

Chávez coup attempt commemorated

President Hugo Chávez celebrated his 1992 coup attempt in which more than 80 civilians and 17 soldiers died, calling it 'a lightning bolt that illuminated the darkness.'

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CARACAS - New Russian-made fighter jets roared overhead on Sunday as Venezuelan soldiers marched alongside tanks, commemorating a bloody coup attempt led by President Hugo Chávez as a lieutenant colonel 15 years ago.

Speaking to troops and spectators before the parade, Chávez called the coup attempt on Feb. 4, 1992, "a lightning bolt that illuminated the darkness" and vowed to turn Venezuela into a socialist state.

"Fifteen years later, here we are: the people and soldiers together," said Chávez, who wore military fatigues and his trademark red paratrooper beret. Borrowing a phrase from his close ally Cuban leader Fidel Castro, he added: "Fatherland, socialism or death!"

Thousands of civilians also marched through the capital Sunday to celebrate the failed 1992 coup. Waving Venezuelan flags and chanting "The people united, will never be defeated!" throngs of Chávez supporters wearing red -- the color of Venezuela's leftist ruling party -- converge at Tiuna Fort, a military base where the memorial parade was held.

"We applaud the rebellion spearheaded by Chávez," said Gregorio Muñoz, a 34-year-old municipal worker. "He gave the people hope for change, and now he's changing our country through socialism."

'IMPERIALISM, NO'

One man carried a poster reading: "Revolution, Yes! Imperialism, No!" Dozens of *chavistas* danced behind a sound truck playing a hip-hop song that boomed: "We don't want Gringos here!" while others pulled a giant inflated 40-foot Chávez balloon through the streets.

More than 80 civilians and 17 soldiers were killed before troops loyal to then-President Carlos Andrés Pérez quelled the short-lived putsch.

Chávez supporters remember the military rebellion as a violent but justified attempt to replace a corrupt government while the president's political adversaries argue the botched coup attempt was unnecessary and threatened one of South America's oldest democracies.

Chávez has celebrated the rebellion's anniversary every year he since took office in 1999. Government institutions have been criticized by opponents for providing participants in the annual event with transportation, food and free T-shirts.

State television broadcast spots on Sunday praising the coup attempt and referring to Feb. 4 as "The Dawn of Dignity." Caracas Mayor Juan Barreto took out full-page newspaper ads showing Chavez dressed in olive green military fatigues and the red beret, waving a Venezuelan flag under a banner reading: "For now, and forever, the Fatherland has awoken."

Anita Colmenares, a 45-year-old secretary opposed to Chávez's shift toward socialism, railed against Chávez for "trying to turn a tragic event into something grandiose" as she watched Sunday's march from a distance.

'TOWARD A PRECIPICE'

"He's leading our country toward a precipice," she said.

Chávez spent two years in prison for plotting the uprising, and was pardoned by then-President Rafael Caldera in 1994. After his release, Chávez traveled across the country, steadily winning support for what was, at first, a fledgling political movement espousing the rights of the nation's underprivileged, but which ultimately led him to the presidency.

Chávez was first elected in 1998 and was reelected after a new constitution was drafted in 2000. He won reelection by a large margin in December and has announced plans to nationalize the country's leading telephone company, the electricity sector and lucrative oil and natural gas projects.

Last week Congress awarded Chávez the power to pass dozens of laws by decree during the next 18 months in areas from the economy to the judicial system.

Chávez himself was briefly ousted in a 2002 coup that he claimed Washington played a role in. The U.S. government has repeatedly denied involvement, although it recognized an interim government established by coup leaders.

Opponents accuse Chávez of trying to install a Cuban-style system in Venezuela and argue his revolutionary rhetoric is dangerously dividing this oil-rich yet poverty-stricken South American nation along class lines.

Supporters counter that Chávez is the first president in decades to stand up for the rights of the poor.