

U.S. gives tepid response to reelection of Chávez

Washington avoided direct references to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's reelection, but it did say reports of voting irregularities should be investigated.

The Miami Herald
Dec. 05, 2006

WASHINGTON - The State Department, long at odds with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, on Monday greeted the populist leader's landslide reelection victory by holding out the possibility of a more cooperative relationship with his government.

"We look forward to having the opportunity to work with the Venezuelan government on issues of mutual interest," State Department press officer Eric Watnik said.

In Cuba, there was no word on whether ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro had sent congratulations to Chávez, a key political and economic ally. But the president of the national legislature, Ricardo Alarcón, reacted with enthusiasm.

"We expected it, but it's still a source of joy," said Alarcón, adding that Chávez's new six-year term "will signify a push . . . for the struggle toward a true Latin American integration and union."

Chávez, meanwhile, saw his victory as a setback for the United States. "It's another defeat for the devil, who tries to dominate the world," he told a crowd of supporters in Caracas later Sunday. "Down with imperialism. We need a new world."

Watnik's brief comments did not offer congratulations to Chávez, nor did it make direct reference to him or what it regards as the increasingly authoritarian course he is pursuing.

Watnik also said reports of voting irregularities should be investigated. The administration, he said, closely followed reports of intimidation and voter harassment during the campaign.

"We look forward to hearing from the Organization of American States, the European Union and civil society groups that observed the electoral process," he added.

WARNING OF EXTREMISM

In Miami, a member of the Israeli parliament said Monday that Chávez's reelection poses a threat to the "stability of the free world" and could lead to increased economic support for extremist organizations.

"Relations between Venezuela and the extremists . . . are very close, are too close," said former deputy prime minister Silvan Shalom. "Chávez comes with a totally different view that sees the free world . . . as an enemy while their enemies are his friends."

"I see Chávez as a senior member of the axis of evil," he said in a speech before members of The Israel Project, a nonprofit organization that raises funds to increase awareness about Israel and promote security, freedom and peace.

Shalom also warned that funding for terrorist organizations could increase as Chávez's popularity rises and his ties with leaders such as Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad grow stronger.

Chávez's contention that Iran has the right to pursue a nuclear energy program and funding believed to be coming from Latin America to terrorist organizations also is cause for concern, Shalom said, though he offered no specific evidence of monetary support.

On Friday, two days before the Venezuelan election, National Director of Intelligence John Negroponte outlined U.S. concerns about Chávez in a wide-ranging speech at Harvard University.

'A DIVISIVE FORCE'

Negroponte said Chávez's "meddling in the domestic affairs of other states in the region -- granting Colombia's FARC insurgents safe haven and other material support, for example -- already has made him a divisive force."

He criticized Venezuela's attitude toward drug trafficking as "permissive," an allegation Venezuelan officials have denied.

Venezuela's growing ties to Iran and other states, such as North Korea, Syria and Belarus, "clearly demonstrate a desire to build an anti-U.S. coalition that extends well beyond Latin America," Negroponte said.