don't have an alternative in their lives, whatever country they're in, they're going to choose drugs, they're going to choose (the) drug trade. That's the way they make money," Michelle Obama remarked after a speech to several thousand young people during her first international trip alone as first lady.

Beyond their shared ideals, Zavala and Michelle Obama also appear to be developing a strong personal friendship — the two laughed together and chatted cheerfully at various events.

"We are both convinced that the more we can pursue this friendship, the better it will be for the relationship between our people," Zavala told the AP.

Finding common ground has been easy for the two women: They're both well-educated lawyers who left their professional lives to back their husband's political careers and raise their young children. The Obamas have two daughters: Sasha, 8, and Malia, 11. Zavala and Calderon have three children: Maria, 13; Luis Felipe, 10; and Juan Pablo, 7.

"Of course we talk about professional issues, but we also talk about how we help our children cope," Zavala said. "We both consider stability in our family as essential, both for the family and for the president."

Family stability and positive opportunities for young people are the messages that both first ladies stressed during Michelle Obama's two-day visit to Mexico.

Since her husband took office, Zavala has been advocating for improvements in the plight of thousands of Mexican children who immigrate alone to the U.S. in search of their parents. She says about 50,000 children are deported back to Mexico every year, including 22,000 who traveled unaccompanied by adults. Some never find their parents, she said.

In recent months, Zavala also has joined Michelle Obama's campaign to reduce childhood obesity, while Obama has advocated for strengthening opportunities for Mexican children.

"The social dimension of the relationship, vital between two societies that are so deeply intertwined, has largely been absent in the political discussions between the governments, so the first ladies are helping put that on the agenda," said Andrew Selee, who directs the nonprofit Mexico Institute at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center.

'Mexico drug war dead mostly criminals'

President Felipe Calderon insisted on Friday that few innocent civilians have fallen victim to Mexico's bloody drug war, saying almost all those killed are people tied to cartels wrestling for power.

Speaking during a tourism conference, Calderon said criminals constitute more than 90 per cent of the drug war's death toll, which stands at nearly 23,000 in just over three years.

Calderon said police officers and soldiers make up less than five per cent of deaths and bystanders or other innocents even less.

"But even so, my friends, I recognize that it's a real problem," Calderon said of the drug violence.

"We are fighting it with firmness and we are making progress with our goal," he added.

Calderon's comments came two days after a gun battle in broad daylight killed six people and wounded five on the main boulevard of Acapulco's tourist zone. Among the dead were a mother and her 8-year-old child. A federal police officer and another bystander also were killed. Federal police have arrested 26-year-old Ernesto Antonio Rocha Reyes, an alleged hitman authorities say carried out the attack with a high-powered assault rifle.

On Friday, four police officers were shot to death in the border state of Tamaulipas.

In Cuernavaca, a city near Mexico's capital, authorities said they found three bags stuffed with hacked-up bodies dumped in a busy street, accompanied by a message that tied the killings to a drug cartel. Police said the number of bodies had not been determined.

Cuernavaca has seen a spike in violence since Mexican marines killed drug kingpin Arturo Beltran Leyva during a December shootout at an upscale apartment complex in the city. Authorities say Beltran Leyva's death triggered a battle for control of his cartel.

Also on Friday, federal authorities announced they had seized more than three tons of pseudoephedrine in a shipment that arrived at the Gulf coast port of Veracruz from India. Pseudoephedrine is a precursor chemical used to manufacture methamphetamines.

An estimated 22,700 people have been killed in Mexico's drug war since December 2006, when a US-backed military crackdown on the cartels began, the government said earlier this week. Its report said more than 9630 people were killed in 2009, making it the deadliest year in the drug war so far.

Calderon said the instances where innocent people are caught in crossfire between police and drug criminals are few, "but they are very painful for us."

Calderon acknowledged that Mexico has a high homicide rate, putting it about 11.6 for every 100,000 residents, but he insisted it is lower than other popular tourist destinations like Jamaica or the Dominican Republic.

Calderon said Mexico has an "image problem" but the country is committed to being a safe destination for tourists.

"We have to work on the perception and image of Mexico," he said.

Mexico sex trafficking soars

Mexico has become the top provider of sex slaves to the Americas, according to the United Nations.

In an effort to tackle the problem, the Mexican government has now signed onto the UN's Blue Heart campaign, but so far it has had little success in prosecuting and convicting human traffickers.

One reason, according to some analysts, is confusion over which government agencies have jurisdiction over human trafficking cases.

In addition the Mexican government has yet to conduct any comprehensive surveys detailing the true extent of the problem.

Mexico's government sets tax, credit incentives for quake-damaged border city of Mexicali

Mexico City (AP) — Mexico is offering a package of tax and mortgage extensions and loans for the border city of Mexicali, after a 7.2-magnitude quake April 4 killed two people, damaged buildings and flooded some land with saline water.

President Felipe Calderon says businesses and taxpayers in Mexicali and the nearby city of San Luis Rio Colorado will get extensions on tax deadlines.

He said Monday that homeowners will get a 4-month grace period for paying mortgages, and government development banks will help finance the recovery of agricultural land.

Another emergency program will provide loans of up to 2 million pesos (\$162,000) for small- and medium-size businesses.

Mexican drug cartels hitting US targets

Mexican investigative reporters have revealed that violent drug cartels are increasingly hitting US targets in the country in an attempt to escalate an all-out war with President Felipe Calderon.

Reports in Mexico City's La Reforma and La Jornada newspapers detailed how cartel gunmen had attacked US consulates in cities on Mexico's northern frontier, and had stepped up direct assaults on prisons and even heavily armed Mexican military squads sent to police the border.

Last weekend, a brazen attack on a military checkpoint near the border with Texas left 18 cartel gunmen and soldiers dead, prompting La Reforma to report that "the situation is becoming more and more like all-out urban warfare."

More than 22,000 people have died in drug-related violence since President Felipe Calderon unleashed his war on the cartels in December 2006, and Mexico's interior minister Fernando Gomez Mont admitted that drug bosses had begun targeting US interests in an attempt to widen the war.

"They want to provoke both countries to bring more troops into the area and weaken rival cartels," he claimed.

Senators call for scrapping 'virtual fence'

Washington — Two senators said Tuesday it's time to consider ending a contract for a "virtual fence" along the U.S.-Mexico border, contending it doesn't stop illegal immigration.

Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., even suggested an old-fashioned, real fence may work better than the electronic one designed by Boeing Co.

"We're counting on you to give us a direct assessment and take action to either terminate the contract or take from it what may work," Lieberman told Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin.

Lieberman, chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said at a hearing on border security: "The best answer to this continuing crisis and continued flow of illegal immigrants into the U.S. is to go back to the old-style fences, double- and triple-tiered, and layered."

Sen. Roland Burris, D-Ill., asked Bersin whether the contract could be canceled. Bersin said he was not able to render a judgment on a legal issue.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said in March that she was halting funding to expand the virtual fence that originally was supposed to monitor most of the 2,000-mile southern U.S. border by 2011. It now covers only a portion of Arizona's boundary with Mexico.

The virtual fence is a network of cameras, ground sensors and radars designed to let a small number of dispatchers watch the border on a computer monitor, zoom in with cameras to see people crossing, and decide whether to send Border Patrol agents to the scene.

The fence was part of President George W. Bush's security plan.

Bersin said that the contractor has been unable to integrate the system to allow central monitoring of the border.

"In the near term, the secretary (Napolitano) concluded the wholesale integration is not a goal that is practicable or would produce the kind of results we want to see," Bersin said.

After the shooting death of a rancher, Republican Sens. Jon Kyl and John McCain of Arizona asked Monday for National Guard troops to be deployed along Arizona's border.

The request for 3,000 troops was part of a 10-point plan that includes hiring 3,000 more Customs and Border Protection agents for Arizona, building new fences and increasing aerial surveillance.

US ambassador: violence may hit Mexico investment

The U.S. ambassador to Mexico says drug violence is affecting the willingness of foreign companies to invest in the country.

Carlos Pascual says the violence is "perhaps the biggest threat to our shared economic success."

He says that "unchecked, violence and instability could cause corporations to rethink their business strategy of locating in Mexico."

The ambassador spoke Tuesday at a meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce in the northern city of Monterrey.

Few foreigners have died in the cartel turf battles that have killed more than 22,700 people in Mexico since late 2006. But Pascual noted that drug cartels have expanded into extortion, robbery and kidnapping, increasing concerns for businesspeople.

Detailed Report/Venezuela

Chavez rallies armed militias to defend socialism

Caracas: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called on 35,000 armed militias yesterday to defend his socialist revolution with their lives if necessary as he faces a test of its popularity in elections in September.

Young militias raised assault rifles and clenched fists in the air when Chavez entered the parade area in Caracas in an open military jeep for a rally marking the anniversary of an abortive coup that ousted him briefly in 2002.

"You should be ready to take up arms at any moment and give your lives if necessary for our nation's independence and the socialist revolution," Chavez said, unsheathing the sword of Venezuelan independence hero Simon Bolivar. The show of force by the government-organized militia—whose number is thought to be several hundred thousand nationwide—appeared aimed at defending his 11-year government from what Chavez and his supporters perceive as the threat of another coup attempt or an attack from abroad.

A fierce critic of what he calls US imperialism, Chavez accuses Washington of backing efforts by Venezuela's upper classes to oust him and arming neighboring Colombia for an invasion of his oil-exporting nation.

Tension between the two countries has risen since Colombia announced that the US military will have access to its bases, and Venezuela ramped up purchases of weaponry from Russia. US

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who will visit Colombia this week, said yesterday he did not see Venezuela as a military threat, adding that it had serious economic problems.

Electricity shortages caused by a severe drought and prolonged economic recession have dented Chavez's popularity ahead of elections for the National Assembly, a prelude to a crucial 2012 presidential vote. Chavez, a former paratrooper turned socialist revolutionary, said the drop in water levels at the country's largest hydroelectric dam, the Guri, had slowed following recent rain and vowed that the electricity crisis would end this year. "We cannot allow the bourgeoisie to occupy seats in the National Assembly," Chavez, dressed in green military fatigues and a red beret, told his supporters. "We cannot allow them to undo the revolutionary laws."

Three years after he was elected president, his opponents organized massive demonstrations triggering a coup that briefly ousted Chavez on April 11, 2002. The military restored him two days later after his supporters took to the streets.

In a move that will anger its opponents, Chavez's government decreed April 13 a holiday to be known as the "Day of National Jubilation."

Colombia warns people against visiting Venezuela

Bogota (Reuters) - Colombia on Wednesday warned its citizens of the dangers of visiting Venezuela after eight Colombians were detained in the neighboring country on espionage accusations.

"The foreign ministry warns Colombians about the risks of traveling to Venezuela," the government said in a statement, the latest salvo in a long diplomatic feud between Colombia's conservative government and Venezuela's leftist firebrand President Hugo Chavez.

Colombian leader Alvaro Uribe accuses Venezuela of violating the rights of the Colombians arrested in Venezuela in recent weeks for allegedly spying on its ailing energy infrastructure.

The detention followed months of jibes between Uribe, the top U.S. ally in South America, and Chavez, who is wrestling with power shortages that could boost opposition prospects at legislative polls due in September.

Chavez has clamped down on trade with Colombia and accused "counter-revolutionaries" opposed to his socialist government of slashing power cables to worsen the OPEC nation's electricity crisis, which has forced his administration to ration power in much of the country.

In practice, it could be difficult for many Colombians who work in Venezuela or have family there to refrain from crossing the lengthy border. Tens of thousands of people move from one side to the other every day.

Update 3-Venezuela oil minister seeks U.S. investment

Washington, April 15 (Reuters) - Venezuelan Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez on Thursday welcomed investment by U.S. oil companies to help develop his country's vast crude reserves, as he held energy talks in Washington for the first time in six years.

Ramirez said Venezuela is signing agreements with companies in Russia, China, Europe and Japan to develop its reserves and U.S. companies should be there as well.

"This United States cannot miss this opportunity," he told reporters on the sidelines of a two-day conference of Western Hemisphere countries meeting to address energy and climate change issues.

Relations between the United States and Venezuela have long been strained, hitting a particularly low point in 2006 when visiting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez took on then-President George W. Bush at the United Nations, calling him a "devil."

Ramirez said foreign oil companies wanting to do business in Venezuela would have to "respect" the country's energy laws and policies.

Venezuela has an estimated 99.4 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, with last year's oil production averaging 2.2 million barrels per day, down 190,000 bpd from the year before. It is the world's eighth largest oil exporter and the fourth biggest foreign oil supplier to the U.S. market.

Money Needed To Tap "Heavy Oil"

To boost its sagging output from traditional wells, Venezuela needs foreign investment and technology to tap the heavy oil of the Orinoco belt that requires much upgrading to turn into lighter crude.

Venezuela was criticized several years ago when it forced foreign companies to renegotiate their oil development contracts, reducing their profits. Several companies, including those U.S.-based, sold their stakes instead of following the Venezuelan government's new terms.

Leading U.S. oil companies Exxon Mobil (XOM.N) and ConocoPhillips (COP.N), left Venezuela in 2007 after being pushed out of multibillion-dollar Orinoco projects.

Before Thursday, Ramirez had not held energy talks in Washington since 2004. He said Venezuelan-U.S. relations had been hurt by the Bush administration, which he said had been "hostile" to his country.

"There's no reason whatsoever for this relationship to have been halted," he said. Ramirez said he expected to have a private meeting with his U.S. counterpart, Energy Secretary Steven Chu, during the conference.

Patrick Esteruelas, Latin America analyst at Eurasia Group in New York, said he did not think Ramirez's comments about U.S. firms was significant because Venezuela has not discriminated against companies from specific countries.

"It has just demanded an equally aggressive share of the (oilfield) rent from all willing investors...very few U.S. companies have shown much willingness to go in and swallow that pill," he said.

More Opec Oil Not Needed

On oil market issues, Ramirez said OPEC will not increase petroleum output to bring down oil costs, even though crude prices have been hovering near 18-month highs.

Global oil inventories are "very high" because demand is low, Ramirez said. Any additional output from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries would end up in inventories rather than satisfying consumer demand, he said.

"As long as there is no robust increase in demand there will be no increase in supply," said Ramirez.

Oil prices settled near \$86 a barrel on Thursday on strong economic data from China, a weaker dollar, and an unexpected drop in U.S. crude inventories. [O/R]

Ramirez side-stepped questions about whether oil prices above \$80 to \$90 per barrel would hurt global economic growth, saying that high prices were caused by market players betting on the price.

"The current price is result of speculation in oil markets," said Ramirez.

Current prices are stronger than the \$70 to \$80 range that OPEC ministers said last month is good for both producers and consumers.

Chávez: Colombian government "has not moral limits"

The government of Colombia "has not moral limits," Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez said in reference to a travel warning released this week, urging Colombian citizens not to visit Venezuela.

"Colombia's government has come to such an extent that it has released a communiqué telling Colombians that they should not travel to Venezuela because here they are endangered. What an ability for infamy; what an ability for rotten actions; that government has not moral limits," Chávez said during the awarding ceremony of members of Mission Barrio Adentro.

Chávez celebrated that the government of Colombian President Álvaro Uribe is leaving soon. "I wish an incoming government with which we can respectfully talk."

Colombia wants "the best relationship" with Venezuela

The Colombian government would like to have "the best relationship" with Venezuela, but based on respect, Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jaime Bermúdez said when voicing again concern about Colombians' treatment in Venezuela.

"Colombia has said that Venezuela is a brother country, and we hold it in great esteem, we are very fond of it. So we want to have with it, as with any other brother countries, the best relationship, but such relationship should be based on respect, without harming the national dignity," the Foreign Minister said, AP quoted.

The government of Colombian President Álvaro Uribe has expressed annoyance at the detention of Colombians with charges ranging from alleged spying to paramilitary activities. Add to this no official explanation for the finding of eight Colombians shot dead last October in Andean Táchira state, on the Venezuela-Colombia border.

This week, in addition, the Colombian government issued a travel warning on the risk of visiting Venezuela.

Venezuelan Consulate in Puerto Rico accused of financing political group

Roberto Arango, a Senator for the New Progressive Party, accused on Thursday night the Venezuelan Consulate in San Juan of financing left-wing groups in Puerto Rico, specifically the Caribbean Bolivarian Coordinating Committee.

The conservative Senator told Efe that he has denounced the "irregular activities" of the Venezuelan diplomatic mission through letters sent to the US State Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI).

Arango stressed that he addressed a letter to Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez to inform him of the activities which, in his view, the Venezuelan diplomats are carrying out in the Puerto Rican capital. The leader of the party that favors Puerto Rico's integration to the US as the 51st state said that Chávez did not answer to his letter.

"They use the diplomatic pouch -that has immunity from search or seizure- and other country resources, to finance left-wing groups," the politician said.

Malaysia to Boost Exports to Venezuela

Kuala Lumpur, April 16 (Bernama) -- Malaysian companies should take advantage of Venezuela's strong economic outlook to increase exports of products and services as trade and investment levels between the two countries are still low.

Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir said Venezuela offered opportunities for Malaysians to export food-related products like flavoring, additives, margarine, shortening and vegetable oil.

"Other potential exports to Venezuela are rubber surgical and examination gloves, furniture and wood products," he told reporters after opening a seminar on "Business Opportunities with Venezuela".

Malaysia is Venezuela's 35th largest trading partner, with total trade amounting to RM398.38 million last year. Of this, Malaysian exports accounted for RM148.26 million.

In efforts to increase trade volume between the two countries, Mukhriz said the government would consider a proposal by the Kuala Lumpur Malay Chamber of Commerce to have direct shipment and a dedicated warehouse to store goods bound for the South American nation.

"At the moment, the number of ships plying the route between Malaysia and Venezuela is very weak, there's a lot of transshipments to be done before goods from Malaysia arrive in Venezuela or the other way round," he said.

With the proposed warehouse, Mukhriz said products from companies could be collected at one place and shipped directly to Venezuela.

He said the ministry would also encourage shipping companies to explore and penetrate the Venezuela market.

"Though the level of trade and investment collaboration between the two countries to date is still low, with persistence and foresight, our trade and economic relationship is set to prosper," he said.

Electrical and electronics products were the largest export items from Malaysia, accounting for 31.1 per cent of total exports to that country.

These exports comprised mainly television reception apparatus, monitors, projectors, radio broadcast and telecommunication equipment and components.

Last year, 98.2 per cent of Malaysia's total imports from Venezuela were crude petroleum.

Between January and February this year, total trade between Malaysia and Venezuela rose six fold from the same period last year.

On investment, Mukhriz said it was rather weak, with Malaysia investing RM0.47 million in Venezuela's mining and quarrying industries between 2008 and 2009.

"We have yet to receive investments from Venezuela in Malaysia," he added.

Critics accuse Chavez of dictatorship

Caracas: President Hugo Chavez kicked off a national party yesterday for the 200th anniversary of Venezuela's independence, but critics used the date to accuse him of turning the nation into a Cuban-style dictatorship.

The socialist leader—who casts himself as the heir to 19th century South American independence leader Simon Bolivar—was due to welcome fellow leftist heads of state, including Cuba's Raul Castro and Bolivia's Evo Morales, during the day.

Today, exactly 200 years after Venezuela's initial declaration of independence from Spain, the leaders of the Chavez-led ALBA alliance of nations are to hold a summit in Caracas amid celebrations across the nation.

“We are just a few hours away from the great party,” Chavez wrote. “Happy commemoration of 200 years of struggle. Fatherland, Socialism or Death! We will overcome!” As well as adopting the language of his friend and mentor Fidel Castro, the former Cuban president, Chavez has likewise presented his 11-year rule as a chance for Venezuela to finally achieve true independence after decades of capitalist rule.

The Venezuelan socialist, who came to prominence in a failed 1992 coup and then won power at the ballot-box six years later, has taken over Fidel Castro’s role as the continent’s leading critic of US power.

Street-parties and special events were beginning all over Venezuela yesterday. Armies of workers and volunteers—dressed in the red T-shirts and caps of Chavez supporters—swarmed over Caracas, sprucing up streets and buildings ahead of a military parade and other events planned for today. Opponents, who have only beaten Chavez once in about a dozen votes since 1998, fumed as they saw him turn the anniversary into a massive show of support for his government.

Some supporters of the “First Justice” party rallied at a Caracas square for an alternative “independence declaration”.

“After 200 years, we are again under an odious foreign domination,” its leader Julio Borges said, accusing Chavez of an “indignant submission” to the Castro brothers. “The freedom fighters 200 years ago did not fight for ... dictatorship.”

Thousands of Cubans are working with the Chavez government, deployed in shanty-town medical clinics and sports training centers and delicate areas such as security agencies and energy projects. Chavez supporters view that as a model of international cooperation, while critics say it breaches sovereignty.

Former Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Perez, whom Chavez failed to oust in 1992, also weighed in. “It is not possible to celebrate when a militarized, authoritarian and pro-Communist regime, headed by a murderous coup-monger, has kidnapped the nation,” he said.

Perez even compared Chavez to Hitler in his buildup of a pro-government militia. The training of teenage “communications guerrillas”—to counter the anti-Chavez push of private media—has divided Venezuelan opinion this week. Chavez and his critics are building up to a September assembly vote, where opposition parties hope to cut into the government’s majority.

Chávez Says China to Lend Venezuela \$20 Billion

Caracas, Venezuela — President Hugo Chavez said over the weekend that China had agreed to extend \$20 billion in loans to Venezuela, pointing to deepening ties between the two countries as China seeks to secure oil supplies here.

The announcement of the loans follows other financing agreements with China that have softened a sharp economic downturn in Venezuela, including a \$12 billion bilateral investment

fund. China's ties with Venezuela have grown increasingly warm in recent years, marked by rising Venezuelan oil exports to China, the Chinese launching of a satellite for Venezuela and the sale of Chinese military aircraft to Venezuela.

If the loans materialize, they could give Mr. Chávez a much-needed cash infusion. Some financial analysts, including the American investment bank Morgan Stanley, have said that Venezuela could soon face a cash crunch as it grapples with low oil revenues and a dearth of foreign investment.

"All the oil that China needs for its growth and consolidation as a power is here," Mr. Chávez said at a ceremony on Saturday announcing the loans.

Details about the new financing deal were sparse. Xinhua, the Chinese government's news agency, said it involved "soft loans" channeled through the China Development Bank.

The linchpin of the loans appears to be China's thirst for oil, with the China National Petroleum Corporation, or C.N.P.C., agreeing to form a venture with Venezuela's national oil company to explore for oil in southern Venezuela. Eventually the companies could produce 400,000 barrels a day in the area. Venezuela's energy minister, Rafael Ramírez, said C.N.P.C. would need to pay \$1 billion to move the venture forward.

Venezuela, faced with a slump in oil production, has recently been seeking to reach similar deals with energy companies from Russia, India and Spain, as well as the Chevron Corporation from the United States. Mr. Ramírez also made a rare trip to Washington this month where he spoke about oil projects.

While the United States remains the top buyer of Venezuela's oil, China is emerging as a new market. But the precise nature of energy relations between Venezuela and China remains something of a mystery. Venezuela claims it is exporting 460,000 barrels a day of oil to China, while Chinese government data show the country importing around 132,000 barrels a day.

Moreover, Venezuela's government has announced dozens of oil-exploration and refining ventures with companies from an array of countries including Iran, Uruguay and China itself. But almost none have been completed during Mr. Chávez's 11 years in power; the refurbishment of an oil refinery in Cuba is a rare exception to this record.

Raul Castro in Venezuela for ALBA Summit

Havana, Cuba, Apr 19 (acn) Cuban President Raul Castro arrived in Venezuela on Sunday afternoon to participate in the main celebrations for the bicentennial of the beginning of Venezuela's struggle for independence, including the Ninth Summit of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) regional cooperation and integration bloc.

Upon his arrival at the Simon Bolivar airport in Caracas, Raul said he was happy to be there only a few days before the 57th anniversary of his first visit to Venezuela. He highlighted the day coincidence in the beginning of Venezuela's independence struggle 200 years ago and another anniversary of the Cuban victory against Bay of Pigs mercenary invasion on April 19, 1961.

The Cuban delegation was welcomed by Venezuelan Vice President Elias Jaua. Also present were the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Nicolas Maduro, and the Cuban ambassador in Caracas, Rogelio Polanco.

Celebrations to commemorate the beginning of Venezuela's struggle for independence from Spain on Monday include a tribute to independence hero Simon Bolivar, a military parade, a solemn session of the Venezuelan National Assembly and the Ninth ALBA Summit.

The Cuban delegation includes Vice President and Commander of the Revolution Ramiro Valdez; Vice President Ricardo Cabrisas; Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla; the minister of Foreign Investment and Collaboration, Rodrigo Malmierca; and Havana Historian Eusebio Leal.

Crime specialist says that Venezuela is the most violent country in the hemisphere

Fermín Mármol García, a crime specialist, said that Venezuela "has become the most violent country in the hemisphere," adding that homicides and kidnappings have risen to levels beyond control.

"Murder rate is currently at 52 homicides per 100,000 people per year, whereas Colombia's rate is 34 homicides per 100,000 people and Mexico's rate is 8 homicides per 100,000 people. This means that in Venezuela there is one homicide each half hour, while total murders in one year amount to 14,000 homicides," Mármol García said in an interview with private TV news network Globovisión.

The specialist stressed that kidnappings "have increased by 486 percent" (in the last 10 years). It is beyond doubt the most profitable crime in Venezuela, and it has recorded the highest growth in the country."

He said violence rates are due to several reasons, including social problems, impunity, lack of gun controls and drug abuse.

Venezuela, Cuba deepen economic ties

According to the bilateral agenda, both countries are to hold quarterly meetings. "Cuba has a great potential: investments, technology, import substitution. There are many skilled people in the island. We are refining the supplementary economic agreement," said on Tuesday Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, referring to issues addressed with Cuban President Raúl Castro, in the context of a bilateral plan "based on the ideals of Simón Bolívar and José Martí."

Following his meeting with the Cuban ruler at the Miraflores Palace, downtown Caracas, Chávez said: "We are working on an integration plan. We are now preparing a more detailed map for economic complementation, in addition to social development. Our people have to offer thanks to the Cuban Revolution for many things."

He said that no pressure would untie the common destiny of Cuba and Venezuela in their goal to "break the imperial hegemony. What we have sown will be reaped in freedom as time passes by."

According to the bilateral agenda, the two countries will hold quarterly meetings to follow up social development projects.

"I am leaving and we are fully satisfied. We have worked hard. I shall return, like I did the first time I came to Venezuela 57 years ago," the Cuban President Raúl Castro said.

The Cuban delegation led by Raúl Castro also included the Vice-President of the State Council and Vice-President of the Ministerial Council, Ramiro Valdés, among others.

Obama bid to engage with Chavez 'has failed'

The Obama administration has been at pains to extend an open hand to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez but officials admit that a policy of trying to work with him has failed.

Officials also say that a central element of dealing with the Venezuelan President is to try, as much as possible, to ignore his insults and anti-United States incitement because tit-for-tat exchanges only bolster his status in the region.

Yet there appears to be no consensus about how to deal with him. One fundamental problem is the US's waning influence in Latin America -- calls for Venezuela's neighbors to show a united front against Mr. Chavez has only alienated them further.

"At this time we are still looking to encourage and applaud positive actions but with Mr Chavez it is tough," one official said.

"And we're confronting those things that do cross the line, such as the oppression of the media and the oppression of dissent."

The White House is also wary of being too heavy-handed with Mr. Chavez. Memories are still fresh of the failed coup attempt in 2002 in which the Venezuelan leader was arrested by the military for 47 hours before being returned to power. Afterwards, there were allegations of US involvement in the coup's planning, which the Bush administration denied.

Yet the allegations sparked outrage in the region and led to pro-Chavez demonstrations -- the worst possible outcome for policymakers in Washington.

Venezuela, Argentina sign 25 accords

The governments of Venezuela and Argentina signed here Tuesday 25 cooperation accords in a number of sectors including food, construction and energy, during the latest of the quarterly meetings of the two countries' heads of state, Hugo Chavez and Cristina Fernandez.

The Venezuelan president and his Argentine colleague presided over the signing ceremony at the presidential palace in Caracas.

In the energy sector, agreements were signed to begin construction projects for Venezuela's electrical infrastructure, including a wind farm in the western state of Zulia.

Argentina is one of the countries helping Venezuela to overcome the electrical crisis that plagues the Caribbean country and has caused rolling blackouts nationwide, except for Caracas.

State-owned Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. Industrial signed with Argentine firms Gas Tecnologia and GNC Galileo an agreement to undertake two joint ventures aimed at establishing natural gas as an automotive fuel in Venezuela.

The governments of Caracas and Buenos Aires also signed a letter of intent to build a re gasification plant in Argentina to process liquefied natural gas from Venezuela.

Fernandez arrived in Venezuela last weekend to take part Monday in the bicentennial ceremonies commemorating the beginning the nation's march to independence.

Brief: China-Venezuela Oil Deal Details

More details came to light April 21 about China's recent energy deals with Venezuela. Venezuelan Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez said that China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) would offer Venezuela \$900 million to take part in heavy crude oil production in the Junin-4 oil block in the Orinoco River area. The development would begin in November 2010, and would eventually produce an estimated 400,000 barrels of oil. Meanwhile, Ramirez also repeated that China Development Bank had signed a framework agreement loaning Venezuela \$20 billion, half in Chinese currency, which would be repayable with oil. These statements ostensibly provide more details about China's dealings with Venezuela, but they are still coming from the Venezuelan side, as with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's statements made on April 18, and therefore need confirmation. CNPC confirmed April 20 that it signed several credit-for-oil deals with the Venezuelans — one being a long-term financing deal, and another being a supply contract for crude oil to repay a ten-year loan — as well as an agreement to do a joint venture in the Junin block. Venezuela is in dire need of cash and the Chinese have it, but there have been many occasions in the past in which much-vaunted deals failed to materialize. Nevertheless the Chinese confirmation, though it does not provide full details, suggests more substance than the latest agreements. This could be a boon for Chavez in particular. While the development would bring more limited gains to the Chinese, who seek foreign investment opportunities as well as opportunities to employ their construction companies abroad, the deal could also diversify Chinese oil supplies.

IMF: Venezuela's economic contraction will be the largest in the hemisphere

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said that Venezuela's economic recovery is expected to be "delayed and weak" compared to other countries in the region which managed to weather the global downturn "comparatively well" and now are posting a strong recovery at "a robust pace."

According to the IMF, GDP in the Latin American and the Caribbean region will average a 4.0 growth in 2010 and in 2011, with some exceptions such as Venezuela, whose economy will contract in 2010.

According to the IMF, Venezuela will remain the "black sheep" of the region as far as economic growth is concerned, as it will contract 2.6 percent this year, mainly due to ongoing power shortages that are adversely affecting the industry. The IMF expects that the Venezuelan economy will have a small rebound in 2011 with a 0.4 percent growth.

According to the semi-annual report entitled World Economic Outlook, April 2010, Venezuela will show a double-digit inflation, with rates of 29.7 percent in 2010 and 33 percent in 2011, Efe reported.

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