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President Barack Obama Confronts Venezuela on Eve of Latin American Meeting

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Putting an end to a verbal confrontation with Venezuela that began in February 1999 when the late President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) had just assumed the presidency of Venezuela and increased in February 2010 when both countries challenged respective diplomatic representatives for the first time (NotiSur, Jan. 28, 2011), the US government stepped into action by declaring the South American country an enemy. On March 9, President Barack Obama signed an executive order declaring a "national emergency" because "the situation in Venezuela … constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."

What does this imply and what actions can follow? It wasn’t said, but Venezuela and Latin America feared the worst.

White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said, "The Venezuelan government should respect the human rights of its citizens and stop trying to intimidate its political opponents. And we continue to call on the Venezuelan government to release political prisoners, including dozens of students; opposition leader; and Mayors Daniel Ceballos and Antonio Ledezma."

In keeping with this, sanctions were established along with the executive order that prohibit entry into the US and freezing bank accounts, if they exist, of seven former and current members of the second level of the Bolivarian government.

While personal sanctions have been latent since last May, the situation escalated with the accusations that Venezuela has violated human rights and with a series of unfriendly declarations by high-level US officials—including Vice President Joe Biden; Defense Intelligence Agency Director Gen. Vincent Stewart; Lee McClenny, chargé d'affaires at the US Embassy in Caracas; and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ)—which the government of President Nicolás Maduro and his allies described as interference in the internal affairs of the country (NotiSur, April 4, 2014, June 6, 2014, and Jan. 16, 2015). What is certain is that, beyond Maduro’s usual grandstanding, the new situation created by Obama’s signing the executive order caused regional leaders opposed to US policies in the region to make forceful statements against the US.

"Something didn’t work well in the White House because the decree was signed at a time that, with some decisions, Washington had silenced Latin Americans who had been most critical of its attitudes in the region," said Argentine political scientist Federico Bernal. When he said "some decisions," he was actually referring to a single decision: the Dec. 17 announcement of a beginning of a process of thawing in US-Cuban relations (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015).

Maduro cries hypocrisy
The first one to react was, obviously, Venezuela’s president. Maduro took a weak flank, which sparked rejection shared throughout Latin America.
"Oh, what a paradox," Maduro said, "to denounce Venezuela when it is precisely the US that systematically violates the human rights of its own population and other peoples of the world." He then enumerated, citing "permanent violence against immigrants and against thousands of Central American children, racism against African American minorities, impunity for crimes by those in circles of power, the open practices of kidnapping and torture [as occurs at the naval base of Guantánamo and other US military installations around the world], as well as support of terrorism, bombings, and aggression in many countries."

Finally, Maduro explained that "it’s not Venezuela that is a threat to the US people, the threat is your own government that invades countries and finances terrorism. It is you," he concluded, "who invented Osama bin Laden, you who are responsible for invading Libya and assassinating Khadafy, and you who are responsible for creating the Islamic State. Mr. Obama, I don’t think it’s fair to ask for a correction, you have chosen to sink into the pit of history."

Meanwhile, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez announced she would denounce the US on the world stage for its continuing refusal to extradite fugitives from Venezuelan justice even though a binational agreement exists on this issue and even though Caracas "routinely sends many drug dealers detained in its territory to Washington." Venezuela has extradition requests for 55 offenders of "common and ordinary crimes, bankers who launder money, rapists and perpetrators of other sexual offences, or murderers, which makes us think that there is a political motivation to block actions of our justice system," Rodríguez said.

The foreign minister added, "It is an irritating absurdity to sanction a country and seven of our officials for imagined human rights crimes but not want to extradite Luis Posada Carriles (NotiCen, May 17, 2007), a former CIA agent who, in 1976, blew up a Cubana de Aviación plane, killing 73 persons."

The Venezuelan official took the opportunity to condemn the US for being one of the few countries in the world that applies the death penalty, "a reality it shares with China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia." On March 11, two days after Obama’s executive order, the state of Utah decided that, when drugs for lethal injections are not available, condemned prisoners could be killed by a firing squad.

Analysts from several Latin American countries agreed that Obama’s decision was "a blunder, probably prompted by powerful Cuban-Americans in Miami who haven’t been able to swallow the new policy toward Cuba, and activated by the right wing of the Republican Party, which recently invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Capitol as an insult to the president," and, as an analyst wrote in the Uruguayan newspaper La República, "which also is using its legislative majority to act in favor of the pro-coup extreme right wing in Latin American countries such as Brazil and Argentina."

**Latin America responds**

Reaction to the condemnation of Venezuela showed that regional organizations such as the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) and the Comunidad de Estados Americanos (CELAC) lack the dynamism of recent times. Uruguayan former President José Mujica (2010-2015) recently finished his term, and Presidents Dilma Rousseff of Brazil and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina are under fire from opponents. The absence of that trio is evident in the actions of these...
organizations (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014). But other countries continue to denounce the US, such as Ecuador, Cuba, and Bolivia.

"Who can believe that Venezuela is a danger for the national security of the US, a formidable power? Who in their right mind can think and accept such a thing?" asked Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa. And, referring to those regional integration organizations that have not shown their power on this occasion, he added, "We will give an appropriate response to this grotesque, illegal, shameless, outrageous, unjustified US interference in the internal affairs of Venezuela. What has happened with the executive order signed by none less than a Nobel Peace Prize recipient [referring to Obama, distinguished in 2007 with this award], is outrageous as it seems to be punishing each and every person who voted for Maduro."

Cuba—in the middle of negotiations with the US, a country it hopes will also end its economic blockade that has drowned the country for more than half a century, and one week before receiving Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson for continued talks—reacted without worrying about any consequences to its statements. "How can Venezuela threaten the US? More than 3,000 km away, without strategic arms, and without resources or officials to plot against the constitutional order of the country, the declaration of the president does not sound believable and it exposes his purpose. Nevertheless, such a pronouncement in a year that Venezuela has legislative elections again reaffirms the interventionist nature of US foreign policy," said a statement signed by President Raúl Castro.

Many Latin American analysts question whether in signing the executive order Obama considered that just one month later he would be in Panama (on April 10 and 11) at the VII Summit of the Americas, an event that Cuba will attend for the first time. He should have anticipated that, despite the weakening UNASUR and CELAC influence, he will be asked to explain his policy toward Venezuela.

Bolivia’s Evo Morales so noted when he spoke with foreign correspondents in La Paz. "In Panama, Obama will meet anti-imperialist presidents who will ask him if he is planning a military intervention in Venezuela," Morales said. "We would like the presence of the US in Latin America and the Caribbean with its technology but not with its military bases or its military interventions, not with its threats to democracy or our revolutions. That we are not going to accept. How much better it would be for the US government to pull out its bases that it still has in Peru, in Colombia, and some Central American countries; how much better it would be for the US to go to the summit in Panama announcing that it just signed the executive order to lift the economic blockade of Cuba."

-- End --