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Venezuela and Colombia Resolve Crisis

by LADB Staff

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The presidents of Venezuela and Colombia say they have resolved the worst crisis that the neighboring countries have had in decades after a face-to-face meeting. The two governments said the split, which lasted almost seven weeks and severely hampered trade along the border, was resolved in a Feb. 15 summit in Caracas between Presidents Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Yet many of the underlying differences that helped aggravate the crisis between the two governments remain in place.

The crisis broke out after revelations that bounty hunters paid by the Colombian government had kidnapped Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) spokesman Rodrigo Granda from the streets of Caracas and had taken him across the border to Colombian authorities (see NotiSur, 2005-01-28). Chavez called the act a violation of national sovereignty, while Uribe said Colombia reserved the right to apprehend "terrorists" wherever they were.

Venezuelan ambassador returns, trade agreements renewed

The reconciliation appeared to be on track at the end of January and the start of February. Venezuela's Ambassador Carlos Rodolfo Santiago returned to Bogota Jan. 31, which many interpreted as a sign of normalizing relations. Chavez made statements that the incident would not be fully resolved until he met Uribe face to face. President Uribe suffered a severe ear infection along with gastrointestinal difficulties and was hospitalized on Feb. 3, which slowed the reconciliation process since Uribe could not travel by airplane for several days.

After 12 days of governing from a house in Cartagena, Uribe boarded the presidential jet Feb. 15 to "turn the page," as Chavez would later say. The leaders gave credit in varying degree to Peru's President Alejandro Toledo and Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, Spanish President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, and Cuban President Fidel Castro, all of whom offered mediation in the crisis.

After the Feb. 15 meeting, Chavez announced the reactivation of work on a binational natural-gas pipeline, sales of Venezuelan gasoline to bordering Colombian cities, and the free passage of Colombian coal into Venezuela, along with the "full" renewal of commercial exchange between the two countries. He ordered border authorities to lift all restrictions put in place during the crisis that had kept border trade semi-paralyzed since Jan. 20.

Chavez added that, in the meeting held with Uribe during his visit to Caracas, they also agreed to work jointly to face natural disasters such as the heavy rains that have hit both countries recently, with the cooperation of Venezuelan Civil Protection Service and Colombian Disaster Prevention Service. The heavy rains overshadowed the diplomatic dispute as at least 86 Colombians and Venezuelans died in massive flooding, with many more missing. Chavez also said they had decided
to "activate a series of meetings," the first one being Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel's visit to Bogota and Medellin to be scheduled in the near future.

Maria Luisa Chiappe, president of the Camara de Comercio de Integracion Colombo-Venezolana, said the meeting had relieved the political tension and allowed the return of "optimism" necessary to complete energy projects and trade between the two nations. "Political obstacles create commercial uncertainty, and this new atmosphere allows us to complete the ambitious projects so that trade will continue to increase and surpass 2004's US$2.5 billion to reach US$3 billion this year," said Chiappe.

**US condemns arms sales to Venezuela**

The US State Department said it was very troubled by Venezuela's arms purchases from Russia, signaling concern that some of the weapons might end up with leftist rebels in Colombia. The weapons could have a "destabilizing effect" on the hemisphere, department spokesman Adam Ereli said from Washington. He said that the US had raised the issue with Russia several times.

Russia reportedly has agreed to sell high performance MiG jet fighters and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles to Venezuela, along with dozens of helicopters. Venezuela is also seeking to purchase Supertucano fighter jets from Brazil since, Chavez's government claims, the US has delayed the delivery of parts for F-16's necessary to keep the jets flying.

Chavez has said he is neutral in the conflict in Colombia between the government and two leftist rebel groups, the FARC and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). But Ereli said Chavez has adopted a "tolerant" attitude toward these groups, both of which the US has designated as terrorist organizations. Granda, from his cell in Colombia, says that FARC presence "isn't a phenomenon exclusive to Venezuela. We are in all the countries of the continent and beyond."

Colombian authorities say that, during more than 200 trips abroad in the past decade, Granda went beyond being a public-relations man for the FARC, and carried out more nefarious missions. He is suspected of establishing a link between the FARC which the government says controls a large share of Colombia's cocaine production and Mexican drug traffickers, and of helping the rebels buy 10,000 assault rifles from Peruvian intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos (see NotiSur, 2004-01-30). The US has asked Latin America to urge Venezuela to take "a less aggressive" stance in its relationship with Colombia and cut its alleged ties with terrorist groups.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher praised Brazilian efforts at mediation in order to normalize Colombian-Venezuelan relations before the crisis was resolved. "We think that the whole continent would have to be concerned. It should encourage Venezuela to adopt a nonconfrontational stance. It should encourage Venezuela not to give any support to terrorist groups in Colombia," said Boucher. But Boucher's support for mediation rang hollow in Chavez's Miraflores Palace.

"Hostile statements by spokespersons of the US government have been increasing in the last several days," Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez said Jan. 28. He rattled off countries where
the US has staged armed interventions, from Nicaragua to Grenada, implying there is concern Venezuela could be next. US continues arms aid to Colombia While the Granda affair has come to a political close, the divisions at the roots of the Colombian-Venezuelan conflict remain.

Chavez has emerged as more of an ideological firebrand than ever, igniting the masses at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre on Jan. 30 with his verbal attacks against the US and global capitalism. Hard-line conservative Uribe, meanwhile, finds himself ever more deeply enmeshed in the war with FARC forces, with the Colombian Army suffering its worst losses since he came to power in 2002. This will likely put the president under even more pressure to blame neighboring countries for supporting the FARC as his military fails to eliminate the group, especially as his re-election campaign gears up (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11). The prime actor in splitting the two countries is the US, which has guaranteed four more years of military aid to Uribe's forces while loudly criticizing Russian arm sales to Venezuela.

In his new budget for 2005, US President George W. Bush has proposed pumping another half-billion dollars into Plan Colombia, the program of mostly military aid to Colombia, which, among other equipment and training, provided the Colombian military with 60 advance-design combat helicopters. Repeated revelations that the Colombian military has links with paramilitary groups that commit a majority of the human rights crimes in the country has not slowed US support.

Chavez had blamed the US for the dispute. "We don't want any conflict. This has been a provocation by the government of the United States," he told reporters at the WSF. The US "would love a violent conflict between Colombia and Venezuela," Chavez said. "It's a great excuse to invade." Editorial writers in Colombia also opined vociferously against Chavez as a helper to the nation's rebel groups, saying that Chavez had proved himself untrustworthy when his government provided identification papers and shelter to Granda. The central question in Venezuelan-Colombian relations is how much Uribe's and Chavez's personal bond is able to bear these dividing pressures.

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