

Guatemala leads Venezuela in U.N. vote

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UNITED NATIONS - U.S.-backed Guatemala held a substantial lead over Venezuela in an 11th round of voting Tuesday for a Latin American seat on the U.N. Security Council, but still fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to win.

Guatemala received 107 votes, while Venezuela got 76 in the secret ballot for a two-year stint on the U.N.'s most powerful body.

The result added to the growing belief that neither would be able to muster the 125 votes needed to win and Latin American nations would ultimately have to look to a compromise candidate.

General Assembly President Sheikh Haya Rashed Al Khalifa immediately called for a 12th round of voting in the chamber of 192-member General Assembly.

Guatemala led in nine of 10 ballots Monday, but could not get a two-thirds majority.

The results were seen as a setback for Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who had lobbied hard in capitals around the world, offering millions of petrodollars in aid.

Diplomats said his bombastic speech to the General Assembly in September, when Chavez railed against the United States and called President Bush "the devil," may have hurt Venezuela's chances. Even U.S. politicians who had reached out to Chavez criticized the speech.

Neither Venezuela nor Guatemala appeared willing to drop out of the election.

Venezuela's U.N. Ambassador Francisco Arias Cardenas complained that the United States pressed countries worldwide to prevent Venezuela from winning a seat on the 15-nation council.

"We are fighting against the first power of the world, the owners of the universe," Arias Cardenas said. "We're happy, we're strong and we will continue."

Venezuelan diplomat Roy Chaderton, who played a key role in his country's campaign for the seat, said the results were only a minor setback in the long struggle against U.S. efforts to dominate international affairs.

"This battle will prepare us for another battle within the international community," Chaderton told Venezuelan state television Sunday, accusing the United States of "using all its power" to undermine Venezuela's chances.

"There were a lot of telephone calls made from Washington ... to coerce and scare countries that had decided to vote for Venezuela," Chaderton said.

The vote, however, also reflected the ambivalence toward Guatemala, Washington's preferred candidate. Even Guatemalan Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal had earlier expressed discomfort about the highly public U.S. campaign against Venezuela and in support of Guatemala.

After Monday's balloting, Rosenthal said his nation was an "independent voice" that would vote according to its own policies.

"And frankly we resent it a bit being told we are going to toe the line of not only the United States but any other power," Rosenthal said. "We make our own decisions."

The voting pattern fluctuated Monday, with Guatemala leading until the sixth round when they tied at 93 each. On the last vote, Guatemala led again, with 110 to Venezuela's 77.

Diplomats said it was far too early to think of a compromise candidate to come forward to fill the seat that Argentina will vacate at the end of the year. Peru holds the other seat reserved for Latin America until Dec. 31, 2007.

The record number of ballots for a Security Council seat occurred in 1979, when the General Assembly held 154 unsuccessful votes to choose between Cuba and Colombia. Mexico was then put forward and won in the 155th round.

Latin American states could agree to put forward a new candidate - but only if the other two agree to step down. Rosenthal acknowledged that the deadlock could not last forever.

"If this goes on for several days and we can see that there's no movement in either of the candidates being able to get two-thirds of the vote, we probably would have to think of a third consensus candidate for the region," Rosenthal said. "But we think the time hasn't come for that yet."

Possible other candidates include Uruguay, Costa Rica, Mexico or Chile, though Chilean Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley has said his nation is not seeking a spot on the council. That does not rule out Chile being put forward by someone else.

Venezuela has served four times on the Security Council. Guatemala has never had a seat but is a leading contributor of troops to U.N. peacekeeping missions.

The other four seats that will come open on the council were filled easily Monday. South Africa, Indonesia, Italy and Belgium will replace Tanzania, Japan, Denmark and Greece.

The 10 non-permanent seats on the council are filled by the regional groups for two-year stretches. The other five are occupied by the veto-wielding permanent members: Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.