

New US ambassador meets with Chavez

The Miami Herald
Oct. 30, 2007

CARACAS, Venezuela --

The new U.S. ambassador to Venezuela says his meeting with President Hugo Chavez was a positive start toward improving tense relations.

Ambassador Patrick Duddy said the Monday meeting covered expanding cooperation in areas such as counter-drug operations - which Washington has cited as a major concern due to the flow of cocaine passing through Venezuela from Colombia.

"We talked about a wide range of issues and our determination to work in some areas such as drug trafficking for the well-being of both countries, and (to) find a way to improve relations," Duddy was quoted as saying by the Venezuelan TV channel Globovision.

"We had a very good conversation," Duddy said later, according to the Venezuelan newspaper El Universal. "I hope to work in this beautiful country for the well-being of both of our sister nations. I think it was a good start."

Duddy met Chavez to present his credentials as ambassador two months after his arrival in Caracas, and in a photograph released by the government the two appeared smiling as they chatted.

Duddy, a former senior official in the State Department's Latin America bureau, replaced William Brownfield, who left in July to become the top U.S. diplomat in neighboring Colombia.

Despite growing hostility between Chavez and the Bush administration in recent years, the United States remains the top buyer of Venezuelan oil.

Duddy has said he hopes to emphasize areas of common ground between the two countries - such as a shared interest in fighting drug trafficking - while trying to strengthen relations.