

Venezuela's Oil Refinery Blaze: Seven Good Reasons to Suspect Sabotage

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"You can't exclude any hypothesis ... It's practically impossible that here in an [oil] installation like this which is fully automated everywhere and that has thousands of responsible workers night and day, civilian and military, and that there is a gas leak for 3 or 4 days and nobody responds. This is impossible."

President Chavez responding to US media and opposition charges that the explosion at the oil refinery was due to government negligence.

Introduction

Only 43 days before the Venezuelan presidential election and with President Chavez leading by a persistent margin of 20 percentage points, an explosion and fire at the Amuay refinery killed at least 48 people - half of those were members of the National Guard - and destroyed oil facilities producing 645,000 barrels of oil per day.

Immediately following the explosion and fire, on script, all the mass media in the US and Great Britain, and the right wing Venezuelan opposition launched a blanket condemnation of the government as the perpetrator of the disaster accusing it of "gross negligence" and "under-investment" in safety standards.

Yet there are strong reasons to reject these self-serving accusations and to formulate a more plausible hypothesis, namely that the explosion was an act of sabotage, planned and executed by a clandestine group of terrorist specialists acting on behalf of the US government. There are powerful arguments to sustain and pursue this line of inquiry.

The Argument for Sabotage:

(1) The first question in any serious investigation is who benefits and who loses from the destruction of lives and oil production?

The US is a clear winner on several crucial fronts. Firstly, via the economic losses to the Venezuelan economy - 2.5 million barrels in the first 5 days and counting - the loss will put a dent on social spending and delay productive investments which in turn are key electoral appeals of the Chavez presidency. Secondly, on cue the US joined by its client candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, immediately launched a propaganda blitz aimed at discrediting the government and calling into question its capacity to ensure the security and

safety of its citizens and the principle source of the country's wealth. Thirdly, the explosion creates insecurity and fear among sectors of the electorate and could influence their voting in the October presidential election. Fourthly, the US can test the effectiveness of a wider destabilization campaign and the government's capacity to respond to any further security threats.

(2) According to official government documents the US has Special Forces operations in over seventy-five countries, including Venezuela , which is targeted because of an adversarial relation. This means that the US has operative clandestine highly trained operatives on the ground in Venezuela . The capture of a US Marine for illegal entry in Venezuela with prior experience in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan is indicative.

(3) The US has a history of involvement in violent destabilization activity in Venezuela - backing the military coup of 2002 and the bosses' lockout in the petroleum industry in 2003. The US targeting of the oil industry involved sabotage of the computerized system and efforts to degrade the refineries.

(4) The US has a history of sabotage and violence against incumbent adversarial regimes. In Cuba during 1960, the CIA torched a department store and sugar plantations, and planted bombs in the downtown tourist centers - aiming to undermine strategic sectors of the economy. In Chile following the election of Socialist Salvador Allende, a CIA backed right-wing group kidnapped and assassinated the military attache of Socialist President, in an effort to provoke a military coup. Similarly in Jamaica in the late 1970's under democratic socialist President Manley, the CIA facilitated a violent destabilization campaign in the run-up to the elections. Sabotage and destabilization is a common weapon in the face of impending electoral defeats (as is the case in Venezuela) or where a popular government is firmly entrenched.

(5) Force, violence and destabilization campaigns against incumbent regimes have become common operation procedure in current US policy. The US has financed and armed terrorist groups in Libya , Syria , Lebanon , Iran and Chechnya ; it is bombing Pakistan , Yemen , Somalia and Afghanistan . In other words US foreign policy is highly militarized and opposed to any negotiated diplomatic resolution of conflicts with adversarial regimes. Sabotaging Venezuela 's oil refineries is within the logic and practice of current global US foreign policy.

(6) Domestic politics in the US has taken a further turn to the far right in both domestic and foreign policy. The Republican Party has accused the Democrats of pandering to Iran , Venezuela , Cuba and Syria - of not going to war.

The Obama regime has responded by escalating its military policies - battleships, missiles are aimed at Iran . He has supported Miami 's demand for "regime change" in Cuba as a prelude to negotiations. Washington is channeling millions of dollars via NGO's to the Venezuelan opposition - for electoral and destabilization purposes. No doubt the opposition includes employees, engineers and others with security clearance and access to the petroleum industry. Obama has consistently taken violent actions to demonstrate that he is as militarist as the Republicans. In the midst of a close election campaign, especially with a tight race in Florida , the sabotage of the Venezuelan refineries plays well for Obama.

(7) With a little more than a month left before the elections, and President Chavez is showing a 20 percentage point advantage; the economy is on track for a steady recovery;

social housing and welfare programs are consolidating massive low income support or over 80%; Venezuela has been admitted into MERCOSUR the powerful Latin American integration program; Colombia signed off on a mutual defense agreement with Venezuela; Venezuela is diversifying its overseas markets and suppliers. What these facts indicate is that Washington has no chance of defeating Chavez electorally; it has no possibility of using its Latin neighbors as a springboard for territorial incursions or precipitating a war for regime change; and it has no chance of imposing an economic boycott.

Given Washington 's declared enmity and designation of Chavez as "a threat to hemispheric security" and faced with the utter failure of its other policy tools, the resort to violence and, in this specific case, sabotage of the strategic petrol sector emerges as the policy of choice. Washington , by revealing its resort to clandestine terror, represents a clear and present danger to Venezuela 's constitutional order, an immediate threat to the life blood of its economy and of the democratic electoral process. Hopefully, the Chavez government, backed by the vast majority of its citizens and constitutionalist armed forces will take the necessary comprehensive security measures to ensure that there is no repeat of the petrol sabotage in other sectors, like the electrical grid. Public weakness in the face of imperial belligerence only encourages further aggression. No doubt heightened public security in defense of the constitutional order will be denounced by the US government, media and their local clients as "authoritarian" and claim that protection of the national patrimony infringes on 'democratic freedoms'. No doubt they prefer a weak security system to ply their violent provocations. Subsequent to their decisive electoral defeat they will claim fraud or interference. All this is predictable, but the vast majority of voters who assemble, debate and cast their ballots will feel secure and look forward to another four years of peace and prosperity, free from terror and sabotage.

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