

# Anti-Chavez channel faces deadline

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

An opposition-aligned television channel, already booted from the airwaves, faced a deadline Wednesday to agree to carry speeches by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez or be yanked from the cable lineup.

The country's telecommunications watchdog has given Radio Caracas Television, or RCTV, until midnight Wednesday to register as a national producer, a category that would require it to interrupt its programming at the government's request to transmit Chavez's speeches.

The new cable channel RCTV International says it intends to be an "international channel."

It asked the telecommunications commission to clarify its rules, saying it appears to be enforcing them differently now that RCTV has begun transmitting programming by cable.

"We're talking about crimes against human rights here. There is no excuse," top RCTV executive Marcel Granier said on a Wednesday morning interview program. "They are crimes for which they're going to have to pay."

Asked if the removal from cable would mean the end of RCTV, Granier said: "We'll see how far it goes."

Chavez forced RCTV, the country's oldest private channel, off the air on May 27 by refusing to renew its broadcast license. He accused it of supporting a 2002 coup that briefly removed him from power and of repeatedly violating broadcast laws.

The channel began transmitting on cable and satellite on July 16.

Venezuela's Chamber of Subscription Television has urged the government to extend the deadline and hold talks, but has received no reaction, according to chamber president Mario Seijas.

Joel Simon, executive director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, said the pressure on RCTV "seems to be yet another attempt by the Venezuelan government to shut down a critical media outlet."

"Forcing the station to transmit President Chavez's speeches is a sign of the government's attempt to control the flow of information," he said in a statement.

RCTV was replaced on the airwaves with public-service channel that Chavez said would help "democratize" the airwaves.

Many of Venezuela's media outlets are still privately owned and critical of Chavez. But the RCTV case has drawn condemnation from critics because only one other major channel, Globovision, remains firmly sided with the opposition.

Chavez regularly takes over the airwaves, requiring channels to carry portions of his appearances in what is known under Venezuelan law as a "national network."

RCTV has said the requirement to carry the speeches and other state commercials would make its operations "economically nonviable."

While other countries have similar provisions, few presidents have used it as often as Chavez, who has taken more than 890 hours of air time since he took office in 1999, according to a recent study by Andres Canizalez, a researcher at Andres Bello Catholic University who also works with the press group Reporters Without Borders.

Canizalez noted in the study that Chavez is using the measure less frequently in recent years, decreasing from a high of 375 times in 2004 to 15 in the first three months of 2007.

