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Robertson Comments Likely to Aggravate U.S.-Venezuela Tensions

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Chicago Tribune
August 23, 2005

HAVANA -- The already-icy relationship between the United States and Venezuela chilled further Tuesday in the wake of religious broadcaster Pat Robertson's suggestion that the United States assassinate President Hugo Chavez.

Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel expressed outrage at what he called the "criminal statement" made by Robertson on television Monday.

U.S. officials immediately distanced themselves from Robertson's comments, with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld saying that "our department doesn't do that kind of thing." U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack described Robertson's comments as "inappropriate."

But experts said that despite the U.S. statements, Robertson's comments were likely to damage the nation's interests in Latin America and aggravate tensions between the United States and Venezuela, a petroleum-rich country that provides the United States with about 8 percent of its crude oil.

Robertson's remarks took special note of Venezuela's oil wealth, saying that an assassination would be "a whole lot cheaper than starting a war ... and I don't think any oil shipments will stop."

The United States and Venezuela once were close allies, but their relationship deteriorated sharply after the United States appeared to support a brief but bloody coup in 2002 against Chavez.

Since then, Chavez - a charismatic speaker and self-described socialist - has accused American officials of plotting to kill him, and he has opposed almost every U.S. initiative in the region.

Chavez's close ties to Cuban President Fidel Castro, his opposition to a hemisphere-wide free trade accord proposed by the United States, and Venezuela's recent weapons purchases have angered the White House, which has tried unsuccessfully to isolate Chavez diplomatically.

In recent weeks, Rumsfeld and other top U.S. officials have accused Chavez and Castro of trying to destabilize Bolivia and other Latin American countries. Both leaders denied the charge.

"The grand destroyer of the world, and the greatest threat ... is represented by U.S. imperialism," Chavez told a national television audience Sunday in Cuba.

On Tuesday, however, he reacted to Robertson's comments calmly, saying he didn't care about what the evangelist had said and preferred to "talk about life."

"I don't even know who that person is," said the Venezuelan president, who spoke at the Havana airport as he was ending a four-day visit to Cuba.

But Chavez's aides demanded a firm condemnation from the United States.

Venezuela's Rangel said the U.S. war on terror would be measured by how the White House responded to the call of a prominent American citizen to kill a democratically elected leader overseas.

"The ball is in the U.S. court ... after this criminal statement by a citizen of that country," Rangel told reporters in Caracas.

Bernardo Alvarez, Venezuela's ambassador to the United States, spoke after the U.S. officials had made their remarks, and he said the White House should forcefully condemn Robertson, whom he described as a powerful religious leader and one of President Bush's "principal supporters."

"The pronouncement by Mr. Robertson needs and demands the firmest and strongest condemnation from the White House," Alvarez told reporters.

Rumsfeld said about the idea of assassination: "It's against the law."

Concerning Robertson, he added: "He's a private citizen. Private citizens say all kinds of things all the time."

But few U.S. citizens are former Republican presidential candidates who appear on "The 700 Club," a television show that claims 1 million viewers daily.

Robertson is no stranger to controversy. Over the years he has made statements opposing the appointment of Muslims to important government offices, equating feminism with witchcraft, and saying Orlando, Fla., risked a hurricane because it welcomed a gay event. In some cases, he has later apologized or tried to clarify controversial remarks. On Tuesday, he was unavailable for comment on his statements, which resounded more loudly - and internationally - than many of his earlier comments.

Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a policy group in Washington, said the fallout from Robertson's remarks are likely to take U.S.-Venezuelan relations to "a new low."

Birns said what is at stake in the escalating confrontation is nothing less than the future of Latin America, where the United States is often accused of pushing unpopular free market reforms that failed to bring prosperity to the continent.

"It's a decisive moment," said Birns. "It's not Chavez's nasty tongue that has earned him Washington's odium. It is his policies. What he stands for is a declining role for the U.S. in Latin America."

Eduardo Gamarra, director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, said that few Latin Americans would differentiate between Robertson's remarks and the White House's aggressive policy toward Chavez.

He said Robertson's statements are "tremendously harmful" and likely to fuel anti-Americanism on the continent.

"This is just confirmation about why Latin Americans don't like the U.S.," Gamarra said. "They said they respect human rights, and they have Guantanamo. They say they respect sovereignty, and they want to assassinate a leader."

Appearing on his Christian Broadcasting Network show, the 75-year-old Robertson - a founder of the Christian Coalition of America - said the United States should "take him (Chavez) out" to prevent Venezuela from "becoming a launching pad for communist influence and Muslim extremism."

"We don't need another \$200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator," he said. "It's a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with."

In the wake of the 1959 Cuban revolution, the United States repeatedly tried to kill Castro, but an executive order signed by President Gerald Ford in the mid-1970s outlawed political assassination.

U.S. officials deny ever plotting to assassinate Chavez, but experts say American policymakers are at a loss to contain the popular Venezuelan leader who is taking advantage of record oil prices to spread his influence across the continent.

"It looks like we are headed for a collision," said Michael Shifter, a vice president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank. "Chavez realizes that the U.S. doesn't have an idea of how to deal with him."