



VENEZUELA POLICY UPDATE: RELATIONS WITH COLOMBIA

July 27, 2010

Washington, D.C. – On July 22, President Hugo Chávez announced that he was severing all diplomatic relations with the Republic of Colombia. The move came after a presentation at the Organization of American States (OAS), where Colombian Ambassador Luis Alfonso Hoyos presented evidence allegedly linking Venezuela to the Colombian insurgent groups FARC and ELN. Hoyos also disrespectfully interfered in Venezuela's internal affairs.

This event was not an isolated one, though. In recent years, repeated unfounded accusations from the administration of President Alvaro Uribe, coupled with a series of aggressive foreign policy initiatives, strained normal diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The most recent round of claims against Venezuela were made in the midst of a rapprochement between President Chávez and President-elect Juan Manuel Santos – who is to be sworn in on August 7. Therefore, the timing of these accusations raises worrying questions about the intentions of President Uribe and those who are behind him, both inside and outside of Colombia.

THE TIMING OF THE ACCUSATIONS

These accusations evidently seek to impact the policies of the new Colombian government towards Venezuela, in favor of sectors that are hostile to Venezuela both in Colombia and in the U.S. Why?

Some recent events help answer this question. First, on July 7, President Obama announced his intentions to submit to the U.S. Congress a pending free trade agreement with Colombia. At the same time, in Colombia, news about a mass grave, where more than 2,000 bodies were found, began generating controversy in Colombia. The FTA, which was signed in 2006, has been stalled over concerns in Congress related to Colombia's human rights record. Once again, this new round of false accusations, using Venezuela as an alleged "threat" that needs to be contained, is a way to set the stage for gathering support for the approval of the FTA between Washington and Bogota.

Second, these accusations have been raised at the very end of Uribe's second and final term, almost a year after Colombia and the U.S. announced a military agreement that virtually ceded seven Colombian military bases to U.S. armed forces and intelligence officials, and less than a month after a U.S. fleet began sailing to Costa Rica under the pretext of fighting the failed "war on drugs."

Given this context, Venezuela had no other option but to break diplomatic relations with Uribe's government. However, the Venezuelan government has stated its commitment to reversing its decision if the administration of President-elect Santos distances itself from Uribe's policies. With a commitment from the Colombian government of bilateral relations based on mutual respect and trust, as well as an understanding that Colombia's



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internal conflict has long impacted Venezuela, there is little reason that relations between the two countries cannot be reinstated and flourish as they had in the past.

UNFOUNDED ACCUSATIONS

From the beginning of President Uribe's administration, Venezuela has been accused of harboring members of the FARC and ELN. In every instance, those claims have been debunked.

In an infamous 2003 case, Moisés Boyer, a Venezuelan who turned himself in to Colombian intelligence agencies and was profiled by the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* as a first-hand witness to the alleged support given by President Chavez's government to the insurgent groups, was found to have lied.

More recently, an allegation that Venezuela had provided the FARC with anti-tank rocket launchers crumbled when it was shown that the very rocket launchers had been stolen from a Venezuelan military installation in 1995 – a theft that was then reported to Colombian authorities.

Similarly, a laptop allegedly “recovered” during an illegal attack on a FARC camp in Ecuadorean territory in March 2008 allegedly proved that links existed between Venezuela and the insurgent group, but a basic analysis of the claims found that they were unfounded, un-provable, or had been doctored to implicate Venezuela.

Additional claims of encampments of Colombian insurgent groups in Venezuela – when investigated by Venezuela authorities – turned up camps on the Colombian side of the border or no camps at all.

The recent accusations have already been exposed as being false. In response to one of the pictures presented by Colombia claiming to prove that FARC camps exist within Venezuela, Narciso Isa Conde, a politician from the Dominican Republic featured in one of the pictures alongside members of the FARC, stated that the camp, which he visited, was in Colombia – not in Venezuela as Colombian officials claimed.

AGGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

In addition to the repeated cases of unfounded accusations against Venezuela, President Uribe has carried out an aggressive foreign policy that has provoked controversy in the region.

The 2008 pre-emptive attack on Ecuadorean soil was a dramatic violation of that country's sovereignty, leading to a condemnation by 11 of 12 of the member-states of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). The attack was of particular concern to Venezuela, because the two countries share a 1,200-mile-long border and the oft-repeated accusations against Venezuela could lead to an act similar to that committed against Ecuador.

In 2009, the U.S. and Colombia signed a defense agreement that virtually ceded seven Colombian bases to U.S. military personnel, intelligence officials, and defense contractors. The agreement was also criticized by 11 of the 12 member-states of



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

UNASUR. Venezuela expressed its concern because the agreement showed an increasing reliance on military means to end Colombia's internal conflict, one that has regular spilled over the border.

VENEZUELA'S ATTEMPTS AT GOOD RELATIONS

Despite ideological differences between President Chávez and President Uribe, Venezuela and Colombia maintained cordial relations for many years.

Under Venezuela's promotion, commerce between the two countries rose to historic highs – over \$6 billion a year. Venezuela dedicated resources to addressing the needs of Colombian refugees that crossed the border, and President Chávez even moved ahead with building a gas pipeline from Venezuela into Colombia over what was once disputed territory.

In 2007 and 2008, President Chávez offered to mediate a humanitarian exchange of hostages between the FARC and the Colombian government, an effort that eventually led to the release of former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three U.S. defense contractors.

These relations can resume under President-elect Santos. Venezuela has made clear that it wants relations based on mutual respect and trust, and that it wants Colombia to understand that the internal conflict that has plagued the country for six decades has had strong negative impacts in Venezuela. Military means alone will not win the conflict, but they will continue to push crime, drugs, and irregular groups across the border into Venezuela.