

Venezuela Declares Solidarity with Bolivia's Government in Face of Separatist Effort

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May 3, 2008, (venezuelanalysis.com) ? The Venezuelan government reaffirmed its support for the territorial integrity of Bolivia and the government of Evo Morales in the face of moves by rightwing oppositionists in the state of Santa Cruz, to hold an unconstitutional referendum on autonomy this Sunday, May 4.

The referendum in Bolivia's wealthiest state has provoked fears that rightwing governors opposed to President Morales's policies of wealth distribution, in the states of Tarija, Pando and Beni, - which possess large fields of crude oil, natural gas and other minerals and represent Bolivia's most productive agricultural land ? could convoke similar referendums, potentially leading to a civil war and the break up of Bolivia.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicholas Maduro said in a speech on Wednesday, "The Bolivian people should know that from here, from Bolivarian Venezuela, we are with President Evo Morales and the unity of Bolivia in any circumstance, whatever happens." Bolivia's Ambassador in Venezuela, Jorge Alvarado Rivas, said the referendum is unconstitutional and illegitimate and aims to divide the country.

"This process is unconstitutional and illegal, it violates the political Constitution of the State, it violates many laws; neither does it have legitimacy because international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the Rio Group, and the European Union have manifested that they will not recognise the results of this consultation because it is anti-constitutional. Consequently? it can not be recognised by the [Bolivian] government."

Rivas believes that the United States is behind the illegal referendum: "What we rightly believe is that this is a policy to divide us, to weaken us ? the movements that we are experiencing in Latin America ? coming from the United States, which always aim to control our energy resources?these regions that are looking to separate themselves from Bolivia are the zones where the largest reserves of hydrocarbons exist."

Key points of the proposed Santa Cruz autonomy statute include: ? Santa Cruz would have a directly-elected governor and an elected assembly with powers to legislate on issues ranging from the judiciary to taxes. ? Santa Cruz would define its own polices on taxes, telecommunications, housing and land, and railway transport. This is a direct challenge to the central government's land reform plans to redistribute unused lands to the country's indigenous majority. ? The governor would have the right to sign international accords. ? Santa Cruz would have the power to form and run its own police force. ? The governor, deputy governor, and leaders of the department's 15 provinces (similar to counties) would have immunity from prosecution. ? The immigration status of foreigners in Santa Cruz would

be regulated by the department, not by the national government.

OAS political secretary, Dante Caputo, has been attempting to facilitate a dialogue between the Santa Cruz opposition and the national government and suspend the referendum. However, Santa Cruz governor Ruben Costas refused to meet with Caputo this week and the president of the so-called Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, Branco Marinkovic (of Croatian origin), said nothing will stop the referendum from going ahead and accused Caputo of being a "Chavista" (as supporters of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez are called).

On Friday the OAS passed a resolution reaffirming the territorial integrity of Bolivia and manifesting its "solidarity and respect" with the Bolivian government.

The text of the resolution did not specifically mention the autonomy referendum in Santa Cruz, but rejected "any attempt to rupture" the constitutional order and territorial integrity of Bolivia.

The United States, however, declared its "neutrality" in the face of these divisions, which many fear could lead to civil war in the

landlocked country.

Journalist Eduardo Dimas questioned, "It is no secret that the U.S. ambassador to Bolivia, Philip S. Goldberg, is a specialist in the dismemberment of countries, an experience he acquired during his term in the former Yugoslavia. Goldberg spends more time in Santa Cruz than in La Paz, Bolivia's capital. Why?"

Research by US-Venezuelan lawyer Eva Golinger recently revealed that the US has transferred more than \$120 million per year, since 2005, to Bolivian opposition groups and NGOs through organizations such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy.

Venezuelan opposition figures such as student leader Jon Goicoechea, have also travelled to Bolivia recently to meet with and "train" rightwing Bolivian student groups. Video footage of the meeting with Goicoechea broadcast on VTV showed the students taking about how they were going to overthrow the democratically elected governments in Bolivia and Venezuela and singing, "Evo, son of a whore."

Conversely, leftist student groups from the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, together with indigenous groups in Venezuela held a march of several thousand in support of the territorial integrity of Bolivia and the government of Evo Morales in Caracas on Friday.

José Poyo, President of the Indigenous Parliament of Latin America, declared, "From here we are giving full support and from the state of Amazonas, together with the state of Bolivar and the states in the east of the country, we will hold a great rally of indigenous peoples, a vigil from Saturday until Sunday. The Indigenous Parliament, the National Indigenous Council of Venezuela and all the indigenous organizations will gather to show our solidarity, to monitor the situation that is happening in our brother republic of Bolivia."

Yul Jabour, a Venezuelan deputy to the Andean Parliament said, "Yesterday it was Kosovo, today it is Bolivia, tomorrow it will surely be Paraguay, Venezuela in sequence. This is the struggle of all the people of Latin America, the Venezuelan people?against north American imperialism and their policy of division against the policy of unity being formed by leaders of

the revolutionary processes of the continent like presidents Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez. This is why we are in solidarity with the great people of Bolivia.”

A recent poll by Equipos Mora showed that in Santa Cruz, 84% of the population say they will vote in the referendum, with 76% in favour of the autonomy statutes. However, the results will not be monitored or verified by any international observers.

Another survey this week by private polling firm Apoyo indicated that Morales counts with 54% popular support nationwide, the same percentage with which he won the December 2005 presidential elections. However, the survey also showed the regional polarization, with support for Morales surging to 75% in La Paz, but only 25% in Santa Cruz.

According to the poll only 15% of the population has actually read the autonomy statutes to be voted on in the referendum.

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