

Recall of ambassador a sign of rising tension

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has called home his ambassador to Colombia to evaluate bilateral relations with the neighboring country.

The Miami Herald
Nov. 28, 2007

CARACAS --

Venezuela ratcheted up a diplomatic row with neighboring Colombia on Tuesday when President Hugo Chávez called home his ambassador to Bogotá for an "exhaustive evaluation" of bilateral relations.

With the move, Chávez appeared to have rejected cautions against allowing an exchange of insults between him and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe on Sunday to threaten the close political and economic ties between the two countries.

The Colombian government said it would not reply by recalling its ambassador in Caracas -- a diplomatic maneuver that shows displeasure but stops short of a break in formal relations.

"Uribe wants this to blow over," said Elsa Cardozo, a professor of international relations at Venezuela's Metropolitan University.

Myles Frechette, who served as U.S. ambassador to Colombia in the 1990s and as a lower-level diplomat to Venezuela in the 1970s, said Chávez undoubtedly acted out of personal pique and with an eye toward a crucial vote Sunday on constitutional reforms.

Frechette said Chávez had been burnishing his tattered reputation abroad through his efforts to win the release of 46 high-profile American and Colombian hostages held for years by that country's leftist FARC guerrillas. Uribe angered Chávez last week by canceling the Venezuelan president's efforts to mediate a prisoner swap with the rebels.

"Chávez's pride was hurt a lot," Frechette said, especially after Spanish King Juan Carlos had already told him to shut up two weeks earlier at a regional summit. "Chávez is also concerned about his image before Venezuelans and how this might hurt his chances of winning the referendum."

Some polls show Chávez losing the vote Sunday by 10 points, but analysts are not counting him out, given his enormous charisma and uncanny ability to win vote after vote in Venezuela.

Chávez and his political allies in the national assembly are proposing 69 amendments to the country's Constitution that would -- among other changes -- allow him to seek reelection indefinitely, give the government the right to suspend some civil liberties

during emergencies, shorten the formal workweek and provide retirement pensions to the one-half of the labor force that works off the books.

Chávez said Sunday that he was putting relations with Colombia "in the freezer" and said he had lost faith in Uribe's ability to lead that country. Uribe responded that Chávez had used his mediation role with the FARC to try to expand his influence in Colombia, and said he had been meddling in too many other countries for too long.

Until then, the two leaders had maintained relatively good working relations for more than two years, even though Chávez is a leftist and Washington's biggest headache in Latin America while Uribe is a conservative and perhaps President Bush's biggest ally in the region.

Analysts had been wondering since Sunday whether either president would seek to exacerbate the crisis.

Chávez took the bait. The Venezuelan foreign ministry issued a statement Tuesday, saying it had called home its ambassador to Colombia "with the aim of overseeing an exhaustive evaluation of bilateral relations."

Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo sought to sidestep the battle, saying, "The enemy of the Colombian people is the FARC."

Colombia is not likely to recall its ambassador to Venezuela, said Patrick Esteruelas, who tracks Colombia and Venezuela for the Eurasia Group, which analyzes political risk for private clients.

"Ultimately, I think this will be the extent of it," Esteruelas said. "Both countries are heavily dependent on each other, although Colombia has the most to lose."

Esteruelas said Colombian exports to Venezuela increased by 77 percent during the first eight months of 2007 compared to a similar period in 2006. Colombia had a \$1.7 billion trade surplus with Venezuela during that period, thanks to exports of textiles, automobiles and basic foodstuffs to Venezuela.

For its part, Venezuela has come to depend on Colombian chicken, meat, eggs and sugar to offset shortages of Venezuelan-produced goods.

The two countries briefly suspended commercial ties in 2005 after agents working for Colombia snatched a senior FARC leader, Rodrigo Granda, from Caracas and imprisoned him in Colombia. Chávez protested by blocking Colombian goods from entering Venezuela.

"The two countries have less of a reason to suspend commercial ties now," Esteruelas said.