

Chávez, Iran target U.S. oil 'hegemony'

The presidents of Venezuela and Iran, pursuing mutual goals to create a 'multipolar' world economy, met to solidify plans for joint construction of an oil refinery in Syria.

The Miami Herald
Sep. 19, 2006

SANTOME, Venezuela - (AP) -- Venezuela and Iran are planning to help construct a petroleum refinery in Syria capable of processing 150,000 barrels a day, Venezuela's oil minister announced Monday.

"We're studying an oil refinery in Syria," said Rafael Ramírez, during an official visit to Venezuela by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Venezuela's relations with Iran and Syria have strengthened under President Hugo Chávez, who views the Middle Eastern nations as important allies in his efforts to build what he calls "a multipolar world" no longer dominated by the United States.

Venezuela -- the world's fifth largest oil exporter -- has reduced its refining assets in the United States while expanding operations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Venezuela's state-run oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela SA, has bought a stake in a small Argentine refinery, signed a deal to double capacity at a Uruguayan refinery, revamped a Cuban refinery and laid the cornerstone for a \$2.5 billion refinery in Brazil last December.

Ahmadinejad and Chávez on Monday visited a tractor factory and an oil field to inaugurate a joint drilling operation.

Wearing hardhats, the Iranian and Venezuelan presidents shook hands with oil workers and questioned them on crude exploration at the drilling rigs in Venezuela's Orinoco River belt -- believed to be one of the world's largest oil deposits, with roughly 30.7 billion barrels of crude.

Security measures were tight, with dozens of Venezuelan soldiers -- many armed with assault rifles -- standing guard around the drilling rigs, adjacent dirt roads and nearby highways.

"We are joining you so this massive petroleum reserve, the biggest any country has in the world, serves us for the development of our peoples," Chávez said following the ceremony in San Tomé, a town about 225 miles southeast of Caracas.

The state-run oil companies of Venezuela and Iran -- Petroleos de Venezuela SA and Petropars -- are jointly exploring an area of the Orinoco containing estimated reserves of 1.5 billion barrels of oil.

"The message from what occurred today is that revolutionary and independent peoples, with mutual help, are capable of providing for themselves," Ahmadinejad said through an interpreter. "Venezuela and Iran have shown that, together, beyond the reach of U.S. hegemony and imperialism, they can work and progress."

