

Chávez lashes out at U.S. ambassador

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CARACAS - (AP) -- President Hugo Chávez warned Thursday that the U.S. ambassador could be asked to leave the country if he continues ``meddling in Venezuela's affairs."

The outspoken Venezuelan leader lashed out after William Brownfield said U.S. companies and investors must receive a fair price for their shares of Venezuela's largest telephone company when it is nationalized.

"If you continue meddling in Venezuela's affairs, first of all, you are violating the Geneva agreements and getting yourself involved in a serious violation and could . . . be declared a persona non grata and would have to leave the country," Chávez said.

Earlier Thursday, Brownfield told local Union Radio the planned takeover of CA Nacional de Teléfonos, or CANTV, should proceed "in a transparent, legal manner" and that Venezuela's government must offer ``fair and quick compensation to the people who are affected or the owners."

"These are the only obligations that a government has when it decides to nationalize an industry," he added.

Virginia-based Verizon Communications Inc. holds the largest minority share of CANTV, which was privatized in 1991. The takeover jeopardizes an agreement by Verizon to sell its 28.5 percent stake in CANTV to a joint venture of América Móvil and Teléfonos de México (Telmex), controlled by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim.

The sale had been awaiting Venezuelan government regulatory approval.

Chávez, a self-proclaimed "revolutionary" who is steering Venezuela toward socialism, has said he wants an immediate state takeover of the telephone company and will not pay shareholders the market value.