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LADB Staff

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Venezuela Invites Celebrities to Monitor Recall

by LADB Staff
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In preparation for the Aug. 15 vote to affirm or reject the presidency of Hugo Chavez Frias, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) has invited a long list of dignitaries, international organizations, and even entertainment figures to monitor the referendum. These observers, if they accept the invitation, will join the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center, which have already been monitoring the continuing struggle surrounding Chavez's presidency.

US President George W. Bush called on the Venezuelan government to act with "transparency" during the vote, even as his own party rejected moves to bring the UN in to monitor the upcoming US presidential election. Bush’s call sparked another round of verbal attacks from Chavez.

**NGOs, political VIPs, and celebrities invited**

The Venezuelan electoral authority has invited international observers for the Aug. 15 referendum, among whose ranks are ex-presidents from several nations, former government officials, artists, Nobel Prize winners, bishops, and famous actors. The CNE released a list of invitees that included Nobel Prize winners Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Adolfo Perez Esquivel. Former Argentine Presidents Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989) and Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003) are also among the personalities invited. Former US president Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center has been actively watching the referendum process, will be on hand along with OAS secretary-general Cesar Gaviria.

The CNE released a list of 98 invitees, a list that included individuals and organizations. Argentine president of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo Hebe de Bonafini, ex-President of Colombia Belisario Betancourt (1982-1986), Costa Rican ex-President Rodrigo Carazo (1978-1982), papal nuncio to Costa Rica Berloco Giacinto, and US independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader were on the list, as were actors Danny Glover and Barbara Streisand, economist Joseph Stiglitz, writers Noam Chomsky and Eduardo Galeano, and Mexican ex-presidential candidate Cuahutemoc Cardenas.

The CNE also hopes for the attendance of representatives of several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from the US and Europe and Spanish academics. It has invited heads of the electoral courts of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Santa Lucia, Sweden, Uruguay, and the US Federal Election Commission.

Indigenous authorities are also on the list, as well as officials from the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and Mahathir Bin Muhamed, president of the Non-Aligned Movement. Critics from the opposition group Coordinadora Democratica (CD) accused the CNE of not inviting experienced observers and instead bringing in personalities who would be nothing more that "tourist visitors."
The CNE announced that 13.9 million citizens are registered to participate in the referendum where voters will vote "Yes" to have Chavez leave office or "No" if they wish him to finish his second term (2000-2006). More than 31,000 Venezuelans residing abroad may also vote in one of 115 embassies. On July 18 the CNE conducted a technical simulation of the vote across the country in which Venezuelans voted for their favorite baseball team.

CNE president Francisco Carrasquero said the electoral machines functioned well. "The information we have is that everything is coming along well, the voting centers are functioning almost at 100% and the results are going to be excellent," said Carrasquero. The simulation took place in 4,632 electoral centers and handled the flow of people well, according to media reports.

**Bush calls for transparency, GOP refuses UN monitoring**

The hot war of words between the Bush and Chavez administrations has continued in the run-up to the referendum. Chavez has said that "the adversary to defeat [in the referendum] is George W. Bush," and he claimed that opposition plans seek to give Venezuelan crude to the US president. Chavez also referred to a document attributed to a US organization supposedly allied to the opposition, which compared his "Bolivarian revolution" to Nazism. "You all will be the greater Nazis, Mr. Bush, by assaulting children, bombing cities, killing people," said Chavez.

Bush called on Chavez to allow the referendum to occur in an "honest and open" manner, saying that "the current government [of Venezuela] should welcome observers, encourage the observers, and not interfere in the process so the Venezuelan people can express their opinion without fear of reprisals."

The Chavez administration has called on Bush to not fund the opposition and alleges that various groups seeking his ouster are receiving money from the US. The Asamblea Nacional (AN), propelled by governing-party votes, condemned US interference in internal Venezuelan politics, attacking statements by Roger Noriega, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, and Florida Sen. Bill Nelson.

The AN called statements by Noriega and Nelson "contrary to autonomy, transparency, and confidence in the electoral authority."

Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel also criticized Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry after Kerry told The Miami Herald that "if Chavez does not respect the [referendum] process, he will then remain at the margins of the law." Rangel responded, saying, "Instead of asking for transparency from the Venezuelan chief of state, it's recommended that he make the same demand in his country of Bush during the presidential elections on Nov. 2, because the same thing that happened to Al Gore [in 2000] could happen to him."

Chavez's administration asserts that there was an electoral fraud in the US in 2000, which illegitimately gave the presidency to Bush. "What moral right does the US president have to be..."
demanding transparency in any electoral process in the world, when he won fraudulent elections?" asked Chavez during a campaign speech.

Some Democrats in the US House of Representatives sought to ask the UN to monitor the November elections in the US, but House Republicans blocked the effort and struck comments of Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) from the official record when she alleged there had been a "coup d'etat" in 2000.

European Parliament will not send observers

The European Parliament (EP) said it would not send a mission of observers to the Venezuelan referendum "fundamentally because we have not received a formal invitation" from the CNE, according to EP Deputy Fernando Fernandez. The Spanish deputy said there were factors that "do not allow a neutral mission." Fernandez, who would have been part of an observer mission, said he had been invited by Chavez, but said the group that should have sent the petition for EP attendance, the CNE, had not done so.

The European Commission (CE) will also not send an observer mission after determining that the Venezuelan authorities "were imposing some restrictions on the mission," according to a source from the Council of the European Union. A dozen leftist European deputies do plan to go to Venezuela to express their support for the "program of social and political reforms" Chavez has put in place.

Belgian socialist Sens. Jean Cornil and Sifa Bouarfa, the Belgian deputy from the ECOLO party Josy Dubie, and members of the Izquierda Unitaria Europea (IUE) Vittorio Angoletto (Italy), Sahra Wagenknecht (Germany) and Jasomir Kohicek (Czech Republic) have confirmed their intention to attend, according to IUE sources.

Their intention will be to express the "solidarity" of the leftist groupings on both sides of the Atlantic "with the process of political and social transformation" put forth by Chavez, said IUE spokesman Paul Emile.

The European parliamentarians will not act as "official observers" to evaluate the cleanliness of the plebiscite, but they will present their "personal testimony" regarding the development of the referendum. Regarding the personal invitations some European parliamentarians had received, Fernandez said that "the EP cannot accept invitations to individuals because the institution is what should be invited."

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