

Canada won't wait for U.S. to pursue free trade (A.7)

BY JULIAN BELTRAME
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WASHINGTON — Canadian Trade Minister Sergio Marchi told American business leaders yesterday that the federal government would continue to pursue free trade in the hemisphere even if the U.S. pulls out.

Referring to President Bill Clinton's failure to secure "fast-track" authority to negotiate new trade deals, Mr. Marchi said he does not believe the setback is a major blow to the next summit on a Free-Trade Agreement of the Americas scheduled for April.

With a hemispheric agreement envisioned by 2005, Mr. Marchi said there is still plenty of preliminary work leaders of the 34 countries can tackle, even if Mr. Clinton's hand is weakened by Congress's rejection of fast track.

But he said the U.S. president will need that authority eventually or the FTAA program could collapse.

"FTAA's launch will not be fatally wounded," he said. "What will be de-

layed is the latter part of negotiations. Countries will not cross t's and dot i's and they won't negotiate twice with the United States."

Mr. Marchi said while Canada wants the U.S. to play a leading role in negotiations for the comprehensive, rules-based hemispheric trade agreement, the stakes are too high to wait for Congress to approve fast track. Mr. Clinton has said he will again seek fast track early next year.

Mr. Marchi noted that by 2000, Latin America will have a population of nearly 500 million pumping out a gross domestic product of \$2 trillion US and is being courted by Europe.

"Canada will pursue its agenda in Latin America with or without fast track," he said, adding that the federal government signed a free-trade deal with Chile which is already paying dividends and will be taking the same approach with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay.

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