

# Iranian President Visits Venezuela to Strengthen Ties

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Jan. 13 — President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) of [Iran](#) arrived here on Saturday for talks with President [Hugo Chávez](#), on the first leg of a Latin American visit to enhance Tehran's stature with governments where distrust of the Bush administration already runs deep.

It is Mr. Ahmadinejad's second visit to Venezuela in the past five months, and the two leaders were scheduled to talk about strengthening their economic ties. From here, the Iranian president is to visit Ecuador and Nicaragua, where leftist presidents aligned with Mr. Chávez are taking office this month.

Venezuela's government promoted the visit as an example of Middle Eastern solidarity with Mr. Chávez's opposition to American foreign policy. Venezuela has been a vociferous defender of Iran as the United States steps up efforts to circumscribe Mr. Ahmadinejad's government, most recently through military raids this week on people suspected of being Iranian operatives in Iraq.

The two countries said Saturday night that they would use a \$2 billion investment fund to finance projects in Venezuela and Iran, as well as in other countries. In addition, they said they were considering ventures to train teachers and produce manioc starch in Venezuela. Mr. Chávez also said Venezuela and Iran would press for output cuts within OPEC in an effort to push oil prices up from a 19-month low.

State television here showed images of Mr. Chávez embracing Mr. Ahmadinejad and of Iranian cars rolling off an assembly line at a recently inaugurated factory in the city of Maracay. Fifty cadets from Venezuela's naval academy were on hand to receive the Iranian president at the international airport in Maiquetía.

“Welcome, fighter for just causes,” Mr. Chávez said in a speech here before the National Assembly, describing Mr. Ahmadinejad as a “revolutionary” and a “brother.”

Nowhere has Iran’s search for allies in Latin America been more fruitful than in Venezuela. The two countries have signed an array of agreements in recent months, pledging to work together here in exploring for oil, building low-income housing and assembling tractors and bicycles, among other ventures.

The tightening alliance with Iran comes as Mr. Chávez pushes for broad changes in Venezuela’s political and economic structures. Just this week, Mr. Chávez’s government said it would nationalize the entire electricity industry and the country’s largest phone company.

Mr. Chávez also announced a plan which, according to some interpretations, would reconfigure municipal governments by replacing them with entities called communal councils. The president’s supporters in Congress say the project is inspired by the Paris Commune, the socialist government that briefly ruled Paris in 1871. Critics of the plan, which also includes the construction of entirely new cities in Venezuela’s interior, say it would effectively eliminate some of the few elected politicians who remain opposed to the government.

Mr. Ahmadinejad’s visit has alarmed Jewish organizations here and elsewhere because of his aggressive talk in relation to Israel. Heinz Sonntag, a prominent Venezuelan sociologist and political commentator, said the visit by Mr. Ahmadinejad was an “affront and an eventual threat to our fellow countrymen who are Jewish.”

“The invitation of this personality is the finishing touch on Chávez’s announcements this week,” said Mr. Sonntag.

Venezuela has a long history of close relations with Middle Eastern countries, dating to the founding of OPEC in Baghdad in 1960 by Venezuela, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, in an effort to keep oil prices high. Mr. Chávez has strengthened those ties through overtures to Iran, and more recently Syria, where Venezuela and

Iran have plans to build an oil refinery capable of processing 150,000 barrels a day.

“There is a desire by Chávez to accelerate what he views as a strategic alliance with Iran,” said Alberto Garrido, author of “Chávez’s Wars,” a book recently published here that explores Venezuela’s ties to the Middle East. “The Venezuelan left has for decades considered alliances with Muslim countries as one of the ways to create a new civilization through the toppling of American values.”

For the time being, Venezuela’s relations with Iran have revolved around Mr. Chávez’s defense of Iran’s uranium enrichment plans, while the two countries deepen their cooperation in oil-related areas. For instance, Venezuela said last month that it would buy four oil tankers from Iran, part of Venezuela’s plan to increase its 21-ship tanker fleet through the acquisition of 42 additional vessels.

Iran and Venezuela, the world’s fourth- and fifth-largest oil exporters, are also exploring for oil together in Venezuela’s Orinoco region. And they have plans for a joint oil trading company, part of an ambition by Caracas and Tehran to price oil in euros instead of dollars in order to weaken the influence of the United States in the international oil market.

Iran seems to have also found a welcome in Ecuador, an oil-exporting country where Mr. Ahmadinejad will attend the inauguration of Rafael Correa, a leftist economist elected president last year. And in Nicaragua, Mr. Ahmadinejad will meet with Daniel Ortega, the former guerrilla leader who assumed the presidency this month.