

## Address by His Excellency Fernando de la Rúa President of the Republic of Argentina

I am very pleased to address you once again, this time to refer to the results achieved in the process of negotiating the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Three years ago, at the previous summit, we instructed our ministers of trade to begin hemispheric negotiations and make concrete progress by the year 2000.

Today we can say with certainty that they have carried out their task to the fullest.

The work done in those 36 months of negotiations — 18 of which were my country's responsibility — has provided us with a first draft of the hemispheric agreement.

We are also implementing a considerable number of tools for business facilitation, tools that are highly useful for our business community and indicate that the integration process is under way.

This degree of progress clearly demonstrates the commitment of the 24 countries of this hemisphere to a continental free trade zone.

We are aware that without firm political will it would have been impossible to achieve these results, no matter how hard our experts worked on behalf of this initiative.

This new summit is a unique opportunity to confirm that we are on the right track, as we spell out the details of our objective of concluding the negotiations within the established time frame.

Therefore, we urge our ministers of trade to continue working to arrive at an FTAA agreement by January 2005.

Regional integration is one of the main foreign policy priorities of Argentina. Like all the countries of the Americas, we are aware of the growing importance of integration processes, not just because they strengthen the economies involved, but also because they promote broader and more comprehensive types of relationships.

That is why, through Mercosur, we have cooperated actively in the FTAA process, in the conviction that our effort at subregional integration is a valuable learning experience in integration.

We know that the road is not free from rough patches.

An agreement that benefits everyone requires a careful balance of interests and a general commitment to include, without distinction, all the issues on the negotiating agenda.

The entrenchment of hemispheric integration that takes account of the dissimilar interests of the 24 participants will be possible only through joint work, which continues to be the most effective way of surmounting current difficulties.