

## **Hu's visits to deepen Latin America ties**

By Sun Hongbo (China Daily)

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President Hu Jintao kicked off a three-nation Latin America tour on Sunday after attending the G20 summit on the global crisis in Washington DC a day earlier. His trip to Costa Rica, Cuba and Peru as well as participation in the 16th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit on Nov 22 are expected to elevate China's relations with the continent to a new height.

With a long history of friendship, China and Latin American countries have made remarkable progresses in developing bilateral ties since the start of the new century.

At a time when international contexts are experiencing profound and complicated changes, the two sides faced stronger demands and fresh drives to further advance bilateral ties.

China and Latin America supplement each other in many fields and enjoy an enormous development potential.

Since China's adoption of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the exchanges of high-level visits between them have been frequent and cooperation in economic, trade and scientific and technological fields has been flourishing. And a new partnership between the two has been built in some regional multilateral organizations.

China is now the third largest trading partner of Latin America and the trade volume between them exceeded \$100 billion last year.

The ongoing international financial tsunami and the collapse of the Doha Round of the international trade negotiations have expanded the common ground between China and the region in their pursuit of national interests.

The rise of trade protectionism, pushed by the spread of the world's economic crisis, makes it more necessary for emerging economies, including China and Latin America, to strengthen communication and coordinate stances on major international issues.

These issues range from reforms of the international financial system to strengthening supervision over the international financial market and pushing for the Doha Round talks.

A strengthened bilateral cooperation will not only be in the interests of the two but also serve the common interests of all developing nations.

The new developments in the region's international politics have also offered good opportunities for China and Latin America to frame an all-round partnership. In recent years, the clout of the US

has been on the decline in Latin America and anti-Americanism has increased in the region due to the rise of leftist forces.

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia conflict, the Kremlin has made a bigger diplomatic offensive to regain its waning traditional influence on the front next to the southern door of the US. India, Iran and the EU are also striving to tighten their ties with the region's members.

Nevertheless, an awareness of an Asia-Pacific identity has been on the rise among Latin American countries. They have shown an increasing wish to enhance economic and trade ties with Asia-Pacific countries, especially with a booming China.

At an Ibero-American summit held late in October, the regional members signed a declaration, calling on the Asian giant to play its role in promoting closer cooperation between the region and APEC members.

The three nations have pinned high hopes on the Chinese leader's ongoing trip to their homelands.

During his visit, President Hu will sign with the hosts a raft of agreements, involving cooperation in economic and trade, financial, energy, education, and scientific and technological domains. That will further deepen Sino-Latin American ties in all aspects.

As the first trip to the Central American country by the highest-ranking Chinese official since bilateral relations were resumed in June last year, President Hu's visit to Costa Rica, also the first leg of his Latin America tour, is of special significance.

The tiny nation hopes to gain China's backing in its bid to enter the APEC and launch talks with the Asian country on a free trade agreement. It being the first country in Central America with diplomatic ties with China, President Hu's visit there is also expected to improve China's relations with the region.

President Hu's visit to Cuba, the first Latin American country that established diplomatic relations with new China, highlights Beijing's support for the new Cuban regime under Raul Castro.

Having suffered three recent hurricanes, Havana looks forward to more investment, assistance and debts-reducing plans from Beijing.

During President Hu's trip to Peru the two countries may reach a formal free trade accord. As an important investment destination in Latin America, Peru has held six rounds of talks with China on the agreement since last September. Bilateral trade between the two was worth \$6.014 billion last year.

Under the new circumstances, the Chinese president's significant visits to the three Latin American countries will add deeper dimensions to their full-fledged bilateral ties.

Also, the trip will advance China's bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Latin America under the APEC framework. Mexico, Peru and Chile are all formal members of the regional economic group, while Costa Rica, Columbia, Panama and Ecuador are working hard for their own membership.

President Hu's Latin America tour ahead of his presence in a high-level APEC forum will expand China's cooperation with the regional members on trade, energy, environmental protection and disaster relief within the far-reaching Pacific-rimmed economic group.

His visits also serve as a major diplomatic move to implement a series of policies China has made on the Latin American and the Caribbean Region.

In early November, the Foreign Ministry issued a document on the country's policies on the region, the first government document issued by China to guide its diplomatic ties with this region.

President Hu's Latin America tour and a series of cooperative accords due to be reached during his visit are expected to consolidate China's established diplomatic strategy toward the region and push forward a healthy, steady and all-out bilateral relationship.

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