

On the road with Sean Penn and Chavez

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LA GRITA, Venezuela --

Aboard the presidential jet, a grinning Hugo Chavez put a hand on Sean Penn's shoulder, praised his acting and added: "And he's anti-Bush!"

The Venezuelan president reveled in his role as host to the Hollywood star as they flew across the country Friday and traveled through the countryside in a military jeep with Chavez at the wheel, stopping to greet cheering supporters.

The Oscar-winning actor has previously condemned the Iraq war and called for President Bush to be impeached, but he revealed little about his thoughts on Venezuela, saying he came as a freelance journalist after reporting stints in Iraq and Iran - and was saving his conclusions for print.

"He's a courageous man," Chavez said as he introduced Penn to reporters and dignitaries during the flight from Caracas to western Venezuela. "He's very quiet, but he has a fire burning inside."

Penn is the latest in a series of U.S. celebrities and public figures to visit Chavez, including actor Danny Glover, singer Harry Belafonte and Cindy Sheehan, who became a peace activist after her soldier son was killed in Iraq.

Enlivened by his conversations with Penn, the socialist president lambasted the U.S. government for "destroying the world" with war and warned of brewing economic troubles, saying Washington should do much more for its own poor.

"There could be a revolution there," Chavez said. "We'll help them. The United States must be helped because the United States is going to implode."

Driving a Venezuelan-made Tiuna jeep through fields of potatoes, corn and lettuce, Chavez craned his head to chat with Penn, who rode in the rear seat wearing sunglasses and taking in the spectacle.

Penn's star power was eclipsed by Chavez, who honked to flag-waving admirers along the road through a mountain valley and stopped to kiss children and clasp hands with screaming women.

At the end of the trip, Chavez and Penn donned white lab coats and toured an agricultural research laboratory.

Some Chavez opponents have been critical of Penn's visit, saying he is being used for political purposes.

While Chavez made a speech, however, Penn stood at a distance alongside the audience, occasionally jotting down notes. He spoke only when Chavez asked the actor to say a few words.

"I came here looking for a great country. I found a great country," Penn told the crowd.

"I'm also here as a journalist and so I owe it to that medium to wait until I've digested, fact-checked and finished my journey here" before saying more, Penn said. He thanked Chavez for the visit.

The president lauded Penn as "a man who is critical of his government and of imperialism."

At one of Chavez's many roadside stops, Penn remarked: "I'm just here to take it in like everybody else."

Chavez noted they were visiting "one of the most tense zones of Latin America" - near the border with Colombia, a haven for drug traffickers, left-wing rebels and right-wing paramilitaries. Security was tight, with soldiers and bodyguards lining the motorcade route.

Holding a map of the border region, Chavez said the U.S. "empire" has a strong presence on the Colombian side, including military advisers and spies.

But he kept the tone light with visiting dignitaries from countries including Canada, Poland and Burkina Faso who joined him on the presidential Airbus jet. With a hearty laugh, he said: "Surely they're going to take satellite photographs, and they're going to say in Washington that Chavez is going around with... a crazy international battalion - African, Canadian, Cuban ... and gringo!"