

Argentina and Chile recall John Paul II and celebrate peace

Argentina and Chile commemorated Friday in Punta Arenas the 30th anniversary of the papal mediation which prevented a full fledged war between the neighbouring countries caused by a limits dispute over three islands next to the Beagle channel in Tierra del Fuego.

Punta Arenas was chosen for the anniversary because it was to be the main target of the Argentine forces in their attempt to take over the disputed islands in late December 1978, but was prevented by a personal last minute appeal from John Paul II to the two military dictators of the time Generals Jorge Videla and Chile's Augusto Pinochet.

The mediation also opened the way for a several years negotiation headed by Cardinal Antonio Samoré that concluded successfully with a 1984 peace and friendship treaty confirmed in Argentina by a referendum.

Mrs. Kirchner thanked the Chilean people for their massive presence at the commemorations and recalled her experience as a simple citizen back in 1978 in Rio Gallegos, the other hot spot of the conflict, where there was "outright panic about the situation".

However she underlined that history at the time was not written by free peoples but by military regimes, and they did it "in a crooked way and writing". Under freely elected governments "peoples don't go to war" and "our cities of Rio Gallegos and Punta Arenas never confronted".

"Who would have imagined in the midst of Rio Gallegos airport full of fearful people, that thirty years later as President of Argentina I would come to Punta Arenas to participate with the President of Chile in what we are commemorating today".

Ms Bachelet underscored that conflict has been replaced by cooperation and "proof of this is what for years now we are doing in peace missions in Cyprus, Haiti and with the creation of the Southern Cross joint peace force".

"We who have conquered peace and honour that peace, have a responsibility towards peace in the region and in other parts of the world", added the Chilean president.

Pte. Bachelet and her
counterpart Fernandez during
the celebrations

Presidents Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Michelle Bachelet headed the celebrations which included a message from Benedict XVI read by his personal emissary, a mass in Punta Arenas cathedral, the unveiling of a plaque and the founding stone of monument to honour Pope John Paul II in Mount Aymond and other public appearances which were supported by the local population.

She pointed out that the commemoration was evidence of how far friendship, brotherhood and commitment to peace have advanced.

On the stone to build the monument to the memory John Paul II and honour peace, "we're going to build a new bilateral integration, for a century of peace, liberty and social justice for our peoples", said Ms Bachelet.

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