

Cuba spotlights friendship with Chávez

A high-profile Cuban delegation visited Caracas this week in a prominent demonstration of solidarity with Venezuela.

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CARACAS - A delegation of Cuba's most influential Cabinet members flew to Venezuela this week to sign 16 deals worth more than \$1 billion, highlighting the close relations between Caracas and Havana.

Perhaps even more significant than the accords to dig for oil or host low-income Venezuelan tourists in Cuba were the officials who showed up for the signing ceremony: 10 Cuban ministers and Vice President Carlos Lage.

The Cuban officials were on hand Wednesday as President Hugo Chávez heralded the growing economic bond between the two nations. The Cuban delegation also was met by a formal military reception at the Miraflores presidential palace.

The visit was significant because many Cuba-watchers often speculate that relations between Chávez and Cuba's interim President Raúl Castro are at best icy.

MUTUAL MESSAGE

But as Fidel Castro convalesces, Chávez continues to pour more than \$2 billion a year to Cuba to prop its economy, leaving Raúl dependent. While Raúl's friendship with Chávez may not be as warm as his brother's, experts say sending such a high-profile delegation was a clear sign that Raúl is eager to extend cozy bilateral relations.

"We think it's a way of each country telling each other: we need each other," said Jorge Piñon, who tracks Venezuelan oil deals with Cuba for the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. "That was Raúl Castro telling Chávez: 'I need you economically. I cannot survive without you, and therefore I am . . . sending my most senior representatives to visit you.'"

Lage was accompanied by Foreign Investment Minister Marta Lumas, Basic Industries Minister Yadira García and Ramiro Valdés, minister of information and telecommunications. Also present were Transportation Minister Jorge Luis Sierra, Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero and the ministers of agriculture, María Pérez, and finance, Giorgina Barreiro. The chairman of the central bank and the industries minister also attended.

The arrival of the delegation on Wednesday was not announced in advance, and took even the presidential palace press corps by surprise. It was the first visit by such high Cuban officials since Fidel Castro fell ill in July.

In all, the two governments signed more than a dozen agreements, in areas as diverse as tourism, telecommunications and energy.

Cuba is to advise Venezuela on tourism projects, including the development of the island of La Tortuga. Venezuela, in turn, plans to send 100,000 low-income tourists to Cuba, drawn in part from the beneficiaries of Cuban-aided social welfare missions in Venezuela.

A joint telecommunications company -- one of a dozen to be established under the new agreements -- will set up a 932-mile fiber optic link between the two countries. The project is scheduled for completion in two years.

FARMS AND FACTORY

Other projects include the cultivation of rice in Venezuela for export to Cuba, the establishment of a stainless steel plant using Venezuelan iron and Cuban nickel, and joint oil exploration in both countries. The oil and nickel agreements are worth about \$500 million each, Piñon said, but are not likely to take off for two to three years.

Venezuelan foreign minister Nicolás Maduro said the agreements marked ``a giant step forward in the process of union between the peoples of Venezuela and Cuba."

Chávez reiterated the two nations' solidarity, and added that even if President Bush didn't mention Venezuela in his State of the Union speech this week, he did mention Cuba.

"Maybe he doesn't know, or let's remind him in case he has forgotten," Chávez said, ``that when he threatens Cuba, he threatens Venezuela, too."

"There has been kind of a conventional wisdom that Raúl and Chávez won't get along . . . the way Fidel and Hugo did; the Cuban government wants to dispel that impression," said InterAmerican Dialogue analyst Daniel Erikson. ``Sending such a high-level delegation is important. At the end of the day, the Venezuela connection is going to be even more important for Raúl than for Fidel."