

Venezuela rails at U.S. despite talks

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UNITED NATIONS --

A day after holding rare talks with a top U.S. envoy, Venezuela's foreign minister railed against the United States Tuesday for the "death and destruction" in Iraq and warned the world not to allow a similar war with Iran.

Nicolas Maduro's fiery speech before the U.N. General Assembly contrasted with the Venezuelan government's description of his "cordial meeting" with Thomas Shannon, the top U.S. envoy for the Americas. The two discussed a possible visit by Shannon to Venezuela.

Relations between the two countries have been tense for years. The United States accuses President Hugo Chavez of being a threat to stability in Latin America and the Venezuelan leader is constantly criticizing U.S. "imperialism" under President Bush.

Monday's private meeting was the first between Maduro and a high-ranking U.S. diplomat. The two spent most of the hour-long talk discussing efforts by Chavez to broker a deal for the release of hostages held by rebels in Colombia, including three U.S. contractors, Maduro told The Associated Press in an interview late Tuesday. He said Shannon requested the meeting and urged Venezuela to push the rebels for proof the Americans were still alive.

But Maduro said he doubted the rapprochement over the hostages would lead to an imminent thawing in relations between the U.S. and Venezuela, saying differences between the two countries were too intrinsic. He cited Iran as a key source of friction.

Maduro's speech showed Venezuela had no intention of softening its criticism of the U.S.

"Madness and ambition for the world's natural resources led the U.S. government to launch a ludicrous war," he told the General Assembly. "This war has led to more death and destruction and has created more pockets of terrorism."

He warned of an intensifying "media campaign to demonize the people and government of Iran" and urged world leaders not to allow the nuclear dispute with Tehran to escalate into war.

"Have the governments of the world asked themselves what would happen if the relentless madness of U.S. leaders culminates in an attack against Iran?" Maduro said. "But we still have time to stop this demonizing campaign. We have time to build walls of restraint to stop the ... elites that run the United States of America."

In the interview, Maduro claimed that there was talk in the "corridors of the U.N." of U.S. plans for a "surprise attack against the peaceful country of Iran" by the end of the year.

Washington has said it is addressing the Iran situation diplomatically, rather than militarily, though U.S. officials also say that all options are open.

A spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations dismissed Maduro's claim.

"The fact is that Bush has stated our goal of resolving the crisis with Iran diplomatically," Benjamin Chang said. "Frankly, I would not put much stock in any rumors that the Venezuelan foreign minister is trying to give credence to."

Venezuela and Iran have built an alliance aimed at countering the United States. Last week, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Venezuela to meet with Chavez, who called the Iranian leader "one of the greatest anti-imperialist fighters."

Ahmadinejad has also deepened ties with the leftist governments of Nicaragua and Bolivia, whose presidents both defended Iran against allegations that it is seeking nuclear weapons in their speeches to the U.N. last week.

Despite deep political differences, the U.S. government has generally sought a pragmatic relationship with Venezuela, which remains a major source of American crude oil imports. The State Department released a brief statement about the meeting between Maduro and Shannon, saying Washington "remains committed to engaging positively with Venezuela."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in a Sept. 25 interview with the New York Post's editorial board, said Washington is addressing the issue of Chavez's influence in Latin America by toning down the rhetoric and focusing on American efforts to improve social conditions in the region.

Chavez seized the world's attention last year by calling Bush "the devil" in a speech before the U.N. General Assembly. He skipped the meeting this year, instead focusing on his efforts to negotiate the release of hostages held in Colombia.

Last week, Chavez made a rare overture to Bush, asking for support for his mediation efforts between Colombia's largest rebel group and the U.S.-backed government of President Alvaro Uribe.