

# Caracas rebuffing U.S. on terrorism

## Venezuela is snubbing the U.S. over requests for information on terrorism suspects, U.S. officials say.

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**WASHINGTON** - Pressing complaints that Venezuela is not cooperating in the war on terror, U.S. government officials say the country has provided no substantive response to 130 written requests for information on terror suspects over the past three years.

In addition, socialist President Hugo Chávez's government has turned down 20 written requests by the U.S. Embassy in Caracas for interviews with senior Venezuelan counterterrorism authorities, without explanation, the U.S. officials said.

The Venezuelan refusals are fueling concerns that the nation, ruled by a president who has repeatedly attacked the Bush administration while maintaining close ties with countries such as Cuba and Iran, is becoming a dangerous blind spot in international counterterrorism efforts.

"Unfortunately, today in Venezuela we see a regime that is increasingly out of step with the world," Frank Urbancic, the State Department's principal deputy coordinator for counterterrorism told a hearing Thursday of the House Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation. He called Venezuela "a liability" in the fight against terrorism.

Charles Shapiro, the principal deputy assistant secretary for the bureau of Western Hemisphere affairs, told the panel that over the past three years the U.S. Embassy in Caracas "has submitted roughly 130 written requests for different types of biographical and immigration related information on potential terror suspects."

Shapiro later told The Miami Herald that just in the past year, the embassy asked for information on Middle Eastern and Chinese individuals suspected of smuggling foreigners into the United States "who could be trying to enter . . . for terrorist purposes."

"To date, they [U.S. Embassy officials] have not received one single substantive response," he said.

Shapiro, who was ambassador to Venezuela between 2002 and 2004, said that some information requests have been submitted multiple times. They involve information on banking and telephone activities, as well as entry and exit data from Venezuelan immigration authorities.

Most countries readily provide such data, but in Venezuela the few cooperative officials have been transferred, demoted or even fired, U.S. officials say. Relations have become so bad that the U.S. Embassy has resorted to the unusual step of submitting the requests in writing.

Venezuela's ambassador in Washington, Bernardo Alvarez, said the Foreign Ministry, the Interior Ministry and the police had never received such formal requests. "We have not received any note of any type," he told The Miami Herald.

Venezuelan officials have long cited their own grievances against Washington, including its refusal to extradite Luis Posada Carriles, an anti-Castro activist accused of blowing up a Cuban airliner, killing all 73 on board, in 1976, when he worked for Venezuela's secret police. A U.S. judge ruled that Posada should not be extradited because of the risk of torture in Venezuela.

In May, the Bush administration banned all weapons sales to Venezuela after designating the country as "not cooperating fully" with U.S. anti-terrorism efforts -- one step short of the designation of state sponsor of terrorism, which applies to Iran, Syria and Cuba, among others.

Chávez has been a sharp critic of the United States, accusing President Bush of supporting a failed 2002 coup against him and even plotting to invade Venezuela -- both charges denied by the White House. But until 2004, the two governments quietly collaborated on most law enforcement issues, Shapiro said.

For instance, between 2002 and 2003, officials from the Superintendency of Banks, the Venezuelan government bank watchdog agency, responded to all 19 information requests presented by the U.S. Embassy, Shapiro said.

But relations turned sour after a 2004 leadership change in the agency, he added. A Venezuelan prosecutor even asked for copies of all the formal exchanges between the embassy and the agency, and U.S. officials believe agency officials may have come under investigation for their relationship with the U.S. Embassy. The mission has since stopped submitting requests to the agency.

Venezuelan law enforcement and ministry officials who have been designated as official liaisons with the U.S. government have become reluctant to share information because those who do are often fired or transferred, Shapiro said. One Interpol official in Caracas who provided information on fugitives was demoted and transferred, and another was forced into early retirement.

In contrast, the Venezuelans are routinely provided with data they ask for, like U.S. business verifications and information on stolen vehicles, Shapiro added.

Ambassador Alvarez on Thursday told a Caracas radio station that the U.S. government has been stepping up its criticism of the Chávez government to undermine its campaign to win a seat in the U.N. Security Council.

Urbancic said Thursday that "the negative impact of Venezuela's behavior would be amplified if it wins a nonpermanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, where it would have a voice in various subcommittees on terrorism."

The Associated Press quotes Alvarez as saying that there is "an interest in trying to produce the opinion that Venezuela is tied to terrorism, which is something that only they see."

"Nobody else sees it. . . . Our neighbors don't see it," he said.