

# Chavez cuts off contacts with Colombia

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said Wednesday he was cutting off all contacts with the Colombian government, but left it unclear whether he was announcing an end to diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Chavez's announcement came after a series of sharp exchanges with President Alvaro Uribe set off when the Colombian leader last week abruptly ended the Venezuelan's mediation between Colombia's government and leftist rebels.

"While President Uribe is president of Colombia I will have no type of relationship with him or with the government in Colombia," Chavez said.

Speaking in the southwestern state of Tachira, Chavez said he will not have any relationship with a "president who is capable of such barefaced lies, disrespects another president that he has called a friend, one that he called on for help."

The Venezuelan president had a similar spat in late 2005 with then Mexican President Vicente Fox. While relations between Mexico and Venezuela were reduced to lower-level diplomats, ties were not formally severed.

Uribe's 4-year term is scheduled to run into 2010, although some of his supporters are urging him to change the constitution and run for a third term.

Uribe appeared to try to calm the dispute with Chavez earlier Wednesday, saying that presidents should put aside their "angers" and "vanities" to get on with their work.

Chavez recalled his ambassador to Colombia on Tuesday. Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araujo vowed then not to call back Colombia's ambassador in Caracas, insisting his government's dispute is not with Venezuela, but with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The Andean neighbors share a 1,380-mile border and \$5 billion in trade last year, maintaining friendly relations despite sharp ideological differences - until now.

Uribe, Washington's closest ally in South America, removed Chavez and a Colombian senator from talks with the FARC rebels a week ago, saying the Venezuelan leader had violated the conditions of his involvement by speaking directly to the head of Colombia's army.

Chavez on Sunday said he was putting relations with Colombia "in the freezer," calling Uribe a "liar" and accusing him of "not wanting peace."

Uribe replied hours later by charging Chavez with pushing an "expansionist project" across Latin America and saying the Venezuelan seemed to want Colombia to fall "victim to a terrorist FARC government."

He also said Chavez was resorting to the "old trick" of stoking hatred of Colombia within Venezuela to reap the electoral benefit. Chavez is campaigning for a national referendum Sunday on proposals that would, among other proposals, extend presidential terms and end term limits.

Uribe had invited Chavez in August to help broker a deal with the FARC guerrillas, who are sympathetic to the Venezuelan leader's socialist ideals.

The rebels are holding 46 high-profile hostages, including three American defense contractors and French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt. It is offering to release the prisoners in exchange for the freeing of all imprisoned rebels.