

# CHÁVEZ'S LATEST ENEMY: BEER TRUCKS

**Ahead of Sunday's vote, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is cracking down on delivery trucks selling beer on the street.**

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**CARACAS, VENEZUELA** – Alongside "neoliberal" economics and President Bush, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has another enemy on his list: beer trucks.

On his road to Sunday's presidential election, which pits the former military colonel turned president against Manuel Rosales, a conservative candidate backed mostly by Venezuela's middle and upper class, Mr. Chávez has ordered the National Guard to stop delivery trucks from selling beer in the streets of poor neighborhoods.

Only licensed establishments can sell alcohol legally here.

"It's the degeneration of society," Chávez said in a televised speech in October. "It's one of the causes of public drunkenness in the slums.... No more trucks."

Chávez made it clear, however, he wasn't banning beer, a necessary qualification in a country known for its fondness for and ability to put back the suds.

Venezuela and Brazil have the highest beer-consumption rates in South America, according to a World Bank study. And since oil prices have boosted the country's petroleum-based economy in recent years, Venezuelans have poured even more freely: Beer consumption here increased by "double-digit rates" in 2004, according to Euromonitor, a global market research company with offices in Chicago.

Some Venezuelans says the crackdown on delivery trucks is a necessity.

"He isn't saying don't drink," says Vito, a middle-aged taxi driver in Caracas. "He just wants to build consciousness about how people do it. There is too much drinking."

Rosele Alcalá, a young waitress, agrees. But she has little hope the regulations will have an impact.

"There is a lot of violence and family problems because of people drinking," she says. "But even if they stop the trucks from selling, the people will just go to the store and buy it. It doesn't do anything."

Chávez's ongoing fight to curb drinking

This isn't the first time the Chávez government has targeted alcohol consumption. A 2005 media law bans alcohol ads on television and radio. Chávez has also promised to boost state services to treat alcoholics. And the government has blue laws that prohibit drinking in the streets while restricting the hours that licensed establishments can serving alcohol.

Yet there's an apparent gulf between laws and enforcement.

It is common to see Venezuelans on street corners hoisting bottles of bright gold Solara and Polar beer, the two top brands.

And, perhaps ironically, the fiesta is especially alcohol-fueled during political events.

"The law says you are not supposed to drink in the street but everybody does it, especially at the Chavez rallies," says Ms. Alcala.

Guy Taylor, an American journalist working in Caracas, says Chávez rallies he has seen were marked by colorful street theater, pro-Chávez rappers, scantily clad women and, of course, plenty of beer.

"It really resembles a carnival," he says. "People start drinking early at the rallies and by the time Chávez shows up, a beer-fueled hysteria has taken hold."

Venezuela's drinking culture

Though alcohol ads are kept off the airways, Caracas, the capital, is dotted with massive billboards, and movie theaters often run beer ads. And, some experts say, Venezuela's entrenched drinking culture and its social permissiveness of excess makes it hard to spot problems.

Writing last week in a popular newspaper, *El Universal*, Pedro Delgado, a Venezuelan mental-health expert, said alcohol abuse here is a "social problem with epidemic characteristics."

"Studies suggest that around half of the male population frequently abuses alcohol," Dr. Delgado wrote, adding that "a high social tolerance

with respect to consumption sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish normal drinking from that which needs treatment."

Even if many admit Venezuelans drink to excess, some are against the crackdown on trucks.

Perched on a beer truck unloading crates in front of a liquor store in central Caracas, Alejandro Lemus says the ban is unfair. "Even though I never sell to people, I can't take the truck into certain neighborhoods," he says. "It has cost me a lot of business."

Down the street, at a foldout table where he rents cellphones by the minute, José Gutiérrez says he supports Chávez's attempt to change the drinking culture.

"I think it is a good idea to stop the trucks," he says. "Drinking brings problems with drugs and fights."

He says children start drinking early, mirroring their fathers, brothers, and cousins, and that his countrymen drink too much.

But will Chávez's efforts actually change the culture?

"No," he says, smiling, shaking his head. "Things are too far advanced for that."

Even so, the government hopes to keep people from stumbling into Sunday's voting booths: beer and alcohol sales are banned throughout the weekend, starting Friday.