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What Are the Implications of Venezuela's Nuclear Ambitions?

Inter-American Dialogue's Latin American Energy Advisor

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Q and A: What Are the Implications of Venezuela's Nuclear Ambitions?

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Last month, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced plans to build the first nuclear power plant in Venezuela, a two-unit facility with a capacity of 2,400 megawatts and a research reactor to produce isotopes for medical and agricultural purposes, Russian media reported. How are Venezuela's nuclear power plans being perceived by neighbors or other countries in the world worried about the potential for the proliferation of nuclear weapons? Is nuclear energy the best option for Venezuela's power grid, long criticized for being outdated and inefficient?

A: Connie Mack (R-Fla.), member of the U.S. House of Representatives and ranking Republican on the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee:

"It is important that the United States not turn a blind eye to the goals and posturing of countries such as Russia and Venezuela. The news that Russia plans to assist Venezuela with the development of two nuclear reactors is troubling because Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez is not a man who can be trusted with nuclear energy. This is the same man that has befriended and works with Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, supports internationally- recognized terrorist organizations like the FARC and continues to threaten the stability and security of the entire hemisphere. With the free movement of terrorists (the FARC, ELN and the ETA) through Venezuela, it is very worrisome to everyone in the region that nuclear material could spread through illegal armed organizations. According to news sources, experts say it would take at least a decade for Caracas to get any nuclear program off the ground, while the huge amount of financing needed is unknown. Many believe that Venezuela's energy needs could and should be met by simpler methods in the resource-rich nation, like wind, solar, natural gas and an expansion of the existing hydro-electric system. Venezuela's relationship with Russia and Iran threatens the security and stability of the entire hemisphere. That is why I am calling for expanded energy cooperation between the United States and Canada and investing in diverse energy projects in our own country, such as ethanol, that can be produced from algae. And given Venezuela's ties to terrorist organizations, we must name it a state sponsor of terrorism once and for all."

A: Gustavo Roosen, chairman of Envases Venezolanos in Caracas and former president of CANTV:

"Nuclear energy projects in Latin America have had little success, long delays and clear failures. Twenty-eight years ago, Cuba initiated the 440 megawatt Juragua plant at a loss of \$1.5 billion. Argentina has invested more than \$6 billion in the Atucha II plant since 1979. Brazil halted the Angra III project in 1986 after investing \$1 billion. Venezuela has stated total compliance with the Nuclear Energy Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, the operational safety and massive training, as well as the plant location are critical to the announced project's success. The management of the nuclear waste rods should be a concern both for Venezuela and its neighbors. Venezuela would benefit from the techno- scientific knowledge resulting from nuclear energy. However, the nuclear energy plants cannot be justified for ego or geopolitical reasons. Venezuela is experiencing a severe electrical energy crisis. More than 30 percent of the installed capacity is facing tremendous operational and infrastructure limitations. Corpoelec, the government owned corporation, has yet to present a credible plan to reach 95 percent operating efficiency in the thermal systems or 80 percent in the hydro system. Such a plan, together with timely execution of the expansion projects in the conventional technologies, should be the paramount priority and not the construction of a 500 megawatt nuclear energy plant with an investment of \$3.25 billion that will, at best, be operational in 12 years."

A: Julia Buxton, senior research fellow in the department of peace studies at the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom:

"Russian nuclear cooperation with Venezuela was discussed earlier this year when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Caracas. The White House has had significant time to consider its response. In setting out that Venezuela has the right to peacefully develop nuclear power under the terms of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, the United States is in step with regional and likely global opinion. This was an issue that could have triggered a new battle in the U.S.-Venezuela diplomatic cold war. Fortunately, the Obama administration has not pandered to the political right in the Southern Hemisphere or in domestic politics. This is far from a step toward nuclear weapons proliferation. In fact, given the muddle that is government in Caracas, it will be surprising if this project comes on line within a decade-no matter the pressures for new energy sources. Venezuela does have demand for improved and diversified energy resources, particularly given this government's mishandling of the electric and hydroelectric sectors. Nuclear capability is also a matter of national pride. It is symbolic of modernity and development, as in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. In signing the accord with Rosatom Corp., the Russian nuclear holding company, Chávez will be hoping that he is seen as responding to the energy crisis while boosting national pride ahead of the presidential elections in 2012. There are alternatives: wind, solar, hydroelectric power expansion and natural gas. The value of this deal is the assumed prestige and closer ties with Russia that the nuclear option offers."

A: María Teresa Romero, professor of international relations at the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas:

"Without a doubt, the plans for nuclear cooperation and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Venezuela are creating concern, especially in the United States and among Venezuela's Latin American neighbors. These countries doubt-in the same way that they do about Iran-that the government of Hugo Chávez will utilize the power only for peaceful purposes. This doubt is based in the permanent, antidemocratic behavior in Venezuela, in

violation of national and international law. Many ask if a government that constantly professes to want to be a world power and destroy the American empire will really comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency's safeguarding mechanisms? Not by coincidence, President Obama pointed out that although Venezuela has the right to develop peaceful nuclear energy, the Chávez administration 'must ensure that these systems are not turned into weapons.' There is also the concern that, under the guise of the nuclear plant purchase, the Chávez government will try to aid Iran in circumventing U.N. sanctions and the international controls designed to prevent the purchase of materials and supplies that could be employed in developing a military nuclear capacity. Moreover, this alliance with Russia is worrying for geopolitical and military reasons. It will accelerate the arms war in Latin America and strengthen the presence and political role of Russia in the Americas. In a country like Venezuela, which has abundant renewable energy reserves and enormous reserves of nonrenewable resources that remain underutilized, the development of nuclear energy seems unnecessary, at least in the immediate future. Thus, these nuclear plans seem attributable to mere political objectives rather than valid technology and energy reasons."

The Energy Advisor welcomes responses to this Q&A. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at kuleta@thedialogue.org with comments.