

# Cuban, Venezuelan aid streams into Bolivia

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**LA PAZ, Bolivia** - Gladys Melani was nearly blind from cataracts. Juana Mamani was illiterate. Sharon Mayra didn't officially exist. What these three Bolivians had in common was poverty, and help from Cuba and Venezuela in solving their problems.

Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez have made a fast and extensive start in providing President Evo Morales' three-month-old left-wing government with humanitarian aid, winning the thanks of its beneficiaries as well as political points.

It's part of what Morales, in a veiled taunt to the Bush administration, calls an "axis of good."

Melani's cataracts were removed for free by one of some 700 Cuban doctors who have fanned out to the farthest corners of Bolivia. Cuban teaching materials are helping Mamani learn to read and write.

Technology from Venezuela got 17-year-old Mayra the ID card without which she couldn't travel abroad, vote, enter government buildings or collect a pension. An estimated 1 million poor Bolivians, nearly 10 percent of the population, are expected to get the same help.

Venezuela is also helping to set up 109 rural radio stations so Morales can spread his socialist gospel much as Chavez has done.

Morales, an Aymara Indian, won office in December in a landslide of discontent with the traditional ruling class. On April 29, he signed a "trade agreement of the people" with Castro and Chavez, a mostly symbolic alternative to free trade agreements Washington has reached with other Latin American countries.

Two days later, he decreed the nationalization of Bolivia's natural gas, an even more forceful assertion of state control of mineral resources than Chavez has taken with his nation's oil.

The United States remains Bolivia's single biggest foreign donor, contributing a bit less than half of the \$360 million annually with which rich nations collectively pay 60 percent of the Bolivian government's bills.

But the Cuban and Venezuelan largesse has mounted as Morales continues to veer to the left. Last weekend, Venezuela offered an additional \$130 million in two separate funds - one for social projects, another for infrastructure and development projects.

"What these doctors and workers have generated goes beyond cooperation and is more about inter-human relations," said Alberto Nogales, Bolivia's vice minister of health.

Critics see dangers.

Fernando Messmer, an opposition congressman and former foreign minister, says Venezuela could use the database set up for the ID cards to keep tabs on Bolivians.

He has no proof, but contends Venezuela and Cuba are concerned more with promoting Morales than helping the poor.

"It's dangerous because it's moving toward consolidating a totalitarian state," he said.

Venezuela's state energy company, meanwhile, has signed a contract to build an ethane, methane and propane plant in Bolivia, and Venezuelan experts are involved in the details of Morales' gas nationalization. Chavez has offered Bolivia diesel fuel that can be paid for with farm products such as soy.

Flush with petrodollars, Chavez has offered fuel at preferential rates to 13 Caribbean countries as well as some poor U.S. districts, and scholarships for Haitians.

Meanwhile the Cubans, who in Cold War times sent soldiers to fight in Angola and Nicaragua, have focused on bringing medicine and literacy to friendly neighbors, Venezuela included.

A literacy campaign modeled on the one Cuba ran in Venezuela aims to teach Bolivia's 720,000 illiterates to read and write in two years. Cuba has delivered 30,000 TV sets plus workbooks and videotapes for Bolivian volunteer teachers.

It is equipping 20 rural Bolivian hospitals, providing free eye surgery in three new ophthalmology centers, and offering to pay for 6,000 Bolivians to study in Cuba.

The Bolivian Medical Association objects, saying the country has 10,000 unemployed doctors of its own. But 75-year-old Gladys Melani feels only gratitude to the eye doctors at a newly-equipped center in La Paz.

"Thank God the Cuban doctors arrived with all their understanding and care. They operated on me, and thanks to them I can see, I can keep working," she said.

Morales' opponents accuse him of using the Venezuelan and Cuban aid programs to mobilize support in July 2 elections for an assembly to rewrite Bolivian's constitution - a pattern similar to that which helped Chavez consolidate power in Venezuela.

But independent political analyst Cayetano Llobet believes the fears are overblown.

"There's a prejudiced mentality in the middle class that believes we're practically being invaded by Cuba and Venezuela," he said. "I don't think it's that serious or alarming."