

Venezuelan station off the air; protesters again clash with police

Students joined other demonstrators in the second big day of protest against the government's shutdown of Radio Caracas Televisión.

The Miami Herald
May. 29, 2007

CARACAS --

Riot police clashed with thousands of demonstrators in the Venezuelan capital for a second consecutive day Monday, leaving several people injured, as protests continued over the closure by President Hugo Chávez of the country's most popular television station, Radio Caracas Televisión, (RCTV).

International condemnation of the shutdown also continued, with criticism coming from the European Union and the press freedom body Reporters Without Borders.

Robert Ménard, secretary general of Reporters Without Borders, said in Caracas that the decision not to renew the station's license was "political." Chávez has accused RCTV of being part of a conspiracy to destabilize his 8-year-old government.

Protests by students from several Caracas universities were dispersed by riot police firing tear gas and rubber bullets, leaving several students hurt. In the midtown Plaza Brión square, protesters kneeled in front of police with their hands in the air and eventually regrouped after the riot squad pulled back.

There were similar clashes in a number of other Venezuelan cities, and in Valencia four students suffered gunshot wounds. Unconfirmed reports said one had died.

In an interview with the government channel VTV, Interior Minister Pedro Carreño accused the opposition of mounting a plot against the government, devised by "the empire." Chávez frequently refers to the United States as "the empire."

PROTESTS `A PRETEXT'

Carreño said the demonstrators were using the RCTV case as a pretext "to develop a plan for violence in the country."

"The government [also] has its plan," Carreño told the TV channel. "And it is working." He gave no further details.

Several journalists, producers and artists from the Venevisión channel, owned by the multinational Cisneros Organization, joined the Plaza Brión rally to express their rejection of the shutdown.

They included some of the channel's best-known anchors.

Venevisión, which was once among the most openly anti-Chávez TV stations, now avoids criticizing the government. Its broadcasting license, which also expired Sunday, was renewed by the authorities last week.

Chávez "clearly over-estimated his strength in this instance," said lawyer and political analyst Enrique ter Horst, a former U.N. deputy high commissioner for human rights. The RCTV closure, ter Horst told The Miami Herald, "has awakened sectors of society, such as the students, which had remained largely on the sidelines."

At RCTV headquarters, most of the staff turned up for work as usual Monday, according to news anchor Valeria Murgich.

``Even though our eyes were swollen from crying and we felt angry and indignant."`

Many of the staff slept at the station Sunday night, Murgich said, after an emotional final broadcast in which they sang the national anthem, prayed together and chanted "Freedom, freedom" and ``No to the shutdown."

It remained unclear whether the station will find a permanent way to transmit its programs now that its frequency has been taken away and its transmitters taken over by the armed forces for use by TVES.

For the moment, it is managing to get some news programs on the air via its sister radio station, RCR, and the Colombian TV station Caracol, and it is also using the Internet.

In a statement, the German presidency of the European Union "noted with concern" the fact that the Venezuelan government had decided to allow RCTV's license to expire, ``without holding an open competition for the successor license."

The statement called on Venezuela to uphold the principles of free speech.

And at a Monday news conference, Ménard called the shutdown "a serious violation of freedom of expression and a major setback to democracy and pluralism" and called on the international community to ``defend what remains of the independent media in Venezuela."

The new government-run TVES channel, meanwhile, which broadcast its first day's programs, showed little sign of the "pluralism, diversity and freedom of expression" promised in its opening promo video.

TRAVEL AND COOKING

A light diet of travel, cooking and arts programs was interspersed with frequent government propaganda spots, extolling the virtues of Chávez's social welfare "missions" and recent nationalizations of "strategic" industries.

The principal challenge facing the new channel, according to media experts, is to replace the country's most popular shows with programs that attract an audience, while simultaneously meeting the government's demand to promote "socialist" values.

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VENEZUELA

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BY PHIL GUNSON

Special to The Miami Herald



HOWARD YANES / AP

University students throw rocks toward riot police Monday in Caracas during a protest against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's decision to shut down opposition-aligned television station Radio Caracas Television, RCTV.

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