

Chávez opens fuel depot, woos Dominica

Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez opened a Petrocaribe fuel storage facility in Dominica.

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ROSEAU, Dominica - (AP) -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez made a plea for Caribbean unity as he opened a fuel storage facility on this poor island on Friday, as part of a program offering Caribbean countries fuel on generous terms.

"We are one nation -- the Caribbean nation," Chávez told Dominica leaders in the capital, Roseau, where representatives of the two governments signed agreements on cooperation in tourism, education and other fields. "Let's get together, truly."

Under its Petrocaribe initiative, Venezuela has sent petroleum products and other aid to needy Caribbean countries to help them counter rising energy prices. Recipients are offered deferred payment and long-term financing for fuel shipments.

Dominica -- one of the region's poorest nations, with an economy based on fading agriculture and tourism - has received asphalt, fuel storage tanks, university scholarships and \$12 million for housing.

The 5,000-barrel fuel storage tank is one of five that Venezuela has pledged to build here under Petrocaribe, an agreement between Venezuela and 14 Caribbean countries signed in 2005 amid the sharp spike in oil prices.

Petrocaribe is widely seen as an effort by Chávez -- long at odds with Washington -- to make inroads in a region where the United States is a major trading partner.

But Foreign Minister Charles Savarin said the former British colony's close ties to Caracas do not signal any distancing from Washington.

"Our relationship with Venezuela does not adversely affect our relationship with any other country," Savarin told local DBS radio. "We are friends with the United States."

During Chávez's one-day visit, officials also planned to discuss a proposed refinery that would process some 10,000 barrels a day and have enough capacity to export refined oil.

Earlier this week, the Caribbean Conservation Association urged Dominica to reject the proposal.