

Chávez threatens private healthcare

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

(AP) -- President Hugo Chávez said Tuesday his government will nationalize Venezuela's privately owned hospitals and clinics if they fail to reduce healthcare costs.

"If the owners of the private clinics don't want to obey the laws, then the private clinics will be nationalized," Chávez said in a nationally televised speech.

Venezuela has a two-tiered health system in which wealthier, insured patients often can afford prompt, better treatment at private hospitals.

"This is the evil of capitalism," Chávez said of the healthcare costs at private clinics. "We have to regulate this progressively, transforming the savage capitalist market into a market of solidarity."

Chávez has expanded the public-health system, building new clinics and refurbishing hospitals, but many public hospitals lack basic medical supplies and sufficient personnel. He has also sent thousands of Cuban and Venezuelan doctors to live in poor neighborhoods, where they provide free care.