

New U.S. post upsets Venezuela

The creation of a new U.S. intelligence post for Cuba and Venezuela angers Venezuela.

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WASHINGTON - The appointment of a top U.S. intelligence official specifically for Cuba and Venezuela prompted the South American country to say Monday that it will reconsider signing a counter-drug deal with Washington.

The Bush administration announced Friday it would appoint a "mission manager" for the two countries, putting them on equal footing with North Korea and Iran as the only countries with such managers, charged with developing strategies for key hot spots.

The administration has said it has very little knowledge of events in Cuba, describing it as a closed society that keeps a tight lid on information. And it has had frosty relations with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a Castro ally.

CRITICAL POINT

The creation of the mission manager post came nearly three weeks after Cuban leader Fidel Castro temporarily ceded power to his brother after surgery for a still-unspecified intestinal ailment.

"Such efforts are critical today, as policy-makers have increasingly focused on the challenges that Cuba and Venezuela pose to American foreign policy," said a news release from National Intelligence Director John Negroponte's office.

"In this light, the mission manager for Cuba and Venezuela will be responsible for ensuring that policymakers have a full range of timely and accurate intelligence on which to base their decisions," it added.

According to the Caracas daily El Universal, Venezuela's Minister of Interior and Justice, Jesse Chacón, on Monday said the development could prompt a "re-evaluation of the accords we might sign with the United States."

The U.S. and Venezuelan governments have been working on an agreement to resume bilateral cooperation on anti-drug matters, halted last year by Venezuela.

But Cuba watchers hailed the appointment, suggesting that it elevates the region's profile.

"There's a very important internal element to something like this," said former Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich. "It sends a signal to our own government that these are key presidential priorities."

A spokeswoman for the intelligence communities said the decision to create the position preceded Castro's announcement July 31 that he was temporarily handing over power, and was prompted by a desire to focus on the relationship between the two countries.

TEMPORARY APPOINTEE

Negroponte appointed J. Patrick Maher, a 32-year Central Intelligence Agency veteran who has spent most of his career as a Latin American specialist, to temporarily fill the post until a permanent manager is named.

Maier will be responsible for "integrating collection and analysis" on the two countries across the U.S. intelligence community, the agency said. He will continue to serve as the national intelligence officer for the Western Hemisphere.

Prior to assuming that post in August 2005, Maher was deputy director of the CIA's directorate of intelligence's office of policy support. His assignments at the CIA include issue manager of the Colombia Working Group and chief of Asian/Latin America branch's middle-Caribbean division.

Former CIA Cuba analyst Brian Latell, who used to hold Maher's current job, called him a "terrific" choice.

"He really knows his way around the region. He's lived and traveled there," Latell said.

"This is a man with a scholarly bent, who's very, very realistic."