

Venezuela to review relations after spying scandal

The Venezuelan government responded firmly to revelations this month that U.S. covert operatives based in Caracas were actively gathering information on the country's oil industry, its employees, and Maduro administration ministers. The new tensions come despite ongoing efforts by Caracas to improve relations with Washington.

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Committed voters mobilized for December election

Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan activists mobilized nationwide to ensure electoral victories for their candidates in next month's National Assembly elections. In contrast to opposition campaigning that focuses on discrediting Venezuela's democratic electoral authorities, the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and allies took to the streets in numerous campaign events across the country.

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Economy

Social indicators ratify government policies

With extreme poverty at a record low, and 3,000,000 elderly people now protected by public pensions, the Venezuelan government this month reiterated its commitment to the socialist policies of the late President Hugo Chavez and his successor, President Nicolas Maduro. According to the Venezuelan leader, these indicators are the result of nationalized oil revenues and social programs.

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In upcoming election, U.S. seeks observers to influence

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Friday, November 27, 2015 | N° 224 | Caracas | www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve ENGLISH EDITION / The artillery of ideas INTERNATIONAL



New Leaks Reveal U.S. Embassy in Caracas Using NSA to Tap into PDVSA

Another scathing revelation released by NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden this month indicates U.S. Embassy staff in Caracas are part of Washington-based efforts to undermine the socialist governments of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. Reported on by Telesur last week, the leaked documents provide new insight into the nature of U.S. covert operations in the South American nation and how covert operatives are using online tools to gather information about public employees in the state-owned oil firm, PDVSA, among others. The reports have strained relations between the two countries, with Caracas demanding explanation from U.S. diplomats. [Page 2](#)

U.S. plotting with opposition for elections

T/ Telesur English
E/ COI
P/ Agencies

Former Venezuelan Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Roy Chaderton recently told the press that the United States is conspiring with the opposition to destabilize the socialist government of President Nicolas Maduro ahead of national elections scheduled for next month. "(The Venezuelan opposition) are above all else destabilizers. They are involved in an ongoing open conspiracy against our democracy and do so using fascist elements in the United



States and Colombia, Chile, and in Spain", Chaderton affirmed.

"There is an orchestrated movement against our elections and our democracy, with the U.S. using Venezuela as a scapegoat for failed policies in Latin America and abroad", he added.

On December 6th Venezuelans will vote in a new Na-

tional Assembly. Claiming the government plans to commit electoral fraud, the opposition has repeatedly dodged requests to commit to recognizing results in advance. Instead, they demand U.S.-friendly observers from the OAS attend the vote, disregarding mechanisms in place for inviting outside observers.



Mujica publicly breaks with OAS over Venezuela

T/ Telesur English
E/ COI
P/ Agencies

Former Uruguayan President Jose "Pepe" Mujica this month formally broke with his former foreign minister and current Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, over recent comments about Venezuela's electoral and participatory democracy.

"I lament the path that you have taken and I now understand that it is irreversible. That is why I formally say goodbye and part ways with you for good", wrote Mujica to Almagro in a letter sent to *Busqueda Magazine*.

Mujica's break with his former minister comes in response to a recent 18-page document prepared by Almagro as OAS head in which he openly discredits Venezuela's electoral authorities and the country's democratic transition towards socialism under former President Hugo Chavez and current President Nicolas Maduro.

In response to the text, Mujica and his ruling party denounced Almagro for "undermining the legitimacy of Venezuelan elections" and "not only hindering the electoral process in the Bolivarian Republic but also helping to delegitimize the democratic life in that country".

After news of Mujica's letter emerged, the twitter hashtag "AdiosAlmagro" or "GoodbyeAlmagro" became a trending topic on Twitter in Venezuela.

The election of Almagro as head of the OAS was seen as an opportunity for the hemispheric organization to break with its record of interference in the sovereign affairs of member states. However, Almagro's recent actions have drawn into question his stated commitment of reforming the OAS.



Whistleblower reveals NSA and CIA spying on Venezuela

T/ Telesur English
E/ COI
P/ Agencies

The U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) accessed the internal communications of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and acquired sensitive data it planned to exploit in order to spy on the company's top officials, according to a highly classified NSA document that reveals the operation was carried out in concert with the U.S. embassy in Caracas.

The March 2011 document, labeled "top secret" and provided by former NSA contractor-turned-whistleblower Edward Snowden, is being reported on in an exclusive partnership between *teleSUR* and *The Intercept*.

Drafted by an NSA signals development analyst, the document explains that PDVSA's network, already compromised by U.S. intelligence, was further infiltrated after an NSA review in late 2010 – during President Barack Obama's first term, which would suggest he ordered or at least authorized the operation – "showed telltale signs that

things were getting stagnant on the Venezuelan Energy target set". Most intelligence "was coming from warranted collection", which likely refers to communications that were intercepted as they passed across U.S. soil. According to the analyst, "what little was coming from other collectors", or warrantless surveillance, "was pretty sparse".

Beyond efforts to infiltrate Venezuela's most important company, the leaked NSA document highlights the existence of a secretive joint operation between the NSA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operating out of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas. A fortress-like building just a few kilometers from PDVSA headquarters, the embassy sits on the top of a hill that gives those inside a commanding view of the Venezuelan capital.

Last year, *Der Spiegel* published top-secret documents detailing the state-of-the-art surveillance equipment that the NSA and CIA deploy to embassies around the world. That intelligence on PDVSA had grown "stagnant" was concerning to the U.S. intelligence community for a number of reasons, which its pow-

erful surveillance capabilities could help address.

"Venezuela has some of the largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world", the NSA document states, with revenue from oil and gas accounting "for roughly one third of GDP" and "more than half of all government revenues".

"To understand PDVSA", the NSA analyst explains, "is to understand the economic heart of Venezuela".

Increasing surveillance on the leadership of PDVSA, the most important company in a South American nation seen as hostile to U.S. corporate interests, was a priority for the undisclosed NSA division to which the analyst reported.

"Plainly speaking", the analyst writes, they "wanted PDVSA information at the highest possible levels of the corporation – namely, the president and members of the Board of Directors".

Given a task, the analyst got to work and, with the help of "sheer luck", found his task easier than expected.

It began simply enough: with a visit to PDVSA's website, "where I clicked on 'Leadership' and wrote down the names of the principals

who would become my target list". From there, the analyst "dumped the names" into PIN-WALE – the NSA's primary database of previously intercepted digital communications, automatically culled using a dictionary of search terms called "selectors".

It was an almost immediate success.

In addition to email traffic, the analyst came across over 10,000 employee contact profiles full of email addresses, phone numbers, and other useful targeting information, including the usernames and passwords for over 900 PDVSA employees. One profile the analyst found was for Rafael Ramirez, President of PDVSA from 2004 to 2014 and Venezuela's current envoy to the United Nations. A similar entry turned up for Luis Vierma, the company's former vice president of exploration and production.

"Now, even my old eyes could see that these things were a goldmine", the analyst wrote. The entries were full of "work, home, and cell phones, email addresses, LOTS!" This type of information, referred to internally as "selectors", can then be "tasked" across the NSA's wide array of surveillance communications will be saved.

According to the analyst, the man to whom he reported "was thrilled!" But "it is what happened next that really made our day".

"As I was analyzing the metadata", the analyst explains, "I

clicked on the 'From IP' and noticed something peculiar". All of the employee profiles, "over 10,000 of them, came from the same IP!!!". That, the analyst determined, meant "I had been looking at internal PDVSA comms all this time!!! I fired off a few emails to F6 here and in Caracas, and they confirmed it!".

"Metadata" is a broad term that can include the phone numbers a target has dialed, the duration of the call and from where it was placed, as well as the Wi-Fi networks used to access the Internet, the websites visited and the times accessed. That information can then be used to identify the user.

F6 is the NSA code name for a joint operation with the CIA known as the Special Collection Service, based in Beltsville, Maryland – and with agents posing as diplomats in dozens of U.S. embassies around the world, including Caracas, Bogota and Brasilia.

PDVSA has long been a target of U.S. intelligence agencies and the subject of intense scrutiny from U.S. diplomats. A February 17, 2009 cable sent from the U.S. ambassador in Caracas to Washington and obtained by WikiLeaks shows that PDVSA employees were probed during visa interviews about their company's internal operations. The embassy was particularly interested in the PDVSA's strategy concerning litigation over Venezuela's 2007 nationalization of the Cerro Negro oil project – and billions of dollars in assets owned by U.S. oil giant, ExxonMobil.

According to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, U.S. policy makers and intelligence agencies "believe that they own Venezuela and our natural resources".

"They have no respect for the sovereignty of nations and peoples, and continue to violate international law" he added. "They work with the opposition to discredit our democratic institutions" and "use their supposed diplomats to conspire against our Revolution".

The Venezuelan government responded to the NSA documents this week by submitting formal complaints to U.S. diplomats in Caracas. Meanwhile, Maduro has affirmed the country will now "reevaluate" Venezuela-U.S. relations and ongoing attempts by his administration to improve relations with Washington.



Legal spat pits ExxonMobil against progress

T/ Telesur English
E/ COI
P/ VTV

Venezuela's legal battle with ExxonMobil has become a long war of attrition. The current dispute dates back to 2007, when the government of late president Hugo Chavez sought to re-nationalize Venezuela's oil sector. Venezuela had previously nationalized its oil industry in the mid 1970's after years of soaring oil prices. However, in the 1990s, while the country faced a massive economic crisis, the government allowed the sector to slowly slip back into private hands. During this time, Venezuela signed 32 operating service agreements with 22 companies, effectively handing over much of the oil industry to private interests.

VENEZUELA TOOK OVER EXXONMOBIL

After being elected in 1998, Chavez viewed the return of the oil sector to public hands as a pillar of his plan to redistribute wealth and alleviate poverty. The idea was to use the oil revenue to bankroll social missions and anti-poverty projects, along with funding investment in other sectors of the national economy to gradually ease the country off its dependence on oil exports.

In 2007, the government began negotiating with private industry to secure majority stakes in most oil projects. Two major ExxonMobil-controlled projects were impacted in Venezuela's Cerro Negro and La Ceiba, with the government compensating the company by paying the book value of its assets. ExxonMobil protested, arguing the government should have compensated the company for the market value of its assets, which was estimated to be significantly higher.

Of the 22 companies with nationalized assets only two opted for legal action against Venezuela – ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil, with the rest choosing to negotiate compensation deals with the government. At the time, Venezuela accused ExxonMobil of resorting to international legal arbitration as a ploy to raise global oil prices.

While the ConocoPhillips case is ongoing, in October 2014 the World Bank's arbitration tribunal, the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes' (ICSID), ordered Venezuela to pay ExxonMobil US\$1.6 billion in compensation for the 2007 nationalizations. Although ICSID is often labeled by critics as prejudiced toward business, this outcome was actually welcomed by the government. The compensation was a fraction of the US\$10 billion previously demanded by ExxonMobil.

Moreover, one of the ICSID's key findings was that the Chavez-era expropriations were legal, with the additional compensation largely awarded due to a disagreement over calculations, rather than the nature of the nationalizations themselves.

A similarly favorable verdict was again handed down by ICSID in March 2015, when U.S. energy shipping firm Tidewater was awarded US\$46 million in compensation. The verdict was in relation to Venezuela's 2009 expropriation of 11 Tidewater vessels. The ICSID ruled the expropriation was legal, and rejected significantly higher amounts demanded by the company.

The verdicts appear to have set a significant precedent in Venezuela's favor, giving the country more breathing space to continue nationalizations and fund improvements in people's living conditions.

Venezuela to review relations with U.S. after spying revelations



T/ Rachael Boothroyd Rojas,
venezuelanalysis.com

E/ COI
P/ Agencies

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro announced last week that his government will review its diplomatic ties to the United States after a leaked document revealed the National Security Agency (NSA) had spied on executives at Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA.

The document, released by the Intercept in conjunction with *TeleSUR* this past Wednesday, is reported to have come from U.S. whistleblower Edward Snowden. It details how the NSA hacked the e-mail accounts of thousands of PDVSA employees and executive officials, including the company president, Rafael Ramirez, in a bid to monitor PDVSA activity and the national government's oil policy.

"I have ordered Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez to demand an explanation and apology for these illegal actions which violate international law, and I am going to conduct a total revision of our relations with the U.S.," Maduro said in comments to *TeleSUR*.

Relations between Venezuela and the U.S. have been strained since the leftist government of Hugo Chavez was elected into office in 1998, and both withdrew their respective ambassadors in 2010.

Following his election, Chavez "renationalised" the Venezuelan oil industry, increasing government control over subcontracting rights and substantially raising taxes for foreign drilling companies.

While the measures drew support from ordinary Venezuelans, they proved unpopular with transnational private oil corporations that had previously operated unrestrictedly in Venezuela, which is home to the world's largest proven oil reserves.

According to Maduro, Wednesday's revelation is confirmation that the U.S. is actively seeking to undermine his government.

"To what ends are they spying on them (PDVSA employees), for the economic war, for persecution, to destroy (us) from the inside?" he asked.

He also confirmed that Foreign Minister Rodriguez would officially deliver a "letter of protest" to U.S. government representatives in Caracas in view of the "unacceptable" and "massive attack" against Venezuela's oil industry.

"It is the backbone of the country", he said, referencing the numerous public services which are funded by the country's income from oil.

Last week, the head of state also met with thousands of PDVSA workers in a televised event where he vowed to make the U.S. apologise for having violated their privacy and

asked for their support in confronting imperialism.

"The era of colonialism must be left in the past," affirmed Maduro.

"Venezuela must be active in defending its sovereignty and self-determination" he added.

Despite ongoing dialogue to restore diplomatic ties between the two countries, talks have been derailed due to what the Venezuelan government has described as "aggressive" behaviour from the U.S., which continues to be the main buyer of Venezuelan oil.

In April 2015 U.S. President Barack Obama invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to declare Venezuela a "threat" to U.S. national security and slapped sanctions on several Venezuelan government officials, banning their entry into the U.S.

A number of U.S. government spokespeople have also publicly questioned the efficacy of Venezuela's democratic system in the run-up to parliamentary elections on December 6th, with no evidence presented to date.

The latest NSA revelations are expected to significantly exacerbate the already frosty relationship between the two countries.

The Maduro administration is expected to make further announcements in the coming days.

Neutral electoral experts to accompany upcoming elections

T/ Paul Dobson
P/ Agencies

Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) announced this month the pending arrival of electoral experts from across the globe—with priority given to Latin American institutions—in order to accompany parliamentary elections scheduled for December 6th.

Speaking to reporters in Caracas, CNE President Tibisay Lucena explained that electoral experts will be in Venezuela next month from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), the Council of Latin American Electoral Experts (CELA), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), the Mercosur Parliament (Parlasur), and the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino).

Similarly, authorities of countries which have electoral agreements with Venezuela such as Russia, Mali, the Philippines, South Korea, India, and the African Union are likely to be present, she explained, as well as experts from “prestigious European universities and the World Organization of Electoral Organisms”.

The U.S.-based Organization of American States (OAS) was

not invited to accompany the elections because of historical bias against progressive governments in the region.

The accompanying missions cover all stages of the Venezuelan electoral process: preparation, primary elections, pre-elections, campaigning, election day, declaration of results, and all of the numerous auditing processes that the CNE carry out both before, during, and after the elections.

“Our presence in Venezuela is technical-electoral, and we have full confidence in the Venezuelan electoral system which, once again, will be at the service of the electorate with results which will without a doubt reflect the will of the People”, expressed the head of the CELA mission, Nicanor Moscoso, who, along with the UNASUR grouping, are to be present throughout the entire electoral process.

“This is a strong, very complete plan allowing for international experts to accompany our electoral cycle, one of the best we have set up for any given election” declared the CNE's Lucena.

It “gives preference to the technical side of the equation, with a work plan which allows for follow up from a legal, political, and technical perspective. Ours is a modern, highly technical and verifiable process”, she added.

The delegations of electoral experts will have direct contact with both public and private media outlets, pro- and anti-government political parties and their members, a wide array of civil society organizations, the electorate, and are guaranteed total freedom of movement throughout the country.

MAJORITY SIGN RESPECT FOR RESULTS

In response to recent post-election violence caused by radical opposition groupings who continuously fail to recognize official results, the CNE this year made repeated requests for all parties to sign a four-point agreement which commits all to “act with strict adherence and respect for democracy, peace, and the Constitution”, “recognize the CNE as the only legitimate electoral body in Venezuela tasked with arbitrating all elections”, and “respect the results of the elections without conditions”, and “renounce all acts of violence”.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and leaders of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) as well as most other parties have all signed the document, while the opposition's main coalition—the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) has rejected calls to do so, calling the proposal “laughable”.



Campaigning formally begins for december 6th elections

T/ Paul Dobson
P/ Agencies

Campaigning for Venezuela's upcoming parliamentary elections officially began this month, with parties organizing caravans, marches, and rallies to mobilize supporters in the December 6th election that will define the distribution of the 167 seats in the country's National Assembly.

Caracas Mayor Jorge Rodriguez, who also serves as Campaign Manager for the pro-government “Bolivar-Chavez” Campaign, told reporters that this year's campaign begins with “all revolutionary forces united in a perfect alliance—a first in Venezuelan history”.

This “alliance”, also known as the Great Patriotic Pole (GPP), was first established by former President Hugo Chavez and is made up of dozens of pro-Chavez political parties, allied social movements, and community-based organizations.

“It is beautiful that the Venezuelan people have made their democratic expression such a day-to-day thing”, affirmed Rodriguez.

“We have had so many elections that for the people it has become rather normal to meet, mobilize, and win”, he added.

This will be the 20th election in the last 17 years.

KICK OFF WITH COMMITMENT

With campaigning kicking off amidst economic woes and heightened crime, many have suggested that this will be one of the most difficult tests of the Bolivarian Revolution (1998—present). According Blanca Eekhout, Vice President of the National Assembly and GPP candidate in the state of Miranda, “not with economic nor psychological war, not with

sabotage nor threats will they be able to stop the advance of the nation”.

Socialist campaigner Nicolas España explained that “they have tried to break us and demotivate us with shortages and induced inflation—both part of this economic war—but we have a people who won't allow our gains to be lost”.

“We have seen a massive start of campaigning” explained Communist Party spokesperson and candidate in the State of Carabobo, Douglas Gomez. “We have started a debate in the population to identify the causes of the economic war”.

Meanwhile, GPP candidate in the state of Monagas and current President of the National Assembly Diosdado Cabello denounced plans of the violent opposition.

“Their campaign strategy is based on nothing but lies” he declared.

“What is the opposition's so-called Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) preparing for? For violence? To not recognize the results? They haven't signed the electoral agreement to commit to peace. Why not? What are they afraid of?”.

Cabello's comments came in response to opposition campaigning that focuses on attacks on the country's electoral authorities and promises of “an end” to the socialist policies of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Instead of campaigning on a platform of concrete legislation that would benefit Venezuelan voters, the opposition's MUD coalition is focusing its efforts on demands for pro-U.S. election observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) and vague promises for “an end to economic woes” and a “return to democracy”.





Public housing mission set to reach one million

T/ Paul Dobson
P/ Agencies

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro this month handed over home number 800,000 to a low-income family benefiting from the massive public housing pro-

gram known simply as the “Great Venezuelan Housing Mission” (GMVV). In doing so, he highlighting progress being made toward completing one million homes by the end of the year, and three million homes by the end of his first presidential term in 2019.

“Today we have handed in home number 800,000 and we are on course for one million”, Maduro affirmed.

“The average rate of construction of public housing in Venezuela today is 480 homes per day” explained Maduro. “That is 20 homes per hour,

or one home every three minutes”.

“This is a world record”, he affirmed.

The GMVV was created in 2011 by former President Hugo Chavez in response to decades of severe housing deficits and 2010 mudslides that left thousands of working families homeless. Homes are provided to needy families on varying long-term payment plans, with zero interest and at subsidized final prices based on a social census. For those who lost their homes in the mudslides, the homes are provided at no cost.

In order to reach the goal of three million homes, the government has announced targets of 500,000 houses in 2016, 700,000 in 2017, and 800,000 in 2018. During the pre-Chavez period, a total of only 1.3 million homes were constructed in the 20 year period between 1978 and 1998 – an average of 65,000 per year.

SOCIAL INVESTMENT AND PEOPLE’S POWER

“What would a right-wing government do if oil fell to \$35?”, asked Maduro.

“They would stop everything! But we continue to guarantee housing construction, defending pensions, the right to work, educational missions, health” he emphasized.

The Venezuelan leader also emphasized the importance of People’s Power in the construction of homes of work-

ing families, explaining that “the people are due to take on an ever-increasing role in the GMVV”.

“With an average 50% of all public homes being built by organized communities, I will continue to insist on People’s Power building hundreds of thousands of units nationwide”, he explained.

According to Housing Minister Manuel Quevado, “the private sector receives construction materials from our government but fails to fulfill their quota commitments”.

“We provide everyone with the resources and materiales they need to build, but while private firms delay construction and complain we must stop to recognize and congratulate organized communities who continue to build and build in spite of economic woes and difficulties”, he explained.

“People’s Power tends to use materials more efficiently, prioritizing the needs of their communities over the private interests that dominate larger construction firms”, concluded Quevado.

The GMVV has seen thousands of local social movements and communal councils organize themselves around the struggle for quality housing, taking on the responsibility of managing resources, materials, hiring and organizing volunteer labor. In total, they have built close to 400,000 homes since the start of the housing mission.

Social indicators ratify socialist policies

T/ Paul Dobson

The Venezuelan government recently released new social indicators that demonstrate the astonishing advances that made since the start of the Bolivarian Revolution (1998 to present) in eradicating poverty and providing pensions, education, and housing to millions of citizens nationwide.

According to Gladys Requena, Venezuela’s Vice President for Social Affairs, extreme poverty went from 21% in 1998 to 4.9% in 2015.

The breaking of the 5% barrier, she declared, is thanks to continued social investment, the newly launched Mission Bases –in which social services are taken to places where extreme poverty is most concentrated–

and a census of 598,000 families in difficult conditions conducted earlier this year.

Executive Vice President Jorge Arreaza explained that recent efforts to eradicate extreme poverty included “reaching out to those who were registered in the census, getting support from the Cuban government who provided professionals in areas such as health, education, sports, and housing”.

Mission Bases, which are physical locations at which over 30 different social missions operate out of, are currently being constructed across the country, with 763 completed this year. Another 181 are functioning while being finished, and another 556 are in the planning phase of construction. They enable the other missions –such as the Education “Ribas” Mission, the Public Health “Barrio Adentro” Mission, and the Safety “All Life” Mission– to work more efficiently and directly, eradicating bureaucracy and overlap. They are located mostly in poorer communities and the new urbanizations constructed by the Great Venezuelan Housing Mission (GMVV).

“Despite the fact that not all of them are totally finished, they all have the support of doctors, cultural workers, teachers, athletes and trainers, with communal councils doing door-to-door visits to bring direct attention to our communities”, explained Requena.

THREE MILLION PENSIONS

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro announced this month that the goal of including three million elderly citizens in the public pensions register was achieved in November, classing it as “a world record of pensioners per capita”.

Starting with 110,000 new elderly citizens included in the pensions register at the start of the month, and after 22,000 transport sector workers were added to another 50,000 seniors, the remarkable goal of 3,000,000 people now on public pensions was finally achieved.

“Regardless of rain, thunder, or lightning, the rest of the pensions are being announced to surpass the goal of three million – a world record of grandfathers and grandmothers protected by the Bolivarian Revolu-

tion of Chavez”, exclaimed President Maduro.

“This has been a difficult year –with oil prices dropping dramatically– but I have found the resources”, he explained.

Vice President Requena explained that 890,000 of the 3,000,000 “never made social security contributions directly” but are included nonetheless because “the Bolivarian government of Chavez and Maduro is working towards the universalization of social security”.

Requena also explained that 75% of all elderly citizens are now covered and receiving pension payments equivalent to a monthly minimum wage, as well as three months Christmas bonuses as is customary for all workers. All pension payments and bonuses are calculated around the 30% increase in the minimum salary which came into effect on November 1st.

Requena also explained that pensions received in 1998 by some 385,000 elderly citizens (19% of the eligible population) were roughly 30% of the national minimum wage.

Tracking U.S. interventionism in Venezuela

T/ Telesur English
E/ COI
P/ Agencies

It's been over a decade since a U.S.-sponsored coup left dozens killed and wounded in Venezuela, temporarily overthrowing Venezuela's attempt to build a new popular democracy, and Washington is still plotting. Nothing new to the people of Venezuela and Latin America, as the United States has a long history of interfering in efforts aimed at regional independence and integration.

Shortly after being returned to power by popular force in April 2002, then president Hugo Chavez quickly warned the United States was already planning its next move. Chavez had been ousted from office for just under two days in early April, in a coup carefully choreographed by Venezuela's business elite, renegade military elements, and the United States.

By early October, 2002, Chavez announced Venezuelan authorities had already uncovered another coup plot. Two weeks later, Chavez narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. The attempt appeared to coincide with anti-government protests.

Then, as U.S. president George W. Bush entered his second term in 2005, Washington appeared to redouble its efforts to remove Chavez. A month after Bush was sworn in for a second time, Chavez said his government had uncovered another assassination plot. The plot was uncovered just weeks after then U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice described the Venezuelan leader as a "destabilizing force". In September that year, Bush again lashed out at Venezuela, accusing the country of failing in its fight against the narcotics trade.

Another major coup plot was foiled in 2006, when Venezuelan authorities said they found evidence the U.S. Embassy in Caracas had been secretly collecting military information. That same year, the State Department began barring certain arms sales to Venezuela. This was the beginning of what would later become a key pillar of U.S. policy towards Caracas – sanctions.

In 2011, state oil company PDVSA was hit with U.S. sanctions, while in 2013 state arms manufacturer CAVIM was also sanctioned. More sanctions were imposed in late 2014 against Venezuelan government officials.

More recently, in March 2015 U.S. President Barack Obama issued an executive order imposing another round of sanctions, and describing Venezuela as an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to the United States "national security". This was the most controversial round of sanctions, and sparked widespread condemnation in the region. The Obama administration was eventually pressured into admitting Venezuela doesn't pose a threat to the United States, though the sanctions remain in place.

The evolution of economic pressure on Venezuela is perhaps the most striking example of the continuity of Venezuela policy between the Bush and Obama administrations. However, this overt aggression against Venezuela has likewise been accompanied by a continuous campaign of subversion, largely in the vein of U.S. activities in the lead-up to the 2002 coup.

Much of this took place through groups like USAID, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI).

In a 2006 diplomatic cable made public by WikiLeaks, then U.S. ambassador William Brownfield said both USAID

and OTI were playing central roles in a strategy to oust Chavez.

"This strategic objective represents the majority of USAID/OTI work in Venezuela", Brownfield wrote at the time.

According to investigations by the U.S.-Venezuelan lawyer Eva Golinger, between 2004 and the time of the cable's initial, secret publication in 2006, USAID spent close to US\$15 million on operations in Venezuela. Much of this involved supporting around 300 so-called "civil society" groupings – largely a collection of far right, anti-government groups. One prominent recipient of U.S. funding was Sumate, an anti-Chavez political group founded by right-wing firebrand Maria Corina Machado. Machado was a signatory of the Carmona Decree – the political manifesto of the short-lived 2002 coup government. The fact that one of the key recipients of U.S. aid was a coup plotter has led many in Venezuela to accuse USAID of being opposed to Venezuelan democracy.

The latest information available suggests USAID's annual budget for Venezuela was over US\$5 million, despite the fact that foreign funding of political activities was banned in Venezuela in 2010. The banning was condemned by the U.S. State Department despite the fact the United States has a similar law against international funding of political campaigns.

The key factor making such a move even more rational in Venezuela is the fact that unlike the United States, Caracas is still facing coup attempts backed by a foreign belligerent force. In early 2015, the Venezuelan government uncovered yet another brewing coup attempt. This time, plotters being paid in U.S. dollars were planning to incite street violence, then carry out a series

of coordinated bombings targeting key government sites. President Nicolas Maduro accused opposition leaders of being aware of the plot well in advance, preparing a public statement to coincide with the bombings, and said the plan was aimed at culminating in the collapse of his government.

A massive campaign of economic sabotage orchestrated by the Venezuelan opposition since 2013 appears aimed at reducing the popularity of the Maduro administration and hit the Bolivarian Revolution where it hurts the most – poor and working voters who benefit most from its socialist public policies. These strategies of "economic war", as described by President Maduro, closely resemble the U.S.-backed ouster of Chilean socialist leader Salvador Allende in 1973.

Faced with a dramatic drop in oil prices and the income this represents, President Maduro has continued to allocate significant amounts of government spending to the country's majorities. However, inflation and scarcity continue to affect a majority of Venezuelans.

As new elections approach on December 6th, concern is again mounting that Venezuela's opposition could be planning more destabilization and violence. Economic warfare seems aimed at preparing the conditions for something worse. Meanwhile, it's unclear which route the United States will take.

Will Washington continue its simmering campaign of underhand destabilization, or will it opt for another open coup attempt like in 2002? Will it succeed in bringing another right-wing government to power – as it did in Argentina this month – or will the Venezuelan people again frustrate U.S. and opposition attempts to put the breaks on Latin American integration?





T/ Eva Golinger
P/ Agencies

Snowden has revealed the extensive espionage and penetration of the NSA in Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA, the lifeblood of the South American nation and fuel of Chavez's Bolivarian revolution.

Edward Snowden revealed to the world the 21st century spycraft in use against millions of innocent, unknowing people who now think twice about sending a text or an email. Amongst the documents obtained by Snowden were reports and details on surveillance of current and former heads of state, many of them from Latin America. Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff was outraged over revelations of NSA espionage against her government, including wiretaps of her own phone and email. Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was another major target of NSA operations. And now, Snowden has revealed the extensive espionage and penetration of the NSA in Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA, the lifeblood of the South American nation and fuel of Chavez's Bolivarian revolution.

Just three years before Edward Snowden became a household name, whistleblower organization WikiLeaks had already released a massive trove of classified and secret documents from the Pentagon and State Department that exposed U.S. government involvement in coups, destabilization campaigns, mass espionage and war crimes. The dirty tactics, strong-arming and back-stabbing revealed in internal State Department cables shed glaring light on the lengths Washington will go to impose its agenda. Allies are treated as enemies, and adversaries as partners, so long as it advances the self-serving objectives of U.S. power.

None of what Snowden or WikiLeaks revealed, as incredulous as it seemed to many, was surprising in Latin America. The region has been subjected to every tactic in the CIA book to ensure U.S. domi-

nation and control of its "backyard". Throughout most of the 20th century, U.S. backed coup d'etats and interventions placed and removed heads of government, imposing School of the Americas-trained dictators that tortured, assassinated, disappeared, persecuted and incarcerated tens of thousands of civilians, disrupting and destabilizing their democratic, progressive movements and spiraling their nations into decades of darkness and brutality. When the dictators no longer served U.S. goals, they were switched out through coups or electoral processes heavily funded by U.S. agencies, ensuring an equally subservient leader would fill their shoes.

It wasn't until the beginning of the 21st century, with the election in Venezuela of President Hugo Chavez, that the region began to liberate itself from Washington's iron grip. Chavez opened the door to a sweeping tide that brought progressive, leftist leaders to power, elected by widespread majorities in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, Honduras and El Salvador. Of course the resilience of Cuba for nearly half a century subjected to a crippling U.S. economic blockade and endless

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CIA attempts to destroy and destabilize their system, was the bedrock of the leftist rise that transformed and liberated the region.

After Chavez was elected in 1998 and began to implement changes affecting powerful interests, changes that would redistribute wealth and nationalize control over strategic resources such as oil and gas, the U.S. backed a coup against him in 2002 that briefly removed him from power and installed a U.S. selected dictator, businessman Pedro Carmona. When Venezuelans took to the streets to reclaim their democracy, bringing Chavez back to power, Washington continued funding and overseeing efforts to destabilize his government, undermine his policies and debilitate Venezuela's economy and international trade.

In response, support for Chavez grew and his allies came to power throughout the continent, elected for policies

that prioritized social justice and people over profits. One by one, U.S. agencies targeted them, funding coups against Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2008, Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2010 and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2012. The success of the coups in Honduras and Paraguay attempted to weaken advancing Latin American integration and sovereignty, but the failure to overthrow Morales and Correa helped strengthen the consolidation of regional organizations like ALBA and UNASUR, and propelled the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which intentionally excludes the U.S. and Canada.

Nevertheless, U.S. efforts to regain control and influence over the region continue. The clandestine operations, espionage, secret missions, covert funding, psychological warfare and regime change tactics

the U.S. has employed in Latin America for decades, continue today overtly and covertly. Snowden has revealed ongoing surveillance and illegal spying of Latin American leaders, governments and public and private institutions, while other investigations, including WikiLeaks, have evidenced the vast array of strategies and tactics utilized by U.S. agencies to fund political parties, build opposition movements and undermine democratically elected presidents who refuse to subordinate to U.S. agenda.

Venezuela continues to be a key target of these destabilization tactics. U.S. agencies including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a congressionally funded entity that finances political movements abroad, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), State Department's funding arm, invested over US\$100 million in U.S. taxpayer dollars to build up the anti-Chavez coalition in Venezuela during the period 2002-2011.

Currently, Venezuela is preparing for an important electoral process set for December 6, when all 165 legislative seats in the National Assembly are up for reelection. The country is experiencing a severe economic crisis and President Maduro's popularity has fallen. While Maduro and his administration share responsibility for failed policies and decisions, the familiar destabilizing hand of the U.S. government is also at play. During the past year, the U.S. has spent more than US\$18 million through USAID and the NED to fund anti-government groups in Venezuela, feeding the conflict in that country and keeping alive an opposition that lacks cohesion and popular support.

Venezuela has the largest certified oil reserves on the planet and will always be a target of the most powerful interests. A not so distant history of U.S. policy in Latin America recalls how Washington will do what it takes to ensure control over the region and its resources.

Opinion

In upcoming election, U.S. seeks observers to influence



T/ Mark Weisbrot
E/ COI
P/ Agencies

Just as big fish eat little fish and lions prey on antelope, so there is no moral shame in the U.S. government trying to undermine, destabilize or get rid of democratically elected governments that it doesn't like.

So it is no surprise that the multipronged effort to delegitimize the elections for Venezuela's National Assembly, scheduled for December 6th, would be reported and widely accepted in Washington without question as merely trying to insure "credible observation" for the election. The "credible observers" who are being portrayed as the sine qua non of a "credible result" is the Organization of American States (OAS).

To see how absurd this assumption is, we need only look back a few years, when the OAS appointed an "Expert Verification Mission" to examine the presidential election in Haiti. This mission did something outrageous, something that has never been done—before or since—in the history of electoral monitoring: It reversed the result of the first round of voting, without conducting a recount or even a statistical test. Normally, when an election result is disputed, there is a recount or the result is accepted or a new election can be held. Nowhere does an elector-

al monitoring team simply pick a new winner.

There are many examples of the U.S. manipulating the OAS machinery.

In February 2011, I was on a panel with Fritz Scheuren, then the lead statistician of the OAS mission, which was carefully chosen so that six of seven members were from the U.S., Canada and France (yes, France was included, even though geographers claim that it's not part of the Western Hemisphere). A former president of the American Statistical Association, he acknowledged that the OAS mission used no statistical inference to draw conclusions from the 8 percent of tally sheets that they examined. Statistical tests conducted by CEPR, including a comprehensive set of simulations for missing votes, confirmed that there was no statistical basis for the mission's reversal of the voting results.

The political reasons became more obvious when Haiti's government, understandably, balked at accepting the OAS decision. With the country still devastated from the 2010 earthquake, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice threatened Haiti with a cutoff of desperately needed aid if they did not accept the OAS Mission's reversal of election results. Michel Martelly, Washington's preferred candidate, was then moved up and into the second round and became president, where he remains today.

It seems unlikely that the OAS could get away with something like this in Venezuela. But it can contribute to destabilization efforts. In 2013, the Venezuelan opposition took to the streets with violent protests, claiming fraud in the presidential election. There was no basis for their claims of fraud: A statistical test of the election audit showed that the probability of getting the official result if the election were in fact stolen through fraud was less than one in 25,000 trillion.

This high level of certainty was possible because of Venezuela's dual voting system, where voters press a touch screen computer and then receive a printout of their vote. The voter then looks at the printout and deposits it in the ballot box. When the polls close, a random audit of 54 percent of the machines is conducted, in which the machine tally is compared with the paper ballots in the presence of witnesses from all parties. The microscopically small probability of fraud, despite the fact that in this case President Maduro won by a margin of 1.6 percentage points, is a result of the enormous random sample size, as any student of introductory statistics can verify.

Yet there were three international voices in 2013 that joined with the opposition and refused to recognize the results, demanding a "full recount": the U.S. government, the right-wing government of Spain and—tellingly—

the head of the OAS at that time, Jose Miguel Insulza. Although the U.S. has suffered humiliating defeats in trying to win votes against Venezuela at the OAS, Washington still contributes about a third of the organization's overall budget, and of course it has other levers of power against individual governments and their representatives. There are therefore many examples of it manipulating the OAS machinery. That is why Latin American governments in 2010 formed the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Nations (CELAC), which includes all governments in the hemisphere except the U.S. and Canada.

For all of these reasons and many more, any government that has been a major U.S. target for regime change for more than a decade would have reason to be wary of OAS observers. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, the U.S. and Canada are among the countries that have not been interested in having the OAS observe their elections. Playing on the public's lack of knowledge of recent history, almost every source for the major media is pretending that the OAS is just a neutral and necessary institutional guarantee against fraud. The International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and the Brookings Institution have all piled on. And why wouldn't they? The pretense of disinterested observer, not beholden to the powers and dictates of empire, is the same on which their own identity is established.

The last decade in Venezuela has seen a series of failed efforts to negate election results there. They include bogus statistical studies by U.S. academics (2004), fabricated polls by prominent U.S. pollsters (2004 and 2006), a 2005 opposition boycott of parliamentary elections and the 2013 efforts described above. And that's not to mention attempted military coups. The opposition has never won a national election in Venezuela since Hugo Chavez was first elected in 1998. This time they think they might win, and they have polls to support that assertion. However, a lot depends on turnout, which has been their weakness in non-presidential elections; and there is a big political difference between getting, for example, a simple majority or two-thirds of the assembly.

Hence the pre-emptive strike to discredit the elections: If they do worse than they expect to do, they will claim fraud. And the hardliners, at least, will continue on their extra-constitutional path towards regime change. This has been—with U.S. support—plan B (and sometimes plan A) for most of the past 16 years, despite the fact that there has not been a shred of credible evidence of electoral fraud during that entire period.