

Venezuela's Chavez meets with Castro

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HAVANA --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez met for six hours behind closed doors Tuesday with Cuba's Fidel Castro and the close allies discussed energy issues and a regional trade pact during an emotional visit, state television reported.

State TV showed Chavez being greeted at the airport by Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, but no images of the Venezuelan president's meeting with the convalescing 80-year-old Castro were immediately released.

A television announcer described the visit as "emotional" and said the pair discussed efforts to improve their countries' energy programs. They also talked about the socialist-leaning regional pact they created, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, known as ALBA.

State TV said earlier Tuesday that Chavez would also meet with Castro's younger brother, Defense Minister Raul Castro, who has been acting president since his older brother temporarily stepped aside in late July following emergency intestinal surgery.

"Long live Cuba! Long live Fidel!" Chavez shouted to official media at Havana's airport before he was whisked away in a black sedan.

Chavez was scheduled to be in historic Old Havana early Wednesday to inaugurate a statue of South American hero Gen. Francisco de Miranda. Afterward, Chavez was to visit the nearby San Geronimo College, which opened in recent years with a focus on historic renovation and art restoration.

Other details of the visit were not immediately announced.

Chavez's visit came just five days after Bolivian President Evo Morales made a daylong trip to Havana and spent three hours with Castro, later saying the Cuban leader looked "very recovered."

Although Castro has not appeared in public in the 10 months since announcing his illness, he has become more active recently, writing more than a dozen essays on international affairs.

He has been seen only in still photographs and videotapes released by the government, including a 50-minute taped interview that appeared on state TV last week. No images of his visit with Morales or Chavez were immediately released.

Senior officials have repeatedly said Castro is on the mend, although the bearded revolutionary recently acknowledged in one of his essays that his recovery has been delayed because one of his first operations did not go well.