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Venezuela Pushes Forward Bid to Join MERCOSUR, Blames U.S. for Delaying Entry

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The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has accused the US of interfering with its bid to join the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) as a full member. Venezuela has been pushing for plenary membership in the trading bloc, with Chavez emphasizing the possibilities for the body in helping to economically integrate the South American continent (see NotiSur, 2005-12-02 and 2007-03-23).

While the presidents of the bloc's full members Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay approve of Venezuela's bid to join, Venezuela's formal entry has been delayed as the parliaments of two of those countries have failed to ratify it. Chavez: uncertainty affects Venezuelan industry "There is no reason that Venezuela's entry should be delayed," said Chavez in a visit to Montevideo, Uruguay, on Aug. 8.

The Venezuelan president said his country's objectives would have to change if entry was not granted by the end of the year. "There have been discrepancies and obstacles for Venezuela's entry into MERCOSUR and the confrontation in that process is now becoming uncomfortable for us," said Chavez, adding that Venezuela "needs MERCOSUR" and that the regional bloc "needs to grow and transform itself."

The executives of the four bloc members approved Venezuelan entry as did the parliaments of Argentina and Uruguay, but approval is still pending in the legislatures of Brazil and Paraguay. "Our integrationist vocation has been and will remain clear, but, if the issue keeps being set back, without any explanation of the reasons, we should take other roads," said Chavez. He denied that he was putting out an ultimatum.

"I am not one who launches an ultimatum to authorities of other countries, but we need a definition to secure our development plans. Today in Venezuela there is much uncertainty about what is happening with our entry into MERCOSUR and that affects industry, production, and the country in general," said Chavez.

Chavez said that Venezuela would keep waiting and still had patience, although he set September as the month for "a definition."

Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez said his country was a "staunch defender" of Venezuela's bid to enter the bloc. "Venezuela is a fundamental actor and of great importance for the region," said Vazquez, whose nation currently occupies the temporary presidency of the bloc. "We are going to look at the possible roads to accomplish [Venezuela's] incorporation in the short term."
At a late June summit of MERCOSUR countries, Venezuelan Vice President Jorge Rodriguez said, "I insist that the incorporation of Venezuela into MERCOSUR is a fact. Venezuela knows the consequences to the country for denouncing the inequalities in the world and the criminal action of the most powerful empire in the world," referring to the US.

Chavez and Rodriguez allege that one of those consequences is that "the empire" is keeping Venezuela's incorporation from happening. On Aug. 1, Chavez said the US was on a campaign to discredit his country. "I am certain that these difficulties are the result of actions of the empire. Within Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, they buy people. They pay very well, they have newspapers and television broadcasts, they try to confuse and instill fear, they blackmail."

Chavez enjoys strong relations with Presidents Vazquez in Uruguay, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, although Chavez and Lula have had opposite visions for energy development, key sectors for both countries.

Venezuela, the hemisphere's most important petroleum producer, criticizes Lula's plan to develop ethanol production domestically and regionally (see NotiSur, 2007-04-27). Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro are among a host of critics who attack ethanol expansion plans, saying the industry which uses crops like corn and sugar to produce the fuel will drive up world food prices and starve the poor to run the cars of the rich (see NotiCen, 2007-04-12, 2007-05-03 and 2007-08-16).

Still, the public relationship between Chavez and Lula remains strong. Several Brazilian lawmakers, however, favor blocking Venezuela's entry, arguing the country does not comply with MERCOSUR's commitment to democracy because of Chavez's decision not to renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, or RCTV (see NotiSur, 2007-06-15).

**Mexico, Ecuador invited also invited to join bloc**

Further growth for the trade bloc could be in the works, with two other Latin American countries getting invitations to join. In recent weeks the presidents of Argentina and Brazil formally invited Mexico to join MERCOSUR (see SourceMex, 2007-08-08).

Argentina's President Kirchner said "it's essential" that Mexico join MERCOSUR. "We should hold the discussions step by step to have a balanced integration that will strengthen the MERCOSUR bloc and all its countries," said Kirchner in a news conference with Mexican President Felipe Calderon in Mexico on July 30. Kirchner was on a three-day trip to Mexico with his wife, presidential candidate Sen. Cristina Fernandez, to sign accords with Calderon to deepen trade between the two countries. Kirchner has also sought to restore damaged relations between Mexico and Venezuela (see SourceMex, 2005-11-16 and 2007-02-21).

Vazquez planned to travel from Uruguay to Ecuador on Aug. 15, with the intent of signing economic-cooperation agreements and to reiterate his invitation to President Rafael Correa that he bring Ecuador into MERCOSUR. Spanish news service EFE reported that it was almost certain that Vazquez, as MERCOSUR president, would deepen negotiations to associate Ecuador with the bloc. There are also ongoing efforts to bring Bolivia into MERCOSUR.