

Venezuela, Argentina condemn America

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MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay --

The leaders of Argentina and Venezuela closed ranks against the United States Tuesday, rejecting U.S. court charges in a campaign cash scandal as one more example of Americans treating their nations like subservient colonies.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez dismissed as "big lies" the allegations by U.S. prosecutors that his government had tried to cover up an attempt to deliver a suitcase stuffed with \$800,000 to the campaign of Cristina Fernandez, who became Argentina's president this month.

And Fernandez - whose ascension Tuesday to the presidency of the Mercosur trading bloc was overshadowed by the suitcase scandal - described herself as the victim of "dirty operations and dirty politics."

Fernandez, visibly angry, blamed it on "unilateralism that has only created tragedy, pain and insecurity in the contemporary world."

And while she didn't refer to Washington explicitly, her husband took care of that. "Relations with the United States are not good and Argentina isn't a colony" of the U.S., former president Nestor Kirchner declared in Buenos Aires.

The U.S. insists that its prosecutors act independently and have pursued the case without influence from the White House - a claim rejected entirely by Kirchner, who noted that the U.S. has thus far refused Argentina's request to extradite Guido Antonini Wilson, the Venezuelan-American businessman who fled Argentina after bringing in the suitcase.

"We Argentines are being abused by a band of mafiosos," Kirchner said. "Return the fugitive, extradite Antonini Wilson, because the Argentines want to know the truth."

The six-month rotating leadership of Mercosur, a trade bloc led by Brazil and Argentina, is the first international role for Fernandez, who took office Dec. 10.

The group signed a free trade treaty with Israel, its first with a non-Latin American country, a move that Fernandez heralded as a bold example of the region's desire to embark on independent dealings in a "multi-polar world." The decade-long phaseout of tariffs on most goods and services is intended to be a model for accords with other Mideast nations, South Africa and India.

Chavez meanwhile pushed for full Mercosur membership for Venezuela, urging holdout members to consider the benefits his oil-rich country, a major importer, would bring to its energy-hungry neighbors.

"The future of Mercosur is bound up in the future of South America," Chavez said.

But trade talks were overshadowed by the "suitcase scandal." U.S. prosecutors have charged four men with being unregistered Venezuelan agents who came to Florida and allegedly pressured Antonini Wilson to keep quiet after Argentine customs opened the suitcase that he allegedly brought from Venezuela.

"This all started as a bunch of big lies," insisted Chavez, who suggested that U.S. undercover agents tried to use the case to sabotage Fernandez's presidential campaign as well as his own failed constitutional referendum.

"Clearly the CIA, the FBI tried to make this scandal explode fully amid Cristina's campaign and our own campaign en route to the Dec. 2 referendum. But they couldn't do it," he said, without giving specifics.