

Iran Leader Visits Venezuela, Bolivia

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#) -- [Iran's](#) president opened his nation's wallet to [Bolivia](#) on Thursday and then visited Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, declaring "no one can defeat us" during a trip aimed at strengthening ties with Latin American leftists and countering U.S. influence.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pledged to invest \$1 billion in Bolivia over the next five years to help the poor Andean nation tap its vast natural gas reserves, extract minerals, generate more electricity and fund agricultural and construction projects.

Bolivian President Evo Morales, who joins Chavez as one of Iran's key allies, called Ahmadinejad's visit historic as the two nations established diplomatic relations for the first time.

Later Thursday in Venezuela, Ahmadinejad and Chavez greeted each other warmly on a red carpet in front of the presidential palace and then let loose with rhetoric challenging Washington, whose influence they are seeking to roll back in the region.

"Together we are surely growing stronger, and in truth no one can defeat us," the Iranian leader said through an interpreter. Apparently referring to the U.S., he said, "Imperialism has no other option: Respect the peoples (of the world) or accept defeat."

Chavez embraced the Iranian leader, calling him "one of the greatest anti-imperialist fighters" and "one of the great fighters for true peace."

In his defiant speech to the U.N. General Assembly this week, Ahmadinejad rebuked "arrogant powers" seeking to curb Iran's nuclear program. Chavez also strongly defends Iran's nuclear research, insisting it is for peaceful energy uses despite U.S. charges it is aimed at making nuclear weapons.

Chavez said he was proud of Ahmadinejad's courage while under hostile questioning at New York's Columbia University. "An imperial spokesman tried to disrespect you, calling you a cruel little tyrant. You responded with the greatness of a revolutionary."

During the Iranian leader's earlier stop in Bolivia, Morales brushed off concerns about close ties to a country that Washington says is a sponsor of terrorism, declaring that the "international community can rest assured that Bolivia's foreign policy is dedicated to peace with equality and social justice."

Ahmadinejad's trip underscored his growing ties to Latin American nations, including Nicaragua and Ecuador, even as the United States tries to isolate him internationally.

The closer ties are viewed with alarm by the opposition in Venezuela and Bolivia, and by Washington. U.S. Rep. Connie Mack, a Florida Republican, said they remind him "of the relationship that Fidel Castro had with [Russia](#)." He urged Washington to reach out more to a region analysts say it has largely ignored since 9-11.

Toward that aim, a bipartisan bill is being introduced in the U.S. Congress on Friday that would establish a 10-year, \$2.5 billion program aimed at reducing poverty and expanding the middle class in Latin America. It would require recipient countries to contribute and encourage matching funds from businesses and non-governmental organizations.

The program would bring more stability in the long run and help the United States "re-establish leadership in the hemisphere" by increasing development assistance by more than a third, said bill co-sponsor Sen. Bob Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat.

Chavez's government, for its part, has promised more than \$8.8 billion in aid, financing and energy funding to the region this year.

Relations between Caracas and Tehran, meanwhile, have grown very close. Since 2001, Iran and Venezuela have signed trade agreements worth more than \$20 billion in potential investment, according to Iran's official news agency, IRNA.

They have teamed up to begin producing cars, tractors and plastic goods, and signed an agreement to help Venezuela build public housing. Iran Air began flights between Tehran and Caracas, with a stopover in Syria, earlier this year.

Venezuelan Jewish leaders objected to the presence of Ahmadinejad, who has called for the end of [Israel](#) and questioned the history of the Holocaust.

"We raise our voice to condemn these statements by the Iranian leader which incite hatred, becoming a threat to world peace," the Venezuelan Confederation of Israeli Associations said in a statement. The country is home to a large Jewish population, including Holocaust survivors.

Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa also wants closer ties with Tehran and last month Nicaragua accepted Iranian pledges for 10,000 houses, 4,000 tractors, milk-processing plants, piers and a farm equipment assembly plant in exchange for goods from Managua.