

Bolivia leader claims assassination attempt

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LA PAZ, Bolivia - Leftist President Evo Morales said Tuesday the U.S. government had organized groups to kill him and said he believed Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's assertion that Washington was preparing to overthrow his administration.

"I've been informed recently how the U.S. had organized teams - groups to persecute Evo Morales, to kill Evo Morales. They haven't been able to and now we're organized, from unions to this political party and they can't stop us anymore," Morales said, without giving more details.

The U.S. Embassy in Bolivia called the charges "baseless."

"We're supporting democracy in Bolivia in a consistent manner and are looking for a constructive relationship with the Bolivian government based on dignity, mutual respect and common interests," the Embassy said in a statement Tuesday.

Chavez said during a visit to Bolivia last week that the U.S. government was plotting to overthrow Morales. His comments came after President Bush said he was "concerned about the erosion of democracy" in Bolivia and Venezuela.

"I want you to know that what my colleague Chavez said is no lie," Morales told reporters while inaugurating a Cuban-funded program to provide free eye surgeries in the town of Escoma, about 125 miles west of La Paz. "These historical enemies, that privatized our natural resources, especially petroleum, are conspiring, not against Evo Morales but against the changes that we've started."

Morales, who was elected in December, nationalized Bolivia's natural gas industry earlier this month and has pledged to fight corruption and pull the poor Andean nation out of poverty.

Since taking office, Morales has had tense relations with the U.S. government, which he frequently refers to as the "empire." He has also accused unnamed foreign energy companies of plotting against him, although he has not presented any proof.

Chavez has also repeatedly accused the United States of trying to overthrow him to seize his country's vast oil reserves.