

U.N. fight: Guatemala surprises Venezuela

Guatemala shocked Venezuela but fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to win a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

The Miami Herald
Oct. 17, 2006

NEW YORK - U.S.-backed Guatemala got the upper hand in a see-saw tussle Monday to secure a seat on the U.N. Security Council, dealing a surprising blow to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's ambitions to lead a worldwide anti-Washington front.

But in 10 rounds of voting Guatemala fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to win the seat, reserved for a Latin American nation, raising the specter of a lengthy battle that could eventually lead to a compromise candidacy.

Venezuelan officials blamed U.S. pressures for blocking their bid to secure a seat on a body that brings a country international prestige and a voice on key issues like the nuclear standoffs with Iran and North Korea.

Francisco Arias, Venezuela's U.N. ambassador, said Washington was exerting "grotesque, obscene" pressures on U.N. members to vote for Guatemala, and vowed his country would fight on.

"Venezuela is staying. Venezuela is by no means pulling out," he said after the fourth round of voting, adding that Washington was campaigning against his country as if "we were inventing a nuclear bomb."

The leftist-populist Chávez has been a steady and strident critic of the Bush administration, and a victory in the Security Council race would give him a strong voice in Latin American regional affairs as well.

Most analysts had expected Venezuela to outpoll Guatemala in the election, one of the most disputed in Security Council history. Chávez had traveled the globe in search of votes, touting himself as a voice opposed to Washington. U.S. officials have complained that Chávez has been using his oil wealth to expand his influence.

But diplomats privately said Chávez hurt Venezuela in a speech last month at the U.N. General Assembly, where he called President Bush "a devil." Guatemalan Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal, who attended the session, said after the 10th ballot that his country would maintain its candidacy for now but would be willing later to consider a compromise.

"We're going to see how things evolve in the next day or two," he said. More rounds of voting are expected today.

Although the vote was secret, many South American and Caribbean nations as well as African and Arab nations were known to be backing Venezuela, while Washington and most European and Central America nations were supporting Guatemala. Chile, Ecuador and Peru abstained in the first round but did not say how they voted in the later ballots.

The winner will succeed Argentina in a two-year term on the Security Council, beginning in January.

Guatemala won the early rounds of balloting and by the third round secured 116 votes, just eight short of the two-thirds needed to win.

Venezuelan diplomats fanned out in the cavernous hall, with Arias methodically greeting each delegation several times. Former Venezuelan foreign minister Roy Chaderton, designated by Chávez as a special envoy for the U.N. campaign, also worked the aisles.

On occasion, the Venezuelan and U.S. diplomats would politely ignore each other as they bumped into one another during their lobbying runs. U.S. Ambassador John Bolton and the assistant secretary of state for western hemispheric affairs, Thomas Shannon, were seen chatting up other delegates. "In the year 2000, I spent 31 days in Florida," Bolton told reporters at one point, referring to the long U.S. presidential election recount. "This has just begun."

The delegates' tables soon became a clutter of pamphlets, with the leftist-populist Chávez delegation dominating the literature.

Delegates also received a small bag with sweets from Venezuela, while Guatemalan diplomats handed out an embroidered wristband.

On the sixth round, Venezuela and Guatemala tied at 93 votes, and the Venezuelan delegation erupted in a loud applause. But Guatemala reversed the tide and by the 10th round obtained 110 votes against 77 for Venezuela.

Monday's election recalled the 154-round standoff between Cuba and Colombia in 1979 that resulted in Mexico winning as a consensus candidate.

In Caracas, Venezuelan Vice President José Vicente Rangel said his country had demonstrated the firmness of its foreign policy in the face of "pressure" and "bribes" from the U.S. delegation. "We are confronting the empire."

But Chávez's main opponent in Dec. 3 presidential elections, Manuel Rosales, described Venezuela's failure to win the seat as a "democratic whipping for those who do not understand that the world is advancing toward freedom and democracy."