

Chávez snubs trade with Colombia

The Miami Herald
Dec. 11, 2007

BUENOS AIRES --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez seems intent on keeping up his diplomatic spat with Colombia despite the harm it will cause to their \$5 billion in trade, and vowed to turn to other nations as business partners from now on.

"That commercial relationship . . . I'm sure that's going to be hurt," Chávez told reporters late Monday while he and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe attended the inauguration of Argentina's president. "Now instead of buying so many things from Colombia, I will go to Brazil . . . Central America, Nicaragua."

Chávez also said he has no plans to return to the Andean Community trading bloc as long as Uribe's government is a member.

Chávez froze his once-cordial relations with the U.S. ally after Uribe abruptly halted Chávez's efforts to mediate a hostage swap with Colombia's leftist rebels. The Venezuelan leader called that a betrayal and said that if he were allowed to continue mediating, FARC rebel leader Manuel Marulanda would almost certainly have turned over some hostages by Christmas.

Uribe ended Chávez's mediation role after Chávez spoke directly with Colombia's army chief against Uribe's wishes. Chávez called that a flimsy excuse, charging that Colombia ended his mediation on orders from Washington.

Chávez and Uribe scheduled separate meetings with Argentine President Cristina Fernández on Tuesday, one day after she succeeded her husband, Néstor Kirchner.

Chile, Argentina, Brazil and France have pressed Uribe to seek a deal for the release of at least 46 prominent rebel-held hostages.

Three Americans -- Thomas Howes, Marc Gonsalves and Keith Stansell -- were captured when their surveillance plane was downed in 2003. Another high-profile hostage is Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential candidate in Colombia who was captured while campaigning in 2002.