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Biden makes first trip to Latin America as VP

BY GIDEON LONG

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Vice President Joe Biden makes his first official trip to Latin America this weekend, attending a summit in Chile where he and like-minded center-left politicians will seek solutions to the global economic crisis.

Biden will attend the Summit of Progressive Leaders in the beach resort of Viña del Mar through Saturday. He will be joined by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the leaders of South America's economic powerhouses -- Brazil and Argentina.

The meeting comes less than a week before Brown hosts the G-20 summit in Britain, and will serve as something of a sounding board for ideas to be discussed there.

"What is clear is that social issues will have to be at the heart of the world's economic recovery," said Francisco Javier Díaz, a policy advisor to the Socialist-led Chilean government of President Michelle Bachelet. "We can't do it the old way, by belt-tightening, like we did in the 1990s. This time around we will be relying on sound counter-cyclical policies."

Biden arrived in Chile late Thursday, hours after the Obama administration unveiled its latest weapon to confront the crisis -- a comprehensive plan to rein in Wall Street with tighter regulation. The White House hopes the plan will prevent a repeat of the reckless bank lending and financial risk-taking that are widely blamed for the current economic mess.

Those are the kind of policies that will find support among the moderate leftist leaders at this summit, as is Brown's call for measures to protect emerging market economies from financial volatility.

Biden's presence here marks a symbolic return of the United States to the so-called "progressive" fold.

The Summit of Progressive Leaders was a brainchild of former President Bill Clinton, along with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. But Clinton only attended one summit -- in 2000 -- before leaving office. After that, the Bush administration stayed away. This will be the first time in nine years that the U.S. government has been present.

Aside from the financial crisis, Biden's visit could shed light on the future direction of U.S. policy in Latin America. Relations between the region and the White House were often strained during the Bush years.

Already, the Obama administration has shown a willingness to reach out to Cuba, but Washington is still at odds with many governments in the region, notably those in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

Four Latin American heads of state will be in Viña del Mar to meet with Biden: Bachelet, Brazil's Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, Argentina's Cristina Fernández and Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez. They will be keen to lay the ground for next month's Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago.

From Viña, Biden will visit the Chilean capital city of Santiago for bilateral talks with Bachelet before traveling to Costa Rica for a meeting with Central American presidents.