

*Brazilian President Lula da Silva  
urges Japan-MERCOSUR  
partnership to counter U.S.  
protectionism*

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**Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (L) shakes hands with Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba at the Japan-Brazil Economic Forum in Tokyo on March 26 (Photo by AFP)**

Tokyo, March 26 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has called for an economic partnership agreement between Japan and the South American trade bloc Mercosur to counter the growing wave of protectionism from the United States.

Lula's remarks came during a multi-day trip to Tokyo, where he addressed an economic forum attended by prominent business and political leaders from both nations. "I am certain that we need to move forward in signing an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Japan and MERCOSUR," Lula stated, emphasizing the benefits of integration over protectionist practices.

MERCOSUR, which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, is building on its recent free-trade agreement with the European Union, though that deal faces significant hurdles before it can be finalized.

The Keidanren business federation, representing a substantial part of Japanese industry, has urged immediate action to advance negotiations for a Japan-MERCOSUR EPA, underscoring the significant benefits such a partnership could yield.

The federation highlighted the potential of the South American bloc, which boasts a population of 300 million and an economic output nearing \$3 trillion.

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba echoed Lula's remarks, reaffirming his commitment to enhancing bilateral trade and investment relations. "Business circles of both countries have pushed for an early agreement on a Japan-MERCOSUR EPA," Ishiba stated, underscoring the importance of addressing these voices while continuing discussions to strengthen economic ties.

Lula, who arrived in Japan with a delegation of 100 business leaders, was expected to reiterate his support for free trade in a joint statement with Ishiba later Wednesday.

"We cannot go back to relying on protectionism. We do not want a second Cold War," Lula cautioned. "We want free trade so that we can ensure that democracy, economic growth, and wealth distribution become established in our countries."

[ SOURCE: teleSUR and AFP ]

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