

Bolton derides protest by Venezuelan minister

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations called 'street theater' a protest by the Venezuelan foreign minister, who was held at a New York airport and claimed officials tried to frisk him.

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UNITED NATIONS - U.S. Ambassador John Bolton on Monday derided the Venezuelan foreign minister's protest over being detained at a New York airport as "street theater" and propaganda.

Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro claimed officials tried to frisk and handcuff him at John F. Kennedy International Airport as he left the annual U.N. General Assembly session Saturday. Screeners grew suspicious when Maduro used cash to purchase a one-way ticket to Miami shortly before the flight was to leave.

The incident capped a visit that further exacerbated ill will between the United States and Venezuela. During a speech to the General Assembly, President Hugo Chávez called President Bush "the devil" and a "spokesman of imperialism."

The U.S. State Department has apologized for Maduro's treatment, but Bolton was less conciliatory.

"There was no 'incident' at the airport -- this was Venezuelan street theater," Bolton said. "He did not request the courtesies we would have extended to get him through the airport. He purchased his ticket at a time and in a manner and with funding such that he was asked to go to secondary screening and he objected to that.

"And the first thing he did was call the press and speak to them in Spanish, so this is propaganda."

Maduro has called the State Department apology insufficient and said Venezuela would seek a legal challenge. Several dozen people in Caracas protested Maduro's detention Sunday.

Also Monday, the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, William Brownfield, said Chávez's U.N. speech should not affect diplomatic relations. Despite political tensions with Washington, Venezuela -- the world's fifth largest oil exporter -- remains a major supplier of oil to the United States.

"My government's position is that we are going to ignore, we can ignore and we should ignore the words. It's the actions that count," Brownfield told the Venezuelan TV station Globovisión. "This bilateral relation is so important for the two countries that we try to ignore the polemical words, the rhetoric."

Chávez said Sunday that it wasn't his intention to cause an uproar by calling Bush "the devil."

'Now `the devil' is in style because it occurred to me to talk about the devil in the United States, and that has caused -- I don't know -- an uproar in the world, which wasn't my intention," Chávez said during a campaign rally in western Venezuela.

"I simply said what I believe. Now the world is stirred up because Chávez called Bush devil," he said. ``Since I called him the devil in his own house, the devil is all worked up . . . They've threatened us with death. I'm in the hands of God. I'm not afraid of death."