

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Release of rights report undermines Bush trip

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MEXICO CITY -- What a show! President Bush's visit to five Latin American countries and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's simultaneous anti-Bush tour of the region are likely to go down as one of the hemisphere's most dramatic political moments in recent memory.

Before I tell you which of the two high-profile travelers has done better so far, let's look at the outcome of the first few days of Bush's tour to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. Bush left for Brazil on Thursday and is scheduled to arrive in Mexico Monday.

Most Latin American diplomats I talked to say that, if this were a boxing match, the first few rounds were pretty even, with a slight edge for Venezuela's oil-rich leftist president. Indeed, things went badly for Bush even before he entered the ring.

In a textbook case of bad timing, the U.S. State Department released its widely criticized annual report of human rights abuses around the world only three days before Bush's trip.

The report, seen by most governments abroad as a hypocritical exercise of political arrogance by the country that tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib and denied rights to detainees in Guantánamo, drew immediate protests from even the closest U.S. friends in the region.

U.S. free-trade partner Mexico issued a communiqué saying that "unilateral reports, such as the State Department's, do not contribute to [bilateral] cooperation."

In a subtle jab at the United States, the Mexican statement added that "No country is exempt from problems in the realm of human rights."

BRAZILIAN STATEMENT

Shortly before Bush was about to land in Brazil, the South American country's foreign ministry issued an even stronger statement, stating that Brazil "does not recognize the legitimacy" of the U.S. human rights report.

"They should have released this report after President Bush's trip," Roberto Abdenur, who was Brazil's ambassador to Washington before his retirement a few weeks ago, told me by telephone.

"This is the kind of thing that the State Department does automatically, without realizing that it irks people."

On Friday, Bush got his next punch in the face when Venezuela's narcissist-Leninist leader stole the show from Bush's first full day in the region by staging an anti-Bush rally in a 30,000-seat soccer stadium in Buenos Aires.

Chávez's act of bravado made at least as many headlines as Bush's vow to spend more money to help Latin America's poor. A Zogby International poll released last week shows that 86 percent of Latin American elites have a bad opinion of U.S. policies toward the region.

Chávez's anti-Bush rally also marked a clear setback in U.S.-Argentine relations.

In recent months, temperamental Argentine President Néstor Kirchner had sent signals to the Bush administration that he wanted to make up for his public pummeling of Bush at a 2005 summit in Argentina.

While U.S. officials publicly say that U.S.-Argentine relations are good, they could hardly conceal their disappointment over Kirchner's decision to give Chávez a privileged platform from which to attack Bush. When I asked Thomas Shannon, the top U.S. State Department official in charge of Latin American affairs, about Kirchner's decision, he responded, "It doesn't help."

BRAZIL AND MEXICO

On the other hand, U.S. officials say that the leaders of the two biggest Latin American countries -- Brazil and Mexico -- will have given the U.S. president a red-carpet welcome. "It's a pleasure to be able to welcome" Bush, Lula da Silva said.

In addition, Bush's trip may result in long-term plans to boost Central American and Caribbean economies, and eclipse Chávez's growing influence in that region, they say.

In Brazil, Bush signed an ethanol cooperation agreement that includes joint plans for development of biofuels in the Caribbean Basin. In Mexico, Bush is likely to announce new U.S.-Mexican initiatives to boost Central American economies.

My opinion: It's too early to talk about a realignment in regional politics, but Bush's tour seems to point to closer U.S. ties with Mexico and Brazil and a further move by Argentina toward the Venezuela-Bolivia-Ecuador-Nicaragua camp.

One image can overpower a multitude of words, and what Latin America watchers will remember is Lula da Silva giving Bush a warm welcome in Sao Paulo, while Chávez was calling Bush an "imperial gentleman" in Buenos Aires.