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Venezuela Breaks Ties with Colombia

by LADB Staff

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A diplomatic crisis led to the straining of ties between Venezuela and Colombia after revelations emerged that bounty hunters paid by the Colombian Defense Department had kidnapped a top spokesman for the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) from Caracas and transported him to Colombia.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez called the kidnapping an attack on Venezuelan sovereignty, while Colombia and the US attacked Chavez's leftist government for protecting FARC members within Venezuelan territory. As cross-border trade was tightened, cries of protest went up from businesspeople, particularly on the Colombian side of the border, and integration-minded South American leaders tried to get Chavez and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to see eye to eye.

But positions hardened as the crisis unwound throughout mid-January, with editorial writers and government officials on both sides firing accusations and the US siding loudly with conservative President Uribe, which did little to calm the conflict.

Kidnapping of FARC leader ignites standoff

The conflict began with the Dec. 13 capture of Rodrigo Granda, FARC "foreign minister." Colombia originally claimed that he had been apprehended in a Colombian border town, but it eventually came out that bounty hunters had been paid to kidnap Granda from Caracas, where a reporter said he had spoken to him the day before, and transport him in the trunk of a car to Colombian territory.

Responding to increasing pressure to condemn the kidnapping, President Chavez withdrew Venezuela's ambassador to Colombia on Jan. 14, citing the "violation of national sovereignty." He said business dealings with Bogota would be frozen until Colombia apologized for kidnapping the guerrilla chief on Venezuelan soil. Colombia admitted to paying bounty hunters to help seize the rebel, but denied its agents violated Venezuelan sovereignty.

Oil-producing Venezuela is Colombia's second-largest export market, with trade between the two countries reaching US$2 billion last year.

President Chavez told parliament on Jan. 14 that he had "ordered all agreements and business with Colombia to be paralyzed." He did not explain whether that meant a cessation of all trade ties between the two countries or just business ties between the two governments. However, efforts at building a US$200 million natural-gas pipeline between the two countries would be suspended, Chavez said. The two countries agreed last year to start work on the pipeline, which would eventually allow Venezuelan gas to reach Colombia's Pacific coast and from there reach markets in Asia and the western US (see NotiSur, 2004-10-08).
Colombian officials responded by preparing a list of FARC guerrillas they said were inside Venezuela and should be extradited to Colombia. Uribe issued a statement leveling Colombia's most serious and explicit charges, accusing Venezuela of having sheltered Granda and saying other Colombian terrorists and rebel camps were inside Venezuela.

"Colombia will deliver proof to the government of Venezuela of the protection that authorities of that country provided to Granda. Sheltering terrorists violates Colombia's sovereignty," Uribe's statement said. He added that he has the right to offer rewards for the apprehension of Colombian terrorists, wherever they are.

Critics compared the kidnapping to Operation Condor, the intelligence-sharing program among Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s that led to extrajudicial killings and kidnappings throughout the hemisphere (see NotiSur, July 7, 2000). Chavez has denied that he tolerates the presence of FARC rebels in Venezuela and says the 2,200 km shared border is too long to properly patrol. Granda's arrest along with that of another senior FARC commander in Ecuador early last year highlighted the ties between the FARC and neighboring countries, where the rebels are believed to often find sanctuary.

Ecuadoran President Lucio Gutierrez was also drawn into the newest fray and forced to deny meeting with Granda repeatedly within Ecuadoran territory. The disagreement escalated when Colombian Defense Minister Jorge Uribe acknowledged on Jan. 12 that Colombia paid bounty hunters to snatch Granda off the streets of Caracas. The defense minister's comments drew Chavez's immediate ire, and he called on Colombia to apologize.

Prior comments by Defense Minister Uribe (no relation to the president) came in handy for Venezuelan officials when they quoted him saying a month before that there were no FARC rebels hiding in Venezuela, a contradiction of the list that Colombia delivered.

On Jan. 22, President Uribe said further pronouncements on the crisis would only come from his office through written statements. The rift with Venezuela must be treated "with total prudence" and declarations from other government officials need to be avoided, Uribe told reporters.

**Venezuela dispatches troops, arms-race accusations fly**

Venezuela dispatched extra troops as part of an effort to tighten security along its border with Colombia, but officials denied that the move was linked to the dispute. Transport trucks carrying food and fuel were backed up on Jan. 24 on the Venezuelan side of Maicao, a dusty border crossing in western Zulia state, while National Guard troops checked vehicles for contraband.

"I've been waiting here since 10 a.m. because of the checks" by troops, said Renato Ruzardo, a trucker transporting sugarcane syrup to Colombia. Ruzardo was allowed to cross the border five hours after arriving at Maicao, 580 km west of Caracas. A National Guard spokesperson denied that
the deployment had anything to do with the dispute and said that it aimed to halt the smuggling of cheap Venezuelan gasoline to Colombia.

Adding to the tensions, a Spanish intelligence-analysis firm questioned weapons acquisitions by the Chavez government, saying it had purchased 100,000 Russian AK 103 and AK 104 rifles and alleging an arms race. The military-information firm Análisis e Inteligencia, based in Madrid, published a December report on the budgeting for the rifles. The president of the Venezuelan Instituto Nacional de Tierras (INTI), Eliecer Otayza, asked the Defense Ministry to permit reservists working in some southeastern states to carry shotguns.

Cesar Perez, an opposition deputy, said such a move would "stimulate anarchy" and would not guarantee national security. Whether the chest-thumping on both sides of the border ultimately leads to violence, it has already led to reduced cross-border trade. Venezuelan electricity was no longer being exported to parts of Arauca, leaving the municipalities of Arauca, Cravo Norte, and Cano Limon in darkness after a dynamite attack crippled the region's energy infrastructure. Gustavo Castro Pena, manager of the Empresa de Energia de Arauca (Enelar), claimed that the Venezuelan cutoff violated a bilateral agreement to provide electricity after terrorist attacks.

Trade between Venezuela and Colombia has fallen sharply since the diplomatic crisis, a business leader said Jan. 24. Trade with Colombia measured by the number of trucks shuttling goods across the border in either direction has decreased by about 60% in the western states of Tachire and Apure, two of four states on the border with Colombia, said Domingo Teres, president of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Urena.

Bogota daily El Tiempo had published a business story depicting the previously unprecedented level of commerce on the Venezuelan-Colombian border in the edition that came out the day Venezuela decided to cut ties. Now that business has mostly stalled. Mediation efforts falter, impasse "hinders" regional integration.

"The Colombia-Venezuela clash hinders any attempt at reinforcing [integration in] South America. Therefore, we ask the presidents of both nations to try to solve the problem," said Brazilian Secretary of International Affairs Marco Aurelio García, explaining to the Colombian daily El Tiempo the decision by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to offer to act as a mediator in the conflict.

Mediation offers came from other Latin American governments as well, including Chile's President Ricardo Lagos and Peru's Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez Cuadros. The two bickering countries' Foreign Ministries were scheduled to meet on Jan. 27, the first time since the crisis broke out. But Chavez's and Uribe's rhetoric, along with that of their supporters in government, the press, and the streets, militated against mutual trust.

Chavez received some street support for his stance against Colombia on the weekend of Jan. 23. Marchers marked the 47th anniversary of Venezuelan democracy and demonstrated their opposition to US involvement in the diplomatic crisis, while opposition forces held a separate,
smaller march to accuse Chavez of undermining freedoms gained after the Jan. 23, 1958, overthrow of Gen. Marcos Perez Jimenez, Venezuela's last dictator.

Over half of Venezuelans back the stance taken by President Chavez, according to a survey of 200 people by Venezuela daily El Universal. In the survey, 52% of respondents agree with the Venezuelan president, against 48% who expressed disagreement. Those surveyed, chosen at random, were asked the following question on the phone: "Who is right in the Venezuelan-Colombian conflict?"

In a similar survey published by Colombia's RCN Jan. 18, 57.4% expressed support for President Uribe, compared to 11.3% who backed the Venezuelan president and 31.3% who refrained from answering. A total of 600 people were surveyed with a 4% margin of error.

**US government sides with Colombia, disparages Chavez**

"This provocation came from Washington, it is the latest attempt by the imperialists...to ruin our relations with Colombia," said Chavez Jan. 25. Responding late the next day, US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli called the allegation "baseless and unfounded." He added, "President Chavez has never presented any evidence to support his claim of US government involvement because there is none." The US has offered its "100% support" for Colombia's actions.

In confirmation hearings before the Senate, nominee for Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice described Venezuela under Chavez as a "very negative force in the region." The ongoing civil war in Colombia, partially funded by the US, which has generated millions of refugees many of whom inundate refugee camps in neighboring countries was not depicted as a negative in Rice's testimony.

French-based nongovernmental group Doctors Without Borders, however, recently characterized Colombia's ongoing crisis as one of the ten most forgotten humanitarian crises of the world. Sen. Lincoln Chafee (R-RI), just returned from a visit to Venezuela with Sens. Bill Nelson (D-FL) of Florida and Christopher Dodd (D-CN), took Rice to task on the persistent attacks on the Chavez government, which has received support in democratic elections or referenda on eight separate occasions (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20).

Questioning nominee Rice, Chafee said, "It seems to me to say derogatory things about [Chavez] may be disrespectful to him, but also to the Venezuelan people." Sen. Mel Martinez (R-FL) expressed concern that Venezuela's efforts to arm itself were having "a terribly destabilizing effect on the region," although Colombian arms purchases did not figure similarly in the senator's on-the-record remarks.

Sen. Dodd said, "It's going to be critically important that we try and do something new with Venezuela rather than the continued policies of isolation." The US State Department, responding to the crisis, urged the Venezuelan president to explain why he allowed FARC leader Granda to move freely in Venezuelan territory and even get a Venezuelan passport. But the US denied Chavez's allegations that it had helped in kidnapping Granda, and the State Departed called the claim completely baseless.