

U.S. and Venezuela at Odds, and Seized Cargo Is Just the Half of It

The New York Times
August 27, 2006

CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Aug. 26 — Government officials from the [United States](#) and this country are intensifying their verbal sparring after Venezuelan customs authorities this week seized diplomatic baggage from the United States that contained military hardware.

In what analysts say may be a prelude to worsening relations, Venezuela's attorney general began an investigation on Friday into whether the American Embassy violated customs law when it brought 20 diplomatic bags into the country.

The cargo, delivered by a C-17 military transport plane, included ejector seats apparently intended for Venezuelan combat jets, explosive charges and about 180 pounds of chicken that did not pass through sanitary inspection, Interior Minister Jesse Chacón Escamillo said Friday night.

This latest row occurred amid growing distaste in President [Hugo Chávez](#)'s government over moves by the United States to step up spying operations in relation to Venezuela, with the creation this month of a post overseeing intelligence gathering and analysis for Venezuela and Cuba. Mr. Chávez regularly claims the United States plans to destabilize his administration and topple him.

Brian Penn, a spokesman for the American Embassy here, told local news media this week that the diplomatic bags seized Thursday contained replacement parts for ejector seats for the Venezuelan military. The United States banned sales of arms and military equipment to Venezuela in May, citing a lack of cooperation on antiterrorism efforts, though it said pre-existing contracts could be honored.

Officials from the American Embassy were not immediately available for comment on Saturday.

Edgar Vasquez, a State Department spokesman in Washington, told The Associated Press on Friday that the United States had requested an "immediate explanation of the entire incident," claiming the search violated international treaties on diplomatic baggage. "The impounded cargo consisted of household effects of a U.S. diplomat and a shipment of commissary goods," Mr. Vasquez said.

Tension between the countries have heightened, with the United States criticizing Mr. Chávez for his continual courting of closer ties with Iran and Cuba even as it remains the largest customer for Venezuelan oil.

Mr. Chávez has criticized American efforts to thwart Venezuela's ambition to secure a seat this year on the [United Nations Security Council](#).

This week, he said that Venezuela had won China's support for its [United Nations](#) bid, following a plan to increase crude oil sales to China to 500,000 barrels a day in five years from a current level of about 150,000 barrels a day. Figures from the [United States Department of Energy](#), meanwhile, showed that Venezuela's oil exports to the United States fell 6 percent in the first four months of this year as Venezuela's overall oil output declined.

"The U.S. government has employed every means necessary to block my country from joining the Security Council," Mr. Chávez told reporters on Friday in Beijing, where he is on a six-day trip aimed at strengthening commercial ties with China. "The American imperialists are trying to stop us."

Analysts here pointed out that Venezuela has used spats over diplomatic bags as a pretext to breaking off diplomatic ties, as it did with the Soviet Union during the military rule of Marcos Pérez Jiménez during the 1950's.

"It's time for maturity in Venezuelan diplomacy in its affirmation of its rights," Julio César Piñeda, a retired Venezuelan diplomat, said in commentary published Saturday in the newspaper El Universal, "or for the elimination of its flaws and the absence of professionalism."