

# **BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**

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### **Report Summary/Argentina**

The president of Argentina Cristina Fernandez issued a decree to the president of Argentina's central bank to pay the national debt from country's national reserves but the president refused to obey her decree and he was removed from the presidency of the bank. So this issue was challenged in the court and the removal of central bank's president has been in doubt after the verdict of a court of Argentina in which the court asked to get the approval of Congress for his removal and pay the debt from the reserves.

Some analysts see it as a political issue between Fernandez and her opposition in congress. The court is trying to empower the Congress in this issue. It is also said that this is not a very different issue from other world but is had been occurred in many countries of the world where the president of the central bank have been removed by the president of the country.

This political tussle between the president Fernandez's party, her opposition party and court is becoming a factor to decline Argentina. Since this issue has started, Argentina's economy is declining. And it is feared that if it remains uncontrollable, Argentina's economy will be affected more than this time. But Fernandez argued that the economy is strong than before as the industrial production rose till 10.4% as compare to the same month of previous year.

The foreign minister of Argentina has visited China recently and made some agreements with Chinese government on several issues. The foreign minister was accompanying almost 80 different companies with him as agriculture machinery manufacturing, biotechnology, textiles and leather. China has become the second largest exporter destination of Argentina as the trade between both countries has increased from US\$4 billion in 2004 to US\$14 billion in 2008. The resident Fernandez was going to pay this visit but she did not due to the fear of overstepping of her vice president as the clash has increased between her and her vice president before a few weeks on the issue of central bank's removal.

### **Report Summary/Brazil**

The defense ministry of Brazil said that in spite the death of 18 Brazilian soldiers in Haiti it will send more troops of its soldiers and police men to Haiti in UN peacekeeping mission. If the congress allows sending more troops in UN peacekeeping mission more 750 soldiers and 150 police men will go to Haiti to maintain order and protect aid convoys. President de Silva has paid a tribute to the 18 dead soldiers and the defense minister participated in the funeral of them. The Brazilian foreign minister is also going to pay a visit to Haiti where he will meet Haitian president and military and civilian command of UN peacekeeping mission to discuss on the recovery issues of Haitian capital after earthquake destruction.

The president of Dominican Republic has stated that the ousted president of Honduras is agree to come to his country as he has talked to the ousted president. Manuel Zelaya was deposed of his seat on June 28<sup>th</sup> in a result of military coup in charge of amending the law of his country by referendum. Zelaya was conducting to amend the Honduran constitution as he can be elect the president of Honduras third time but army could not digest it and pushed him out of country. He came back to the country in September 21<sup>st</sup> and got asylum in Brazilian embassy in Honduras.

'Lula Son of Brazil' is criticized by a journalist professor and some other political opponents of president Lula de Silva that it is just to run the campaign of president Lula's favorite candidate Ms Rousseff. It is said that this film is made by the sponsorship of many expensive companies and the companies sponsored just to get benefits from the government. This film is becoming very popular in the slums of Brazil as in which it is shown how a metal worker spent his life and then became the president of a country. It revolves around the life of current president of Brazil.

A South Korean special presidential delegation is going to visit Latin American countries. The delegation will visit Colombia, Paraguay and Brazil and in Brazil the delegation will discuss to increase the business relations with South Korean companies. The delegation is visiting in response of the Forum for East Asia- Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) which held in Tokyo in the beginning of this month. The countries of both regions settled to increase relations between both regions in the field of trade, investment, energy, and culture.

The foreign minister of Israel met with the defense minister of Brazil and asked his support and favor for Israel. He said if the world's democracies do not support Israel on the issue of human rights violations by doing attack on Gaza, it means they are supporting terrorism in the world. He said to refuse the Goldstein report to support democracy. He also said that Iran's nuclear program is not to produce energy as it has much oil and water reserves in its country by utilizing that reserves energy can be created. In last he condoled the death of 18 Brazilian soldiers in Haiti.

Brazilian president told media that the coffee production will be lesser this year as compare to the previous year. The downpours has hindered the production of coffee this year. Brazil is the largest producer of coffee in the world but this year may not produce as much as it is producing in previous years.

World social forum arranged a series of different topics in a Brazilian city Porto Alegre and on the second day Brazilian president de Silva was invited and issue to be discussed was environmental catastrophe. The president arrived there from the capital city Brasília and before that the discussion was continue whole day in which a professor from New York declared globalization is the cause of today's bad environment and some blamed capitalism. The president said he is disappoint of Copenhagen conference in which the rich nations of the world did not show the seriousness but Brazil is very serious in this matter as it has set its target of greenhouse gas reduction target is between 36% and 39% till 2020 and the deforestation is to be reduce till 80% which is a great target of achievement. He said rich countries like USA have set target like very poor nations as 4% to be reduce till 2020 but if the countries feel difficult to reduce while progressing, he said they should make Brazil as model for them.

The foreign ministers of BASIC countries met with the Indian prime minister at New Delhi and told that the Copenhagen conference on climate change just was a political deal but now the rich nations to give \$10 billion to poor countries to combat environmental problems. BASIC developing countries have also pledged to reduce their carbon production as China is the member of BASIC and has pledged to reduce carbon 40 percent to 45 percent by 2020 as compare to 2005, India which is the fifth largest carbon emitter, has pledged to reduce carbon 20 to 25% in 2020 and Brazil is ahead of all these BASIC countries and in the world which has pledged to reduce 40% carbon gas emission.

### **Report Summary/Mexico**

According to the Dallas news the drug cartels of Mexico are also a terrorist group of the world as Al-Qaida and this group is also to be taken seriously. President Felipe Calderon should not leave the efforts in the war against the drug cartels but there is need to show more vigor against the drug cartels. The drug cartels are spreading much harassment in the country by the killings of common people, security personnel and political personalities. They have also targeted a police helicopter few days ago which was chasing a small plane by drug cartel members and marijuana was full in that. Police raided to know the whereabouts of the targeted area and captured many suspects. And when a drug member or load of a cartel is captured, they take revenge brutally as recently the security personnel have arrested and killed a lord of a big cartel then after that the drug members killed a police man and packed his head in a soccer ball and sent it to the office. These kinds of actions are just to spread fear in the society which is not less than terrorism.

Recently the security forces has captured a drug leader 'El 20' who is involve in three murders and linked by another drug lord. Along with his capture a million of Mexican pesos and weapon in a large quantity is seized. He was captured in a result of a long time fight between Mexican soldiers and drug cartel members. Mexican war against drugs has taken lives of more than 16,000 Mexicans since 2005 and almost 7,000 Mexicans lost their lives in 2009 which is considered most violent year in the last decade. Violence not only revolves around Mexicans but also foreigners who are residing in Mexico as some men and women of El Salvador have also been killed by the drug cartels. The deputy minister of El Salvador has also complained Mexican government over the assassination and rape of Salvadorian women in the southern part of Mexico.

Government of Mexico is lobbying to replace some police officers with some bigger state police officers to maintain public safety. Though the process of bringing bill regarding police forces' appointment is far but government is trying to take state authorities in confidence. To tackle the crimes and criminals is not very hard work but the police is very big hurdle in it. most of the police men are less educated and involve in betting bribe from the criminals so the government is planning to give control of police under state government from the federal so that an environment of cooperation would created among them.

It has seen that most of Mexican immigrants to US are not only due to get jobs but due to the fear of death by violence. Drug cartels are prevailing in many states and targeting the people. According to a repost 303 immigrants of Mexico got a political asylum in US in 2009 but now the States government has fixed a criteria to get political asylum in US as the applicant has to

prove that his life is in danger and he belongs to a specific group to get asylum. Canada had also closed border for Mexicans and Czech immigrants last year. Now Mexicans are in curb as they cannot cross both borders till the time they get permit from their government.

Haitian ambassador to Mexico told that Mexican aid for the Haitians victim of quake is very well as the material of basic usage is provided by the government of Mexico. He appreciated the efforts of Mexican volunteers who are filling trucks everyday with the basic goods to send Haiti and also the Mexico's biggest telephone company Telmex had raised 10 million pesos (784,000 U.S. dollars) on the first day of an appeal for funds to send aid to Haiti. But he also said that in spite of all these efforts from Mexico and all over the world the food is still in shortage as according to an estimate still 3 million people of Port-au-prince are homeless and demanding basic feeds. The foreign ministry of Mexico has told that two Mexican women have also been died in earthquake in Haiti and 31 are still missing.

Mexico is increasing its area of trade by using the platform of free trade area to uplift its economy. Recently the Mexican ambassador to India told that in the month of May this year Mexico is going to announce free trade market with India. FTA between and India and Mexico will increase economic relations of both countries. Prior to this announcement Mexico's finance minister visited USA and held a speech with U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and said that Mexico's economy will grow this year as 5% which is not a normal growth. The president office of Mexico has also told that the British based bank HSBC is going to invest US \$700 million in Mexico. This investment will also boost up Mexico's economy.

National Action Party of Mexico which is a ruling party is trying to propose a bill in congress to cut in the value-added tax and to extend the tax base to maintain revenue. Now the lawmakers are going to meet the finance minister to discuss on this proposal. While the Institutional Revolutionary Party is against PAN's decision to increase tax on basic things which are used by poor people like food and medicine.

### **Report Summary/Venezuela**

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez said that he won't involve in Chilean business as he criticized Venezuelan president that Chavez is not running government by democracy. Chavez lambasted Chilean president that he should do their own business but not try to interfere in the affairs of other countries. By giving answer of this the Chilean president said that every country has right to express his opinion and he did what he felt. The president of Netherlands has also criticized president Hugo Chavez because he is accusing Hague has given place US warplanes to attack on Venezuela while the prim minister of Netherlands said the US forces are just to crackdown the drug cartels, not to attack on any country.

The emir of Qatar paid a visit to Venezuela and met with the president Chavez. Chavez recalled the emir's last visit 10 years ago and told that Venezuela is very happy today to welcome a superb leader of Arab among us. Both of the leaders also pledged to increase bilateral relations between Venezuela and Qatar on several issues of mutual interest.

President Chavez announced to increase of wages till 25% in his annual speech in national assembly. He ensured that the funds of health care, education and other anti-poverty will not be cut from this. He said 10% wage will increase till 1<sup>st</sup> March and other 15% in September

so it means the wage will increase from 950 bolivars per month to nearly 1,200 bolivars per month. Chavez also got resign from the minister of power and electricity due to mismanagement in ministry and appointed to the finance minister of Venezuela as new minister of power and electricity and the vice president, defense minister and environment minister resigned himself from his post. Then he merged Finance Ministry and the Planning Ministry into one. But later the president has nominated the agricultural minister as the vice president of the country.

While criticizing globalization and capitalism Chavez said that all crises becomes united due to globalization as financial crisis, moral crisis, food crisis, environmental and climate crisis; and crisis of values etc. He said the Bolivar introduced socialism which was influenced by Christianity and Marxism. And he said that the Christ was the socialist and more radical than all of us.

The France's ministry has taken the notice of closure of France-Colombian chain store markets in Venezuela. Last week the France's chain store market was exit by the government of Venezuela and not the government of France has asked the clarification of its closure from the government of Venezuela. Also Panama has condemned the dictatorial behavior of Venezuelan government as closure of France's chain market and sanctions on media.

According to a report Venezuela is surrounded by crisis as the problem of decline in Bolivar and the electricity crisis. Electricity crisis is becoming very dangerous as the traffic signals are not working which are being causes of road accidents. The government reporters told that the shortage of water in Guri dam caused the electricity crisis. Guri dam is providing 70% of electricity to the country where the water level is declined. Government declared it a natural problem as due to the shortage of water it happened. Venezuela's economy relies on agriculture which can be decline due to less water providing to the fields. Timing of stores and offices has changed and at night time those malls and offices cannot be open.

RCTV of Venezuela was not renewed license due to criticism on government and not to telecast president's speech. The government argued that if a TV channel cannot telecast president's speech for the people of the country and always criticize on government then that TV channel has not right get renewal of license. The criticism becomes hurdle in the way of government to run the system. Chavez considers RCTV as the supporter of capitalism. Hundreds of students protested against the sanctions on media channels in Venezuelan capital Caracas and raised slogans against socialism of Chavez. The director of Human Rights Watch also criticized Chavez that he is violating the freedom of media.

Except from this thousands of Venezuelans also protested against the president Chavez and his socialism. Most of them were students of different institutes. They were raising slogans against Chavez that he has stuck out. A fight occurred between students and police men and a student was also killed in the protest. Recently the country is suffering in several crises severely as blackouts, water rationing and crimes have increased in the streets of Venezuela and people are coming out to protest against the government as it has failed to manage the system properly. Also the supporters of Chavez demonstrated in the city to show their strength. They were supporting Chavez by raising flags of Venezuela. As the elections of Venezuela which are going to be held in this year are coming near, the political activities has also been increased by the Chavez party and the opposition group.

The president of Haiti has appreciated the role of Cuba and Venezuela in the rehabilitation works in Haiti after the earthquake destruction there. The president said that Venezuela was among the first countries which came to Haiti for the help of the victims. The president of Venezuela has also forgiven the debt of Haiti that is USD 295 million.

The economy of Venezuela has also fallen as the Bolivar has decreased and a series of protests started in the country. According to an institute the US president Obama has declared an economic war against the Venezuelan government to decrease its economy and US is behind the anti-government protests in Venezuela to make Venezuela without Chavez. Like this Cuba will be the only dictatorial country in that region. It is said that the devaluation has affected the stuff like televisions, cell phones, alcohol, tobacco, computers and other like material like this which can be a hurdle in Chavez's favoritism. Even the capitalist business which can harm Chavez's favoritism can be harmed by the government.

### **Detailed Report/Argentina**

Buenos Aires, Jan 22 (Reuters) - Argentina's president suffered a setback on Friday when a court upheld a freeze on her use of central bank funds to repay debt and said Congress must decide whether she was right to dismiss the bank's head.

President Cristina Fernandez's push to tap part of the country's \$48 billion in foreign currency reserves has sparked legal challenges and political tension, rattling financial markets and raising concerns a bond swap could be delayed.

Fernandez removed central bank chief Martin Redrado by decree earlier this month because he opposed another decree to transfer \$6.6 billion to the treasury. A judge reinstated Redrado a day later and also blocked the funds transfer.

"This is a great triumph for the opposition," said prominent deputy Elisa Carrio. "The central bank's reserves aren't going to be used to pay debt until Congress discusses these decrees."

Argentine bond prices have fallen since the turmoil erupted earlier this month, highlighting persistent political uncertainty in Latin America's No. 3 economy. The latest court ruling did not affect locally traded sovereign debt <AR/BONOS>, which closed down 0.9 percent on average.

Friday's ruling rejected a government appeal against the court decisions that blocked the reserves transfer and reinstated Redrado, urging Congress to take the lead in resolving the spiraling legal and political dispute.

The court ruling said the government cannot appoint a new president for the Central Bank until Congress has issued an opinion on Redrado's removal.

Setback

Redrado, who the government has accused of misconduct for refusing to hand over the foreign reserves funds, said the court decision vindicated him.

"(It) confirms that the president of the Central Bank did not fail to carry out the duties of a public official," a Central Bank statement said.

Fernandez asked lawmakers earlier this week to form a special advisory committee to discuss Redrado's firing, her first concession to opposition politicians who had called on her to summon Congress to debate the issue.

Argentina's Congress is not due to reconvene until March following the summer recess and ruling party lawmakers have rejected the opposition's calls, saying only the president has the power to summon Congress for a special session.

The special committee is expected to meet next week on Redrado's fate, but Fernandez has stressed that any recommendations it makes will be nonbinding.

Analysts said Friday's ruling was another blow to the president as her cash-strapped government seeks to shore up its finances before a presidential election next year in which her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner, is tipped to run.

"These decisions are a significant political blow for the Kirchner administration as the court system seems to have empowered Congress to be an active voice in this debate, which hitherto the Kirchner administration has been resisting," said Alberto Ramos, senior economist at Goldman Sachs.

Government ministers have said the turmoil at the Central Bank will have no effect on the planned swap of \$20 billion in defaulted bonds, which the Argentine government is expected to launch in the next few weeks.

Buenos Aires — The struggle for control of Argentina's stockpile of foreign currency appeared headed for a showdown as the country's dissident central-bank president vowed to come to work Monday even though the government has posted police to bar him at the door.

The government's latest effort to oust bank president Martín Redrado followed a two-pronged appellate-court decision late Friday that left Mr. Redrado's status in doubt, while also dealing another blow to the government's plan to use several billion dollars in central-bank reserves to pay foreign debt. President Cristina Kirchner's leftist government was scrambling to come up with alternative strategies for laying hold of funds so it can ramp up politically popular spending ahead of 2011 elections.

The Argentine dispute is one of several battles over central-bank independence playing out in various countries in the aftermath of the world financial crisis—though in no other country has the dispute over central-bank autonomy taken such bizarre twists. "It's a telenovela [soap opera] and [Monday] will be the most interesting chapter yet," said Aldo Abram, an economist at the Higher School of Economics and Business Administration in Buenos Aires.

In the U.S., Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke has faced opposition to being confirmed for a second term amid populist anger over the rescue of companies such as American International Group. In South Korea, the government sent a political official to a central-bank

policy meeting for the first time in a decade. In Japan, government officials have bluntly targeted the central bank for criticism and policy suggestions. "As part of the general economic and financial meltdown of the last few years, the 'isolated' nature of central banks is being questioned," notes Johns Hopkins political scientist Riordan Roett.

Preparing to go mano a mano with the government, the 48-year-old Mr. Redrado, dubbed the "Golden Boy" by the media when he started his career in government in the 1990s, said he's confident he's in the right. In an op-ed column published Sunday in the Buenos Aires daily La Nacion, he said he was acting as "guardian of the reserves" needed to defend Argentina's economic stability.

The Kirchner government was equally adamant. Cabinet Chief Anibal Fernandez vowed Friday that Mr. Redrado will "never more" return to the bank. Miguel Angel Pichetto, head of the Kirchner administration's block in the senate, said on Friday, "Redrado is out of the Central Bank and he should not be there any more. One alternative is removing him with public-security forces." A police detail was posted this weekend in front of the bank's broad-columned entrance.

The dispute started in December when announced the creation of a "Bicentennial Fund" for debt payment, to be funded with \$6.57 billion of central-bank reserves. The idea was to free up resources for public-works projects while at the same time reassuring investors of Argentina's willingness to pay its debts. Argentina is trying to regain access to international capital markets after having been frozen out for eight years since it declared the largest sovereign-debt default in history.

Almost immediately after the plan was announced, Mr. Redrado faced pressure from Congress to refrain from releasing the reserves, which legislators insisted were under their control, not the president's. As Mr. Redrado delayed, Mrs. Kirchner on Jan. 7 fired him for "bad conduct." The central banker took his dismissal to court, and was reinstated the next day by a judge, who also blocked the transfer of the reserves into the fund.

Late Friday, an appeals court upheld the ban on transferring the reserves. But it created ambiguity over the future of Mr. Redrado by deferring the fate of the bank president to Congress and the executive branch. The Kirchner government interpreted that part of the ruling as a victory in its battle against Mr. Redrado, who it maintains must step aside while Congress deliberates the matter this week. Mrs. Kirchner's hand-picked replacement, Miguel Angel Pesce, who had been Mr. Redrado's second in command, signed a document Friday confirming himself as interim president, the government said.

But Mr. Redrado said he is still bank president. "I maintain my decision to continue carrying out my duties as an official until Congress decides the contrary," he said in the La Nacion article.

It's anyone's guess what the denouement will be. Many analysts say he will have a hard time surviving until September when his term is set to end.

Meanwhile, the government was scaling back on its plans to tap the central-bank reserves. Mr. Fernandez said the government intended to use \$2.187 billion in bank reserves to pay debts to multilateral creditors, such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. The government said that paying multilateral creditors, as opposed to bondholders, would be permitted by a law passed in Congress five years ago when the government used reserves to pay its debt to the International Monetary Fund.

The Kirchner government is desperate for resources to bolster its faltering popularity ahead of 2011 presidential elections, analysts say. Mrs. Kirchner's husband and predecessor, Nestor, has been laying the groundwork for another presidential bid.

The political and judicial setbacks to the Bicentennial Fund are a continuation of the erosion of support for the Kirchners that was evident in midterm elections last June, when Mrs. Kirchner's coalition lost its majority in Congress, says political scientist Carlos Germano. He is skeptical of the Kirchners' chances of recovering popularity, no matter how much they spend. "History shows when Argentine leaders begin losing support, it's very hard for them to reverse the trend," Mr. Germano says.

Rio de Janeiro — The showdown between President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the nation's central bank president will shift to Congress on Tuesday, as lawmakers take up the fight over tapping the bank's reserves to pay the country's debts.

The dispute between the nation's president and her central bank chief has shaken financial markets and has stirred new concerns about the policies of Mrs. Kirchner's government. Last year, her government nationalized Argentina's largest airline and seized \$30 billion in private pension funds — signs that the government is short of cash but unwilling to cut back populist subsidy programs.

Mrs. Kirchner fired the bank president, Martín Redrado, by decree this month for refusing to release \$6.59 billion in reserves so that the government could pay down \$13 billion in international debt due this year.

A federal judge, María José Sarmiento, then ruled that Mrs. Kirchner could not fire Mr. Redrado or take control of the reserves without congressional approval.

On Friday, the Court of Federal Administrative Disputes appeared to uphold the earlier rulings of Judge Sarmiento, but Mr. Redrado said on Sunday that the police in Buenos Aires had prevented him from entering the bank in the afternoon.

“The Congress, courts and central bank have protected the \$48 billion that provide strength and peace of mind to the Argentine economy, that allow jobs to be created and protect Argentines’ savings,” he said in televised remarks on Monday. “It seems to me that we have an important opportunity to get out of the crisis,” he added.

Mr. Redrado, accompanied by his lawyers, tried to enter the bank on Sunday but was turned away by a group of police officers stationed in front of the bank’s entrance. Spokesmen for the government told Argentine news organizations that the police were acting on a resolution taken by the bank’s board of directors, who on Friday put the bank’s vice president in charge as interim president.

Mrs. Kirchner has defended her move to tap the reserves as necessary for Argentina to restructure \$20 billion in foreign debt from the nation’s major default in 2002. The failure to do that has continued to hamstring Argentina’s ability to bolster investor confidence. But analysts and economists said that Argentina was running out of fresh domestic financing options to keep the economy growing.

A bicameral committee of Congress is scheduled to hold its first meeting on the issue of Mr. Redrado’s firing on Tuesday morning. The committee is expected to give its opinion on the matter by Feb. 9, Patricia Fadel, a congresswoman from the Front for Victory Party, Mrs. Kirchner’s wing of the Peronist Party, told reporters last week.

The committee’s sessions will be held behind closed doors, according to comments made last week by members of the congressional group.

Mrs. Kirchner’s wing of the Peronist Party lost control of Congress in elections last June. Julio Cobos, the vice president who defied Mrs. Kirchner by voting against a plan to increase export taxes on soybeans, would have the final vote on the committee’s decision in case of a tie.

The president’s supporters have accused Mr. Cobos of being behind a conspiracy to stop the government from using the bank reserves. But in this case Mr. Cobos has said in recent days that he would vote in favor of Mr. Redrado’s resigning in order to put the crisis behind the country, according to Argentine news reports.

Economists say that the Argentine economy is expected to grow by 4 percent this year, and that higher agriculture prices and domestic consumption will likely allow the government to rebuild the reserves in 2011. But Gabriel Caamaño, an economist at Estrategico Consultores in Buenos Aires, said that despite government claims that the central bank has \$17 billion in surplus reserves it can tap, he estimates that it has “almost nothing” when discounting the funds it needs to pay debt due over the next year and to cover C.D.’s in the banking system.

At the same time, many economists fear that if the government is successful in ousting Mr. Redrado, the central bank will begin to finance the executive branch through the printing of pesos and the sale of debt, stoking inflation of 13 percent last year. Government spending has been increasing steadily since 2007, jumping 30 percent from 2008 to 2009, while revenues increased officially by 19 percent over the same year, economists said.

With Mrs. Kirchner and her husband, the former President Néstor Kirchner, clinging to the slim hopes of retaining the presidency in 2011, using reserves to pay down debt this year could only help the first couple have more cash to spend next year, said Dante Sica, an economist with abeceb.com in Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires, Jan 21 (Reuters) - Argentina's industrial production rose 10.4 percent in December from the same month a year earlier, Argentine President Cristina Fernandez said on Thursday.

Argentina also registered a 2009 trade surplus of \$16.98 billion, Fernandez said, speaking in a public appearance at the presidential palace.

Buenos Aires: Argentine Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana said yesterday he was leading a trade mission to China, following President Cristina Kirchner's announcement this week she would not join the trip due to concerns over her own vice president.

"The bilateral relationship (with China) is of central importance" to the Argentine government, Taiana said before departing.

Kirchner announced Tuesday she had decided not to attend the mission fearing that her Vice President Julio Cobos would overstep his authority during the time she was out of the country.

Argentina's delegation on the China trip includes representatives from some 80 companies from industries such as agricultural machinery manufacturing, biotechnology, textiles and leather. They aim to strike "strategic partnerships with their counterparts" in the cities of Beijing and Shanghai, the Foreign Ministry said.

Talks and business conferences kick off in Beijing on Monday, moving south to Shanghai on Wednesday, and concluding on Friday.

Bilateral trade between the nations increased from four billion dollars in 2004 to 14 billion dollars in 2008, making the rising Asian giant Argentina's second largest destination for exports, according to official data.

Kirchner has clashed repeatedly with her vice president since 2008, but the disagreements peaked in the last few weeks over the president's attempt to remove Martin Redrado as Central Bank chief. The Cobos-backed bank chief refused to dig into the bank's reserves to guarantee payment of a new 2010 sovereign debt issue, fearing that it could open the way to the creditors laying claim to the bank's reserves. Kirchner tried to sack Redrado as a result, despite the bank's constitutional autonomy, but her order was overturned by courts.

### **Detailed Report/Brazil**

Brasilia. Brazil is looking to send hundreds more soldiers to its UN peacekeeping deployment in Haiti, potentially doubling the unit to 2,600 men, the defense ministry said in a statement, AFP reported.

If Congress approves the ministry's request, Brazil could immediately send 900 personnel -- 750 soldiers and 150 police -- to boost the 1,260 Brazilian peacekeepers already in the country, as urged by the United Nations.

A reserve of another 400 troops could then be kept on standby in case the situation warrants also sending them to the quake-ravaged Caribbean country. "The priority is to send soldiers who have already served in Haiti and who, therefore, have the necessary experience for the mission," the statement said. The UN Security Council on Tuesday voted to send 3,500 more security personnel to Haiti to maintain order and protect aid convoys.

Brazil has military command of the UN peacekeeping force in Haiti, which is currently 9,000-strong and has been in the Caribbean nation since 2004.

The force currently counts 7,000 soldiers from various nations and 2,000 police. Eighteen Brazilian peacekeepers died in the quake.

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic - Manuel Zelaya, who was ousted in June as president of Honduras and has been holed up for four months in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa, may leave for the Dominican Republic, the Caribbean country's president said.

Leonel Fernandez made the offer Wednesday during a visit by Honduran president-elect Porfirio Lobo to the Dominican Republic's capital, Santo Domingo.

Fernandez plans to attend Lobo's inauguration January 27 in Tegucigalpa and said he wants then to return to the Dominican Republic with Zelaya.

Lobo promised that one of his first acts as president would be to ensure the safe passage of Zelaya.

Zelaya has agreed to the plan, Fernandez said.

In his first reaction to Lobo's promise of safe passage, the ousted president said it was a 'good gesture' from Lobo.

At the moment, however, there is a warrant out for his arrest on charges of treason and abuse of office related to his attempt to amend the constitution to allow presidents another term in office, an unpopular stance that led to the coup.

Zelaya was ousted on June 28 and expelled from Honduras in a military coup. As the international community continued to recognize him as Honduras' leader and demanded his return to power, he slipped back into the country on September 21, taking refuge in the Brazilian embassy, from which he continued to demand his reinstatement.

Lobo was elected November 29 in a vote that had been planned before the coup.

Roberto Micheletti, who has been heading Honduras' interim government, intends to remain in office until January 27, after which he plans to retire into private life.

Fernandez said Wednesday that he would recognize Lobo as the president of Honduras.

Once upon a time it was considered indecent to turn living people into myths, or even into films, with too much haste. The cycle seems to be shorter now. Gandhi had to wait until 34 years after his death before he appeared on cinema screens around the world. George Bush junior, by contrast, was the victim of an Oliver Stone biopic during the last year of his presidency. Now a Brazilian director, Fábio Barreto, has done the same for Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as he starts his final year of office.

"Lula, Son of Brazil" is the tale of a poor boy made good, his flaws left on the cutting table and his virtues in close-up. Since Lula hopes to secure the election of his chosen successor, Dilma Rousseff, in October, it is controversial. The film "promotes the worship of a political myth," said Eugênio Bucci, a critic and journalism professor. Before it was even released *Veja*, a magazine, pointed out that many of the companies that funded its production (the most expensive in the history of Brazilian cinema) have either won or hope to win contracts from the government.

For all that, the film is very watchable. It opens in the poor north-east, where Lula was born into a landscape of bright red soil and cacti, and ends with his rise as a metalworkers' union leader in the industrial belt of São Paulo in the 1970s. This is a candyfloss version of the story, however. Lula's reverses are shown: the little finger lost to a lathe, the death of his first wife and child in childbirth. But he is too good to be true: a perfect student, perfect husband and political moderate who abhorred violence.

The book on which the film is based, by contrast, quotes Lula as approving of an incident in which a director of a factory that is on strike is thrown out of a window. In the film he runs from the factory appalled. That is a shame. A more nuanced telling would not detract from Lula's remarkable life story and achievement.

The film is doing well at the box office. Its producers say it is running more strongly in the north-east than in the populous south-east, which means it mirrors Ms Rousseff's fortunes in the polls. There are plans to show the film on mobile screens in places with no cinema. It may get an airing on television, though there is no such deal in place yet.

All this helps a process of mythmaking around Lula that is already well under way. Catching some of Lula's stardust is Ms Rousseff's best hope for capturing the presidency in October, and

there are some signs that this is happening. The gap between her and José Serra, her main rival, halved between March and December last year and now stands at 14 points. Competing against a celluloid legend is not easy.

Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim denied on Thursday any conflict with the United States over security control in Haiti.

"Raising questions about a Brazil-U.S. power struggle is petty," Amorim said.

The minister said last week that some Brazilian planes carrying supplies were having difficulties landing at the airport of Port-au-Prince, as air traffic there was controlled by the United States after the quake hit. He made a phone call to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss the matter.

Yet he later dismissed the incident as a misunderstanding; he believed such a problem was "natural" when flights from many countries are due to land at the airport shortly after the quake.

Amorim will fly to Haiti to examine the latest development, and then attend a conference in Montreal, Canada, to evaluate the post-quake situation in the Caribbean nation with representatives from other countries.

Brazil has been heading the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti (Minustah) since 2004 and has about 1,300 military personnel in the country. The congress will later decide whether to double the figure as proposed by Defense Minister Nelson Jobim.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva Thursday paid tribute to 18 UN Brazilian peacekeepers who died last week in the Haiti earthquake.

The military participated in the "noblest humanitarian mission ever carried out by the Brazilian Armed Forces," Lula said in a speech during the official ceremony in honor of the soldiers in Brazil's capital city, Brasilia.

The funeral ceremony was also attended by Defense Minister Nelson Jobim and other high-ranking military and government officials.

The 18 soldiers were serving in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti (Minustah), which Brazil heads since 2004. Most of them had almost completed their six-month mission and were to return to Brazil only a day after the quake that killed them.

Speaking before the 18 coffins draped with Brazilian flags, Lula said that the Brazilian members of the Minustah brought not only security and medicine to Haiti, but also solidarity and, "above all things, respect" from the Brazilian people.

The 18 officers received post-mortem promotion and were granted the Peacemaker Medal.

Foreign Minister of Brazil, Celso Amorim, left on Friday for Haiti where he will meet on Saturday with Haitian President Rene Preval and with military and civilian command of the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti ( MINUSTAH).

According to the Brazilian presidency press office, Amorim will also follow the work of rescue teams that support the country's recovery after the earthquake that destroyed the capital Port-au-Prince on Jan. 12.

On Jan. 25, the chancellor will travel to Montreal, Canada, where he will represent Brazil at the preparatory meeting for the Conference of Donors to Haiti.

In statements made on the eve of his departure, Amorim denied that Brazil is vying with the U.S. for leadership on humanitarian efforts in the Antillean country.

Brazil is responsible for the military command of MINUSTAH, military force that counts so far about 11,000 troops and is composed of 17 countries, most of them Latin Americans.

The government of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva sent to the Congress this week a request for increasing the number of Brazilian troops that make up the mission from 1,300 to 2,600 soldiers.

He also announced Thursday the contribution of 208 million dollars for humanitarian and security actions, out of which 113 million dollars will go to the maintenance of troops, 19.4 million dollars to strengthen the team of the Brazilian embassy in Haiti and 75 million dollars to help restructuring local health system.

The tragedy of Port-au-Prince caused the death of 21 Brazilians, of which 18 military and 3 civilians.

Washington: Spelling out the agenda of the administration in its second year, the White House has said United States President Barack Obama and his team will work towards promoting stronger bilateral cooperation with countries such as India, Brazil, China and South Africa.

“We will continue to build on the President’s efforts with regard to promoting a stronger bilateral cooperation with countries like India, Brazil, China, South Africa,” White House spokesman Mike Hammer told foreign journalists on Friday.

He said the President was determined to work every day to advance the American National Security interest. — PTI

A South Korean special presidential delegation set out on trip to Latin America where they will visit Colombia, Brazil, and Paraguay, the foreign ministry said Monday.

The special envoy comprised of ruling party lawmakers Kim Jung-hoon and Kim Sung-sik are scheduled to arrive in Colombia Monday to meet with President Alvaro Uribe while also participating in a ceremony commemorating the country's 200th anniversary of independence during the trip, the ministry said.

They will then fly to Brazil Wednesday for a two-day trip where they will seek increased support and cooperation for South Korean companies doing business in the country.

Their three-nation trip will end in Paraguay as they are scheduled to meet with Miguel Carrizosa, chief of staff of President Lopez Perito, and other government officials in a bid to find ways to bolster economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries, the ministry said.

The upcoming trip comes on the heels of the Forum for East Asia- Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) held in Tokyo earlier this month, where countries from both regions discussed ways to expand cooperation in trade, investment, energy, and culture.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman discussed security matters, including international terror, Monday evening with Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim. Lieberman told Jobim that Israel expects the world's democracies to support Israel against the United Nations' Human Rights Council report on last winter's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which accuses Israel of war crimes. The foreign minister said, "If the enlightened world does not reject the Goldstone report, the ability of democracies to defend themselves against terrorism will be seriously damaged."

Lieberman also told Jobim that Iran's nuclear program is not just for electric power, given the Islamic Republic's oil and gas reserves. The foreign minister added Israel's condolences on the loss of 18 Brazilian soldiers who were part of an international force in Haiti.

Brazil's public debt could grow by as much as 16 per cent this year, according to the government's 2010 Annual Borrowing Plan, which analysts described as consistent with the administration's emphasis on slow but steady progress.

"It is a conservative plan but it follows the same line as in previous years, most importantly by reducing the percentage of debt linked to interest rates that this year are expected to rise," said Silvio Campos Neto, chief economist with Banco Schahin.

That percentage of floating-rate debt should total between 30 per cent and 34 per cent, compared with 33.4 per cent at the end of 2009, Arno Augustin, Treasury secretary, told a news conference in Brasilia.

The Selic base interest rate is currently 8.75 per cent but most analysts expect it to head back into double figures this year.

Mr Augustin also said the percentage of fixed-rate domestic debt should end 2010 at between 31 per cent and 37 per cent.

Outstanding debt should rise by R1,600bn-R1,730bn , up from R1,497bn (\$818bn) – almost 16 per cent – at the end of 2009.

The government will require R372.3bn to service domestic and foreign debt this year, with R285.6bn going on main payments while another R86.7bn is to be set aside for interest. The total figure is slightly down on the R379.7bn it announced last year for 2009.

Other analysts agreed the overall plan was solid but some said officials could take more advantage of growing capital inflows.

“It seems that 2010 is going to be a positive year for them in the sense that it is on everyone’s radar screens, everyone is moving money into Brazil,” said Mauro Leos, vice-president on the sovereign ratings team at Moody’s.

“A large part of those capital inflows have been going into equity rather than debt and in that sense they are conservative. They may have the opportunity to perform better than expected.”

Although overall foreign direct investment was down because of the global crisis, the Bovespa gained 82.66 per cent in 2010 and the real was up by more than a quarter against the dollar. Foreign reserves currently sit at \$241.4bn, a record high.

Jan. 21 (Bloomberg) -- Brazil’s Finance Ministry is considering anti-inflationary measures to prevent interest-rate increases by the central bank, O Estado de S. Paulo reported, citing unnamed government officials.

Among measures under consideration are cuts on import taxes for products with increasing prices, lower fuel taxes and the elimination of tax incentives to stimulate consumer spending, the newspaper said. The Finance Ministry also intends to renew its commitment to a primary budget surplus equivalent to 3.3 percent of gross domestic product, according to Estado.

Finance Minister Guido Mantega is aiming to dispel market expectations that the central bank will lift interest rates in the first quarter to prevent an inflationary bubble at the end of the year, Estado said.

Officials at the ministry in Brasilia didn't immediately return calls by Bloomberg News before regular working hours.

Jan. 21 (Bloomberg) -- Coffee output in Brazil, the world's biggest producer, may unexpectedly drop this year as downpours hinder the development of the beans, an Agriculture Ministry official said.

Growers may harvest about 39 million bags, less than last year's 39.5 million and as much as 20 percent lower than the ministry's Jan. 7 forecast of 45.9 million to 48.7 million bags, Jorge Lulu, meteorologist for the ministry's Conab crop-forecasting agency, said today in an interview.

Heavy showers in Brazil's southeastern coffee-producing states disrupted the flowering and ripening of the beans, prompting production losses, Lulu said. Brazil's coffee output is expected to rise this year because trees are entering the higher-yielding half of a two-year cycle.

"Growers will lose lots of beans because the rains led them to develop in different stages," Lulu said by telephone from Brasilia. "There will be ripe beans mixed with buds and growers have no way of separating them during the harvesting."

Agriculture Minister Reinhold Stephanes said in a Jan. 6 interview that Brazil has the chance of reaching a record coffee harvest this year. Still, he said rainfalls could hurt the quality of the beans and slow down the harvesting.

"Rains may hurt the quality of the beans but not quantity," Rodrigo Costa, a vice president of institutional sales at Newedge USA LLC in New York, said today in a telephone interview.

Coffee futures fell 0.9 percent to \$1.38 a pound on ICE Futures U.S. at 12:01 p.m. in New York. Earlier, the most-active contract rose 0.7 percent to \$1.4015.

Excess rainfall may also hinder soybean output in center-western Mato Grosso and Goias states. Showers in the area are slowing the harvest and also raising incidence of the Asian rust disease, Lulu said. Soybean growers may have to spend more to fight the fungal disease this year, he said.

A bag of coffee weighs 60 kilograms (132 pounds).

Noted political leaders and intellectual met today to discuss a range of topics on the second day of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Although the venues were scattered throughout the city and the issues ranged from economic injustice to looming environmental catastrophes, the antagonist at each was shared--Capitalism. But the highlight of today's Forum was a visit from Brazil's President Lula, who delivered a rousing speech articulating much of what was discussed earlier in the day, vowing that Brazil is prepared to take the lead on Green reform--and that other nations, particularly the world's biggest polluters, need to make up for the harm they've caused.

"You have to pay because you sent the greenhouse gas and now we have to stop it."

### Resource Bubble Bound to Burst

The discussions held this morning linked the global economic meltdown with the current environmental crisis--which speakers likening earth's natural resources to a commodities 'bubble' that will eventually burst under the pressures of capitalism's runaway tendencies.

New York professor David Harvey--a vocal opponent of globalization--described the capitalist system as being based on "destruction and not construction," and that its "obsession" with economic growth comes at the expense of the environment being exploited to sustain it.

Susan George, a renowned fellow from the Transnational Institute, shared the same concerns as Harvey and outlined a dire future for a world that continues the capitalist growth model, warning that "society is submissive to the limits imposed by nature" and that seeking "immediate and blind" economic growth will impact on the ecosystem until the "time when it is impossible for life [to exist] on Earth."

### Crowds Gather for Lula

Later in the afternoon in another part of the city, people began gathering in a large auditorium for what was sure to be the highlight of the day's speech delivered by the country's popular president. Crowds lined the stands in the space usually used by the local soccer team--many wearing red shirts with the name "Lula" printed on it to show support. At one point, the roughly 7 thousand in attendance spontaneously began 'the wave' in anticipation of the President's arrival.

Word came in the press-box, about 30 minutes after Lula's speech was set to begin, that the President just departed for the hour-long plane ride from the nation's capital city, Brasilia to where the crowd was gathered in Porto Alegre. But, despite the wait, the excitement hardly waned in the audience, who gingerly fanned themselves in the evening heat.

### Lula on Environmental Responsibility

When the President finally arrived and began his speech, it didn't take long for him to share his remarks on the disappointments of COP-15, the failure of the most polluting countries to bear responsibility for climate change, and Brazil's commitment to upholding a responsible environmental policy.

We went to Copenhagen with the decision more serious and consistent in all countries that were there. We took a proposal for 2020 cut greenhouse gas emissions of between 36% and 39% and also reduce Amazon deforestation by 80%. It took the rich countries by surprise.

### Wealthy Polluters Are in Debt

He then outlined what he perceives to be a consistent failure of the US to openly resolve their significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions:

The U.S. is proposing to reduce [CO2 emissions] 17% from 2005. But if you take the date of the Kyoto Protocol and the base date of 1990, the U.S. proposal is only reduced 4% by 2020. We want common but differentiated. If one country is polluting the world for 200 years, is it just for another country that is polluting for 2 years to pay the same account? It is possible that [the US] did not want to discuss the pattern of consumption of humanity. It is possible to have a correct policy of compensation for countries.

For us to fulfill our commitment, we will have to invest 16 billion dollars. More than the European countries and the U.S. have promised. Do not just treat this as if it were charity, [those countries] are not doing a favor to pay for carbon sequestration. No. They have to pay because they sent the greenhouse gas and now we have to stop it. And now they have to give money to the Poorest countries. Not a favor! And now we have to solve it in Mexico this year. Each one will have to say this: I'll clean my mess. No one will need to help Brazil to clean it. Each country needs to clean their own [mess] so that we will be sure to achieve the right goals to clean up the planet Earth.

World, Copy the Model of Brazil

President Lula went further to suggest that nations unable to find the political will or innovation to tackle climate change head-on should look to Brazil as a leader on that front:

We are well prepared for the debate. We will not accept any dirty-fuel covered finger in this country anymore, which has its extraordinary energy sources. This week I went to Juiz de Fora inaugurate the first power plant fueled by ethanol in the world. With a turbine made of aircraft 747. To the World: if you want to get rid of fossil fuels, which are a major pollutant, and sequester as much carbon as possible, and change how you get your energy and fuel, copy the model of Brazil.

Brazil, China, India and South Africa called Sunday for developed countries to quickly begin handing over the \$10 billion pledged in Copenhagen to poor countries to help them deal with the effects of climate change.

The first funds should go to the least developed countries, including small island states and African countries, said Xie Zhenhua, China's top climate change negotiator after a meeting of the representatives of the four nations in New Delhi.

The four developing world giants — known as BASIC — also said they would their submit plans for combating climate change to the U.N. this week.

At Copenhagen conference, many developed countries had hoped the Kyoto Protocol, which only required emissions cuts of rich countries, would be replaced with an accord that also made demands on developing nations. But instead, President Barack Obama and the BASIC nations brokered a deal — the so-called Copenhagen Accord — requiring poor countries to propose voluntary actions by Jan. 31. That deadline has since been extended.

"We have the obligation to be the first to submit the action plans," South Africa's Environment Minister Buyelwa Sonjica told reporters.

China, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has already said it would cut its "carbon intensity" — a measure of carbon dioxide emissions per unit of production — by 40 percent to 45 percent by 2020, compared with levels in 2005.

India, the fifth largest polluter, said by 2020 it would cut its carbon intensity by 20 percent to 25 percent. Neither country has accepted a legally binding emissions reduction target.

On Sunday, the group also called on Denmark, chairman of the climate conference, to convene a series of meetings this year to begin discussions on a legally binding climate deal ahead of a conference in Mexico in December, said a joint statement from the countries.

### **Detailed Report/Mexico**

The drug lords' methods are no different than those of Al-Qaida, and must be taken as seriously.

The arrest last week of reputed Mexican drug lord Teodoro (El Teo) Garcia Simental underscores the contention that Mexico is in the midst of a counterterrorism war, which President Felipe Calderon must continue pursuing with full vigor in spite of pressures to reverse course.

By capturing Garcia and putting him on trial, Calderon not only sends a strong message to his own people about respect for the rule of law but helps American drug users better understand the violence and misery they are helping fund across the border.

Simental wasn't a mere pot pusher. Authorities accuse him of carrying out 300 killings, including the assassinations of dozens of Tijuana police officers. He reportedly liked to behead his victims, hang them from overpasses or dissolve them in vats of caustic soda.

He is reported to have sliced off the face of one victim and to have had it stitched onto a soccer ball.

If this isn't terrorism at its sadistic worst, what is? The fact that El Teo was captured on the heels of last month's killing of drug kingpin Arturo Beltran Leyva signifies real progress in restoring order to Mexico's streets. It also emphasizes the vastly improved level of cooperation and intelligence-sharing between Mexican and U.S. law enforcement agencies.

The U.S. Department of Justice once listed El Teo as one of the 10 most wanted figures in the Arrellano-Felix drug cartel that ruled northwestern Mexico. He is reputed to have been a hit man for the cartel but broke away to join forces with a rival group. A subsequent turf battle turned the streets of Tijuana and other western border cities into killing fields. The Drug Enforcement Administration supplied information to Mexican authorities that prompted a five-month surveillance operation leading to Garcia's arrest.

The efforts Mexico has made to aid quake-torn Haiti have been "extraordinary," a Haitian diplomatic official in Mexico said Wednesday.

"I would call the response from Mexicans extraordinary on several levels, from ordinary people and authorities to central and local government," said Moise Dorce, Minister-Counselor at the Haitian embassy in Mexico City, who is in charge of the aid work.

"There has been a very human response," Dorce told Xinhua. "People immediately realized how hard it is and are working to make things better."

Two trucks are loaded with donated goods daily. The streets outside the embassy, in the posh suburb Polanco, are stacked high with crates of donations: water, rice, beans, medicines, canned food, mattresses, diapers and toilet rolls.

Both Haitian and Mexican volunteers are busy filling trucks with goods, which will head down to the eastern port Veracruz and then be loaded onto the Mexican navy ship "Hausteco" that has carried 200 tons of aid to the Caribbean nation.

Embassy staff estimate the embassy alone has sent between 250 and 300 tons of aid to Veracruz, and there are many more collection points across the country.

The Constitution Square in central Mexico City is also packed with volunteers organized by the city government sending goods to Veracruz for shipping.

Dorce said Mexico's biggest telephone company Telmex had raised 10 million pesos (784,000 U.S. dollars) on the first day of an appeal for funds to send aid to Haiti, where officials say at least 75,000 people have died in the devastating quake.

Dorce said he was particularly proud to be in a nation that responded so quickly. "Mexico City's quake increased the sensibility of the population. It makes them understand more about what other people have experienced."

Mexico's Topos de Tlatelolco, a volunteer quake rescue team that travels across the world when a disaster strikes, flew immediately to Port-au-Prince once the quake struck Haiti last week.

But the crisis is not over. Food was running short and aid reached only a small number of Haitians, Dorce said.

Many people were sleeping on the streets fearing more aftershocks would occur after a powerful one hit the country on Wednesday morning, he said.

"We see the quantity of aid that arrives here, but the people in Haiti don't know. They just see they have nothing, and they are desperate," Dorce added.

The World Food Program estimates it is now feeding 200,000 people in Haiti. However, this remains short of what is needed.

Other UN bodies estimate as many as 3 million residents in Port-au-Prince and the surrounding cities are homeless and need assistance.

Needs remain varied. Embassy staff say they need urgent help from a logistics company to pack up donations. Tents are also urgently needed as many people stay in the streets and Haiti is prone to heavy rains.

Other staffers say the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine is the most important.

Mexican soldiers have detained Juan Carlos Tarabay Castillo alias "El 20," one of the top leaders of Golfo drug cartel, the Mexican National Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

The ministry said in a statement that Tarabay was detained on Tuesday in Boca del Rio municipality in the state of Veracruz, 300 km to the Mexican capital Mexico City.

"El 20" was captured together with two other gunmen. The Mexican soldiers also seized several weapons and 3.5 million Mexican pesos (about 272,000 U.S. dollars).

According to the Mexican authorities, "El 20" was in charge of supervising for the Golfo cartel all the states in central and southern Mexico.

"El 20" has direct contact with another top leader of the drug cartel Miguel Angel Trevino Morales alias "El 40," the authorities said.

"El 20" is responsible for at least three murders, including the killing of a commander of the municipal police.

The ministry also said many of "El 20"'s companions tried to save him, which led to a clash with the Mexican soldiers.

During the clash, the ministry added, a number of people were injured and the gunmen ran away when they found they had no way to rescue "El 20."

According to the Mexican authorities, the Golfo cartel, an ally of the "Los Zetas" group, is one of the biggest crime organizations in Mexico.

As Golfo cartel chief, Osiel Cardenas Guillen, is imprisoned in a U.S. jail, the drug cartel is now headed by Heriberto Lazcano alias "El Lazca."

Redwood City, Calif.—Poverty and joblessness aren't the only factors keeping Mexican immigrants in the United States from returning to their home country. Now they have another reason -- panic over the high levels of violence, a result of the so-called "war on drugs" launched by President Felipe Calderón.

Of the more than 16,205 murders committed in Mexico during the Calderón administration, the majority has occurred in the states of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Baja California, Durango, Michoacán and Guerrero. The most violent year in the last decade was 2009, with 7,724 murders, in addition to a spike in kidnappings (mostly committed by drug traffickers), reaching 111 per month.

Luis Carvajal, a 30-year-old immigrant from Sinaloa, says he feels very "sad" over what is happening in his state. "All my relatives who are there," he says, "tell us the violence has reached a degree they've never seen before."

And while the federal government has launched an intensive media campaign to gain the trust of

the Mexican people (both inside and outside of the country)—constantly ensuring them that it is winning the war—the dire statistics present a different reality. In January 2010 so far, 370 people have been killed in Sinaloa, including three journalists.

“Sinaloa has always been known because that’s where the big drug lords are from,” says Carvajal. “I remember when I lived there, there was violence, but nothing compared to what’s happening now. In my neighborhood (Los Mochis) there were never shootings, and now they happen every day, at all hours. People are killed daily.”

Carvajal, who has lived in the United States for six years, adds with obvious indignation, “A few days ago, they killed and hanged two people from a bridge in Los Mochis. That was unthinkable two years ago.”

The federal government, in its attempt to clean up the bad image created by the violence, has tried to show that many of the deaths were attributed to drug traffickers, and that the high levels of violence are an indication that they are fighting organized crime effectively. Indeed, the data shows that the vast majority of those murdered had a connection to organized crime, or were members of the police or military.

However, as noted in an editorial in the Mexican daily *La Jornada* last week, civilians—including women and children—are often caught in the line of fire. In fact, one of Carvajal’s own relatives was murdered recently in Sinaloa. “He went to a car wash and a group of people went there to kill someone, but several innocent people were killed in the shooting.”

As a result of the violence, Carvajal explains, “People like me who used to dream of returning, or even go there on vacation, are thinking twice about it. On the other hand, a lot of people there want to come [to the United States] because they’re afraid.”

Elizabeth Aguilar, a 36-year-old Sinaloa native who works cleaning houses, agrees with Carvajal without hesitation. “I wouldn’t go back to Sinaloa to live. I really like my country in general. But everything has turned into chaos. Sinaloa is governed by drug traffickers. Everyone there knows it.”

Although most of Aguilar’s family lives in the United States, her parents still live in Sinaloa. “I worry that they are there,” Aguilar says. “I’d really like them to come to the U.S. Whenever I talk to them, I ask them to come here. I think everyone, not just my family but everyone I talk to here, is really stressed out about what’s going on there.”

Journalists, too, are afraid to return home. “In recent years, journalists have been forced to leave

their country to save their lives,” Sanjuana Martinez writes on her [blog](#). “Some have decided to seek asylum in the United States and Canada on grounds of persecution.”

"What's happening [in Mexico] is very serious," says Mexican journalist Francisco Barradas. Barradas, who lives in San Francisco, says he is shocked and saddened, especially by the murders and disappearances of journalists. In the last decade, 65 journalists were killed in Mexico, making it the most dangerous country for journalists in all of Latin America. None of the journalists' cases has been solved.

"Dozens of attacks and 14 murders have taken place in the last year [2009]. When journalists denounce the complicity of authorities, police, or political leaders in organized crime, sparks fly. And the warnings may come in the form of threats by phone or email; being followed; verbal or physical attacks; robberies; attacks on their homes or cars, or other crimes," says Martinez.

On Dec. 8, 2009 Amnesty International (AI) held worldwide protests against the human rights violations and abuses by the Mexican Army. In a report, the human rights organization warns that in the last two years, violations of individual rights, such as forced disappearances and torture, have reached “scandalous levels.”

"Although we live far away, as long as the violence continues to grow in Mexico, as long as we hear about shootings and murders every day, and many of these victims are innocent people who had nothing to do with drug trafficking, we won't stop feeling sad and living under stress here in the United States," says Carvajal.

Mexico City - Two Mexican women were killed in Haiti's devastating earthquake last week and 31 Mexican nationals are still missing, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

The ministry confirmed on Friday the death of Maria Antonieta Castillo Santamaria, who worked at the UN mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).

“Her remains are in the Dominican Republic and will be repatriated to Mexico,” the ministry said in a statement.

Karen Valero, another Mexican national, also perished in the quake and her remains have already been brought back to Mexico.

A total of 148 Mexicans were in Haiti when the massive 7.0-magnitude tremor struck the impoverished Caribbean nation on January 12, the ministry said in updating its estimates.

Among those, 22 have returned to Mexico, 34 have left Haiti for other countries and 59 others have decided to remain in Haiti, where survivors are still scrambling for access to much-needed food, water and medical supplies.

**El Paso, Texas --** More Mexicans are going to the U.S. border ports, asking for political asylum, a newspaper analysis.

The Arizona Republic reported information from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration services showed that in 2002, 50 Mexican nationals went to a U.S. port of entry and asked for asylum.

As of August 2009, 303 asylum cases have been received. In 2008, U.S. immigration officials reported that were 312 asylum requests from Mexican nationals at a U.S. port of entry.

There has also been a jump in asylum applications from Mexicans already in the U.S. There were 1,410 applications in 2006, compared to 2,144 applications in 2008 ,according to CIS data.

"I think you are likely to see more, and we are already seeing significant numbers," said Donald Kerwin. Kerwin is a lawyer and asylum expert at the Migration and Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

The majority of asylum cases are filed in Texas and California.

"People just can't come and say I'm afraid because they killed someone in my school," said Carlos Spector, an immigration attorney in El Paso. Spector explained that people filing for political asylum must show they being targeted because they belong to a specific group.

In 2008, 13 percent of asylum applications from Mexicans were approved.

San Salvador, El Salvador — The government of El Salvador has filed a complaint with Mexican officials over the killing of three migrants and the rape of four others by armed men in southern Mexico.

El Salvador's deputy minister for Salvadorans abroad says about 150 migrants was pulled off a train by unidentified assailants in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.

The official, Juan Jose Garcia, says three men were slain and four women raped in the Saturday attack. Salvadoran migrants frequently hop freight trains in Mexico trying to reach the United States.

Garcia said Tuesday that the complaint was filed with Mexican police and Mexico's National Immigration Institute.

The institute says it has no immediate comment.

Mexico City - President Felipe Calderón's administration wants to dissolve Mexico's 2,022 city police forces, saying many of them are so badly educated and vulnerable to corruption that they are undermining the country's crackdown on drug cartels.

The proposal was announced by Public Safety Secretary Genaro García Luna as he released gloomy new statistics on Mexico's battle against crime. The country's murder rate rose from 9.69 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007 to 14.72 in 2009, nearly triple the U.S. rate of 5.6. Cocaine use in Mexico has quadrupled since 2006, and methamphetamine use has quintupled, García Luna said, despite a massive, U.S.-backed buildup in federal police.

The government wants to replace Mexico's 160,967 municipal police officers with bigger state police forces and is lobbying governors for their support, García Luna told lawmakers during a congressional hearing late last week.

"This idea of having one police force per state would allow us to coordinate forces with more speed and more capacity, something that is very important given the circumstances the country is currently facing," he said.

It would be the fourth major overhaul of Mexico's law-enforcement system in three years and by far the most radical. It would whittle the number of police forces to 32, one for each of Mexico's 31 states plus Mexico City.

"Harmonizing our abilities, systems, procedures, profiles and technologies is much easier when you have 32 police chiefs instead of 2,022 police chiefs," García Luna said.

About 68 percent of Mexico's municipal police have only a ninth-grade education, and 61 percent earn less than \$300 per month, making them vulnerable to bribery, García Luna said. Half of the municipal police forces have fewer than 20 officers, meaning drug gangs can easily overpower them.

Under the proposal, the best-educated municipal police officers would be absorbed into the state forces, said Jose Luis Ovando, president of the security committee in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress. He and other members of Calderón's National Action Party, or PAN, have quietly begun pushing the idea in Congress, the National Association of Mayors and the National Conference of Governors, he said, although a formal congressional bill is probably months away.

"We have to present a united front against crime, and this dispersion of forces, these isolated efforts that sometimes overlap, don't work," Nuevo León Gov. Rodrigo Medina, chairman of the security committee at the National Conference of Governors, told reporters in Mexico City on Friday. Medina is a member of the powerful Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

Some lawmakers were skeptical. Rep. Teresa Incháustegui of the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, said the measure goes against "community policing" principles that the United States and other countries have embraced as a way of reducing crime. Those efforts try to cast police as fellow neighbors instead of outsiders and encourage good relations through foot patrols, neighborhood meetings and outreach programs.

Rep. Jorge Carlos Ramírez of the PRI called the government proposal a sign that the Calderón administration is getting desperate. "Passing the ball back and forth from one (police force) to another is not the answer," he said.

Other countries, such as Colombia and El Salvador, have moved to centralize their police forces as a way of combating corruption. But doing away with municipal police in Mexico, a sprawling country of 103 million people, could require massive legal changes, said Bernardo González Aréchiga, an expert on crime at the Monterrey Institute of Technological and Advanced Studies.

"We would have to review a huge number of federal and state laws," González said. "The implications of a change like this are enormous."

It would be the latest in a series of realignments as the government tries to improve investigations and speed up trials in Mexico. Beginning in 2007, Calderón combined the federal highway patrol and other law-enforcement agencies into a new Federal Police under García Luna's control.

He then took Mexico's version of the FBI, known as the Federal Investigative Agency, away from Mexico's attorney general and folded it into García Luna's police force.

In 2008, lawmakers passed constitutional amendments giving all police more power to investigate, detain witnesses, search homes and run undercover operations. Other changes established that suspects are presumed innocent until proved guilty. Mexican courts are phasing in U.S.-style "oral trials" to replace the current system, in which trials are conducted through a secretive, slow exchange of written briefs.

In August, the government also purged its Customs Service, firing all 1,400 inspectors at airports, seaports and border crossings and replacing them with new recruits in a single day.

Canada's decision last summer to require visas for visitors from Mexico and the Czech Republic has curbed skyrocketing refugee claims from the two countries, according to the latest statistics obtained by the *Star*.

However, the backlog of claimants awaiting a decision continues to climb, growing by 7,000 last year. The number of claims from Hungary rose almost tenfold, from 272 cases in 2008 to 2,434 last year, according to numbers provided by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Since Ottawa slapped the visa requirement on Mexicans in July, asylum claims have fallen from an average of 1,000 cases a month to fewer than 200, hitting a new low of 158 in December. A total of 9,296 Mexicans sought refugee status in Canada last year; 9 per cent were accepted, compared with 11 per cent the year before.

The influx of Czech Roma refugees has also fallen to a trickle, from a peak of 448 in May to just one in December. A total of 2,202 Czech Roma sought asylum in Canada in 2009, though only 10 per cent of their claims were accepted, a drop from 43 per cent in 2008.

The flood of Roma claimants from Hungary, the second highest refugee-producing country last year, has raised fresh alarm, prompting Ottawa to consider expanding the visa requirement. Such a move could trigger further backlash from the European Union, in which both the Czech Republic and Hungary are members.

In all, asylum claims fell slightly last year, from 35,000 in 2008 to 34,000 in 2009, with the acceptance rate hovering at about 42 per cent. However, the backlog has continued to grow, from 54,232 cases to 61,170 in the past year – a result of delays by the Conservative government in appointing new adjudicators to the refugee board.

A board spokesperson said all member seats have now been filled and will help ease the backlog.

After Mexico, Canada's top refugee sources in 2009 were Hungary, with 2,440 new claims filed; Colombia, 2,300; Czech Republic, 2,200; Haiti, 1,600; and China, 1,580.

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico - Drug traffickers shot at a Mexican government helicopter as it chased a small plane allegedly loaded with drugs, a military official said.

A spokesman for Operation Chihuahua, a counternarcotics campaign with 8,000 participating soldiers and federal police, said the attack took place Thursday afternoon Uruachi, a town in the northern state. The bullet-riddled helicopter's pilot was injured.

Locals called in to radio stations, saying that hundreds of police and soldiers surrounded the site of the confrontation, arresting several people for questioning on the whereabouts of the attackers.

More than 15,000 people have died in spiraling drug violence in the past three years across Mexico, particularly in northern border areas on lucrative trafficking routes into the United States, despite a nationwide crackdown on organized crime operated by 50,000 troops.

Ciudad Juarez, ground zero for drug-related violence, has seen around a dozen homicides a day this year. Last year, drug violence claimed around 2,660 victims in this city across the border from El Paso, Texas. - Sapa-AFP

Washington - (Dow Jones) - Mexico may try to renew a \$47 billion credit line it currently has in place with the International Monetary Fund, the country's new finance minister said Wednesday.

Ernesto Cordero, who took over as Mexico's finance minister in December, held a press conference in Washington after meetings with U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and officials at the World Bank and IMF.

It was his first trip to the U.S. as Mexico's finance minister.

A possible renewal of the precautionary credit line was among the topics discussed with the IMF, he said.

Cordero continued to expect the Mexican economy to grow at a 3% clip this year. "There is a moderate optimism about what is going to happen," he said. "There are clear signs of recovery."

He said he expects interest rates will remain steady in Mexico. He also said he was not concerned about inflation in the country. "All the expectations for inflation for the year are around 5% and that's a really reasonable forecast," he said.

Calcutta, Jan. 25: Mexico will hold talks with India for a free trade agreement (FTA) in May this year. "Such negotiations take time and we are at a preliminary stage. A committee on economic and trade relations will meet Indian officials in May this year. The FTA is one of the major issues to be discussed at the meeting in Mexico," Jaime Nualart, the ambassador of Mexico to India, said on the sidelines of a seminar organized by the Indian Chamber of Commerce here today.

This will be Mexico's second meeting on the FTA with India. In 2007, Mexico signed two agreements with India — a bilateral investment promotion and protection pact and a memorandum of understanding to set up a high-level group of officials to look for areas of synergy. The investment promotion agreement, which will be in force for 10 years, also provides free repatriation of funds by an investor of either country.

According to the ambassador, Mexico is keen on foreign direct investments from India in mining.

"We seek Indian FDI in the mining sector in our country," Nualart said.

Mexico City: The Mexican government says the British-based bank HSBC will invest US\$700 million to increase the operating capital of its Mexico subsidiary by about 30 percent.

The office of President Felipe Calderon says the investment was announced during a Monday meeting at the presidential residence with top executives of HSBC's Mexico subsidiary.

Spokesmen for HSBC Group PLC were not immediately available to comment on the report.

Calderon's office says the investment shows HSBC's confidence in the Mexican economy.

It says the boost will strengthen HSBC's capitalization and branch office network in Mexico and help increase lending to small- and medium-size businesses. - AP

Jan. 26 (Bloomberg) -- Mexican President Felipe Calderon's party may propose a cut in the value-added tax while broadening the tax base to maintain revenue, the party's vice coordinator in the lower house of Congress said.

Lawmakers from the National Action Party will meet today with Finance Minister Ernesto Cordero to discuss the proposal, which may include eliminating tax loopholes for companies, lawmaker Roberto Gil told reporters in Puebla, Mexico.

"We're going to look at the sales tax issue," Gil said at an assembly of the party, which is known as the PAN and is the second-largest in the lower house of Congress. "Raising the tax base and lowering the tax rates can improve the structure of the value-added tax in a significant way."

Mexico's government raised the value-added tax by 1 percentage point to 16 percent this year as it aims to boost public revenue in order to make up for declining oil production and a fall in income taxes amid last year's recession. Output at state-owned Petroleos Mexicanos, Latin America's largest oil producer, fell 7 percent in 2009 from the year-ago period.

Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, the largest faction in the lower house, said last week it was considering a proposal to lower the sales tax to 12 percent while taxing all foods and medicines that aren't essential to the poor. Food and medicine are currently tax exempt.

Calderon proposed last year creating a 2 percent levy that would include food and medicine in order to increase the tax base. Lawmakers opposed that plan.

### **Detailed Report/Venezuela**

After saying that "the hemispheric rightwing" is overexcited, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez criticized on Wednesday the remarks made by Chilean president-elect Sebastián Piñera, who claimed that he did not share the practice of democracy in Venezuela.

"He is a businessman; I think he is among the richest in Chile; and among the richest in the hemisphere. We respect that. But we cannot allow them to pick a fight with us. I expect that Mr. Piñera will not purport to turn Chile in another platform to attack Venezuela," the president said.

Chávez said that Piñera's disagreements with the Venezuelan revolution were expected, considering that he is a wealthy businessman.

"The least we can ask for is respect for the Venezuelan people, like the Chilean people. We do not get involved in the Chileans' issues, so they should mind their own business."

Mérida, January 18th 2010 (Venezuelanalysis.com) - In his annual address to the National Assembly, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez announced a 25% increase in the minimum wage this year, promised that funding to health care, education, and other anti-poverty programs will not be cut, and spoke of the influence of both Christianity and Marxism on his government's policies.

"In the year 2009 we declared ourselves in a position of economic defense, that we would do all we can to defend ourselves as a people, guarantee employment, protect salaries, social security, and social investment, which we define as of maximum priority," said the president.

Chavez alluded to his government's maintenance of social spending even as it reduced the national budget by more than 6% and nearly tripled its domestic debt in early 2009 in response to a sharp drop in the price of oil, Venezuela's chief export, as a result of the world financial crisis.

14 million Venezuelans, who constitute approximately half the population, regularly benefit from the government's subsidized and regulated-price food production and distribution networks and food cafeterias, which manage 27% of all Venezuelan food consumption, Chavez said.

"We have to achieve the expansion of [the state-run food networks] Mercal and PDVAL so that we continue to provide cheap and high quality foods for the people," the president added, emphasizing that the social programs must be "transitory" and channel people out of poverty.

"There is an important, appreciable difference between the poor of the past and the poor who remain now. Now, they have food, medical care, and free medicines," Chavez said, mentioning the expansion of primary health care coverage to nearly 100% of the population. "Some day, they will get out of their situation, through these transitory programs."

In addition, Chavez said the minimum wage would be increased by 10% on March 1<sup>st</sup>, then by 15% in September. This will bring the minimum wage from approximately 950 bolivars per month to nearly 1,200 bolivars per month, and it comes in addition to a 20% minimum wage increase in 2008.

The announcement came a week after the government initiated its a plan to devalue the national currency and increase public investments in non-oil exports and domestic manufacturing to substitute imports and wean off oil dependence. It also came as Venezuela's cumulative inflation in 2009 decreased by nearly six percent compared to the year before, although it remains the highest in Latin America.

National worker unions, including the country's largest national union federation UNETE, released several communiqués expressing their support for the measures last week, but strongly urged wage increases to counter the potential inflation caused by the devaluation.

#### New Electricity Minister

To improve the government's management of the current national electricity shortage, Chavez announced that he will transfer his current finance minister, Ali Rodriguez, to direct the Electricity Ministry, which was created last month to handle the crisis. Chavez said he would merge the Finance Ministry and the Planning Ministry into one, which will be directed by current Planning Minister Jorge Giordani.

Last week, Chavez asked for the resignation of his first minister for electricity, Angel Rodriguez, after irregularities in the management of programmed power outages nation-wide caused public dissent and confusion. In his address on Friday, he reiterated that the government "does not have any complex about recognizing errors. I became aware of a reality, a poorly executed plan... in no more than 24 hours we rectified it."

Rodriguez will be charged with executing a series of electricity-saving measures, including scheduled power outages, mandatory limits on consumption and operating hours in public and private institutions, public education and incentive for consumer conservation, and public investments in energy production.

## Global Crisis

What makes the current state of global affairs historically unique, said Chavez, is that it represents "all crises united into one... it is much more than an economic crisis; it is a moral crisis, a crisis of values, that engulfs the entire world; it is a financial, food, environmental, and climate crisis."

This crisis is also "a demonstration that not only is capitalism not the only alternative for humanity... twenty years have passed since the 'end of history,' and this crisis is a demonstration that capitalism and neo-liberalism constitute the most horrifying perversion!"

Venezuela's construction of "21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism," commonly referred to as the "Bolivarian Revolution" in reference to Latin American independence hero Simon Bolivar, is responding to this crisis with an approach that is influenced by both Christianity and Marxism, said the president.

"This revolution, and I say this as a Christian, is profoundly Christian. Long live Christ the revolutionary redeemer!" Chavez exclaimed. "Christ was a socialist, I believe it. Who could imagine that Christ was capitalist? Christ was more radical than all of us combined."

Chavez mentioned the influence of other heroes from Latin American history, including Cuba's Jose Marti, Venezuela's Francisco de Miranda, and Nicaragua's Augusto Sandino, but he made special mention of German philosopher Karl Marx, saying, "Marxism is the most advanced proposal toward the world that Christ came to announce more than 2,000 years ago."

## Venezuela-U.S. Relations

With regard to Venezuela's strained diplomatic relationship with its top oil customer and political opponent, the United States, Chavez criticized the administration of President Barack Obama for backing the coup regime that overthrew Honduran President Manuel Zelaya last June, and for unleashing "a thrust of seven stab wounds in the heart of Latin America," in reference to the seven Colombian military bases that the U.S. will use to expand its spying and military operations across the South American continent.

"As the months passed in 2009, the enigma of President Obama, an enigma in which the United States people believed, crumbled to pieces," Chavez said. "The events clarified the panorama for those who might have had illusions about the new U.S. government."

## Haiti

At the start of his address, President Chavez asked for a moment of silence for the people of Haiti who are suffering the deadly effects of a series of recent earthquakes, with estimates indicating hundreds of thousands of dead and missing.

Chavez urged the world not only to provide aid to Haiti, but to ask, "Why is Haiti such a poor country, why does its population depend on family remittances from abroad for almost 50% of its income, why don't we analyze the realities that led to the current situation in Haiti?"

Reading from a letter written by former Cuban President Fidel Castro, Chavez said, "Nobody says a word to remember that Haiti was the first country where four hundred thousand African slaves trafficked by the Europeans revolted against 30,000 white owners of coffee and sugar cane plantations, carrying out the first great social revolution in our hemisphere."

"Haiti is a net product of colonialism and imperialism over more than a century; of military interventions and the extraction of its riches," Chavez read.

The French government on Thursday voiced concern about President Hugo Chávez's decision to expropriate six hypermarkets owned by French-Colombian retail chain Éxito in Venezuela.

"France is concerned about the allegations of illegal speculation and about the measures taken (by the government) against" Éxito and Cada retailers, whose majority stockholder is French company Casino Guichard Perrachon SA, said a spokesman of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The spokesperson said that the retailer group employs 5,000 people and has worked in Venezuela for 10 years.

(The retail chain) has always met the "Venezuelan legislative and regulatory regulations," he added.

Therefore, according to the same official, France hopes that the Venezuelan authorities "quickly" dispel any "misunderstandings" regarding the French company, Efe reported.

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Sebastián Piñera, Chile's president-elect, claimed to respect "all countries and governments". He added, however, that he has also the right to express his opinion, responding to criticisms made on Tuesday by Venezuelan President, Hugo Chávez.

Chávez lambasted the remarks made by Chilean president-elect during an event in Caracas. He urged Piñera to mind his own business and do not get involved in Venezuelan affairs. "We do not get involved in Chileans' matters, so they should mind their own business," Chávez said.

On Wednesday night, Piñera replied to Chávez from the northern Chilean city of Coquimbo. The president-elect said: "I respect all countries and governments but I also have the right to express my opinion."

"What I have said is that the way we want to achieve democracy in Chile and the way the model

of economic development is carried out (in our country) is very different from the model implemented by President Chávez in Venezuela," he added.

Qatar Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani met on Thursday with Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez at the Miraflores presidential palace, as part of an official visit aimed at strengthening cooperation between the two countries.

"Today Venezuela is very happy, because a superb friend has come home," said Chávez during the official welcome ceremony.

The Emir of Qatar landed at 11:30 a.m. on Maiquetía airport, where he was welcomed by Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolás Maduro. He then proceeded to the presidential palace, Efe reported.

During the meeting, Chávez recalled the first visit paid by Al-Thani 10 years ago and labeled the Qatari people as "a praiseworthy bearer of the flag of the struggles of the Arabian people."

For his part, Al-Thani voiced to be "very happy" to meet with his "brother Chávez" and highlighted the "decent position" of the Venezuelan president concerning Israel's attacks on the Palestinian people in Gaza.

The Venezuelan Bishops' Conference (CEV) has suggested a program to fight widespread violence and insecurity and urged both the government and communities to join the move.

Monsignor José Luis Azuaje, president of the CEV Commission for Social Pastoral, Justice and Peace, said that the first thing would be to explain that insecurity is everybody's business; that the national and state governments are not the only ones that should take action on this matter.

The CEV encouraged people to make policies intended to curb violence.

"We will make a future proposal. We will be working today and tomorrow to propose viable issues."

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) - Venezuelan lawmakers on Thursday expanded the government's powers to expropriate businesses if it finds they have raised prices inordinately.

The National Assembly gave final approval to a revised consumer protection law that allows the government to begin expropriation proceedings in response to a range of violations — such as price hikes deemed to be improper, hoarding of goods, price speculation or boycotts.

President Hugo Chavez had called for a law empowering his government to take over businesses that improperly raise prices after a currency devaluation earlier this month. The devaluation is widely expected to drive up inflation that is already hovering at 25 percent, the highest in Latin America.

The National Assembly, which is dominated by Chavez allies, approved the measures during a second and final debate a day after Chavez signed a decree to expropriate the Exito retail chain, which is part of the corporation Cadena de Tiendas Venezolanas, in which the majority shareholder is the French company Casino Guichard Perrachon SA.

Other minority shareholders include the Colombian company Almacenes Exito and the Venezuelan company Empresas Polar.

The government has said it will pay compensation to the owners, but officials have not said how much or how soon.

The government also said Thursday that authorities have recently shut down about 1,500 businesses temporarily — for a daylong penalty period — after inspectors found they had raised prices or engaged in "speculation."

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Venezuela is in the midst of an electricity rationing program caused, according to the government, by acute water shortages at the main hydroelectric dam. As the BBC's Will Grant reports from Venezuela, the power cuts are leading to traffic chaos.

Drivers in the Andean city of Merida are having a tougher time than ever negotiating its chaotic streets. Now that the Venezuelan government's electricity rationing program is under way, many of the city's traffic lights aren't working.

"It's horrible," says taxi driver Luis Sanchez. "The electricity can be off for up to seven or eight hours a day and the traffic lights in the centre have basically collapsed."

The darkness has caused accidents across the picturesque city as well as long tailbacks.

"Sometimes it can take as much as 20 or 30 minutes to get past a single traffic light, particularly if there are no traffic cops on duty," says Mr Sanchez. "No-one wants to let anyone else through."

In the Venezuelan Andes, the effect of the blackouts has been absolute says Jose Villet, the editor of the Cambio de Siglo newspaper in Merida.

"The government doesn't want the cuts to reach Caracas, so all of the pressure has been placed on three states in the Andes."

For a principally agriculture and tourism-based economy, Mr Villet says the daily energy-saving measures have been catastrophic.

"We've seen major losses in productivity in this state especially in food and coffee production. There are fewer tourists here too.

"Why would you go to a place where there's no electricity if you can take your holidays somewhere else? All in all, the regional economy has been badly damaged."

'Deep crisis'

Added to the economic effects, the blackouts are also affecting the quality of life in the region.

Merida is an important centre of university education but many institutions are having to cancel classes.

Shopping centres and restaurants are often without power, and criminality on Merida's dark streets is on the rise.

In an effort to reduce the running costs of public buildings, the working day for state employees has now been cut in half.

And there has been a 200% increase in the sale of electrical generators, pumping out carbon dioxide into Merida's clean mountain air.

Dr Daniel Varnagy is an expert in electrical energy at the Simon Bolivar University.

"We're in a moment of deep crisis and it will be very difficult to reverse," he says.

"To construct another dam which is needed to generate more hydroelectrical power would take a minimum of three to five years.

"The alternatives, such as wind or solar power, just don't apply here with the scale of the problem."

The government of President Hugo Chavez says the current energy crisis is down to dangerously low levels of water in the country's main hydroelectric dam, Guri, in the south.

'Temporary interruption'

The Guri dam provides 70% of domestic electricity consumption. The water is around 10m below its normal level.

Jesus Farias is a former member of the Chavez government and one of the president's most vocal supporters.

"The problems at Guri are fundamental to this situation - it's a crisis of climatic conditions which is also being felt in other nations," says Mr Farias.

The government is doing what it can to alleviate the situation, he says, including flying cloud-bursting planes over the region to provoke rains.

"There are important investments being made to try to deal with this, but it's going to take time. Of course there have been mistakes, and the government has duly recognized them.

"But this is a temporary interruption in supply and within three or four months it will be solved," says Mr Farias.

But others - including Dr Varnagy - accuse the current administration of failing to read the warning signs.

"This is a problem which dates back over the past 20 years of government - 11 of which have been under President Chavez," he says.

"When he first came to office, I was part of a group of experts from the public utility companies which put together two proposals for his new government: maintenance of existing infrastructure and investment in new electricity generation and transmission.

"It would appear that those proposals were ignored."

Water rationing

At midnight in Venezuela, the national anthem is played on state television.

For many, it is now the moment when the televisions fall silent and the lights go off, the start of their four-hour energy rationing program.

They are the lucky ones, for whom the cuts occur during the night rather than working hours.

Last week, President Chavez went on state television at midnight to announce that Caracas would be spared from the blackouts, minutes before they were due to start.

"There have been technical errors and poorly taken decisions," the president admitted, adding that he had sacked the country's electrical energy minister, Angel Rodriguez.

In September, Venezuelans go to the polls in legislative elections. The issue of electricity is expected to play a significant role in the vote, especially as the blackouts come on top of other problems in basic infrastructure, such as water rationing, and recent currency devaluation.

"Common sense tells you that there may well be a punishment vote against Chavez and the United Socialist Party," says Dr Varnagy.

"But you must remember that for many President Chavez is like a messiah and they will excuse this situation and continue to vote for him."

Meanwhile, the country continues to function as best as it can in the dark.

"You have to drive more carefully, especially at the crossroads," says Luis Sanchez from his taxi in Merida.

"I've seen accidents on almost every corner."

The prime minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, has criticised Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez for accusing the Netherlands of helping the United States prepare an attack on his country.

In an interview with Radio Netherlands Worldwide, Mr Balkenende dismissed the allegations as "fabrications" and "nonsense". Mr Chávez has repeatedly accused The Hague of allowing US warplanes to use a Dutch military base on Curaçao to prepare strikes against Venezuela. The prime minister urged Mr Chávez to retract his claims. Mr Balkenende stressed that the US planes are only being used to combat drug traffickers.

The prime minister also criticised the relief effort in Haiti in the wake of last week's earthquake. He also voiced concern about the deployment of nearly 20,000 US troops there. The prime minister recognized they were needed now, but insisted that the United Nations must eventually take over responsibility.

Caracas, Venezuela -- A Venezuelan TV channel that takes a critical line against Hugo Chavez could be forced off cable if it doesn't carry mandatory government programming including some of the president's speeches, a lawyer for the channel said Friday.

The government forced Radio Caracas Television, or RCTV, off the open airwaves in 2007 by refusing to renew its broadcast license, and the channel subsequently moved to cable under the name Radio Caracas Television International.

Venezuela's telecommunications agency said Thursday that two dozen local cable channels including RCTV must carry government programming when deemed mandatory, just like broadcast channels already do. Chavez often uses the measure - referred to as a "national network" - to have his speeches shown in full on all TV channels and radio stations.

RCTV lawyer Oswaldo Quintana said cable providers were told by the telecommunications agency the if RCTV doesn't carry the next mandatory programming segment, "they would have to take us off the air."

"They invented something additional that isn't in the law," Quintana said, referring to a new measure allowing only limited commercials between programs on local cable channels. He said that requirement is aimed at "destroying you as a channel."

Public Works Minister Diosdado Cabello, who also heads the telecommunications agency, on Thursday announced a list of cable channels that have more than 30 percent of locally produced programming and are to be bound by the rules approved by the agency last month.

Cabello said if a channel don't comply with the law, cable providers should "remove it from their lineup immediately."

RCTV executive Marcel Granier said at a news conference that "we will continue to be an international channel" and that the company on Friday appealed to the Supreme Court for legal protection from the government's measures. Granier didn't say whether the channel plans to carry the next mandatory Chavez speech.

Government figures show that as of 2008 about 37 percent of Venezuelan homes received cable television. But some private companies say that according to their research, about six out of every 10 households have subscription television service - popular in part because some Venezuelans prefer not to listen to the president's lengthy and frequent speeches.

Chavez refused to renew RCTV's broadcast license in 2007 accusing it of plotting against the government and lending support to a failed 2002 coup.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- Thousands of university students protested against President Hugo Chavez again Tuesday, accusing the socialist leader of forcing an opposition-allied TV channel off cable and satellite as a means of silencing his critics.

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The march by some 3,000 people was peaceful, unlike protests in several cities Monday that escalated into clashes among anti-Chavez factions, the president's supporters and police, leaving two youths dead in a western state.

Demonstrators marched on Tuesday from Caracas' central plaza to the headquarters of the leading government-run television channel, where they condemned the removal of Radio Caracas Television Internacional, or RCTV, and accused state media of biased reporting.

"Tell the truth," student leader Roderick Navarro told the channel's representatives. "We don't want this media outlet to continue dividing the people."

Government officials argue that RCTV violated recently approved regulations that require two dozen local cable and satellite channels to televise mandatory programming, including Chavez's speeches, whenever the government deems it necessary.

The channel, which has been fiercely critical of Chavez for years, did not transmit the president's speech to his supporters over the weekend. RCTV was forced to move to cable in 2007 after Chavez refused to renew its license for regular airwaves, accusing the station of plotting against him and supporting a failed 2002 coup.

Five other channels were also dropped from cable, none of which is as widely watched as RCTV.

In a televised address, Chavez said one of them, TV Chile, contacted the telecommunications agency and will probably be permitted to return to cable and satellite.

Chavez lashed out at France, criticizing its government for urging Venezuela to reconsider RCTV's removal from cable and satellite TV. The foreign ministry condemned what it called "unacceptable and reprehensible" meddling in Venezuela's affairs and announced that a letter of protest would be presented to the French ambassador in Caracas.

For years, Chavez has frequently forced television channels to air his marathon speeches. But the rules had applied only to broadcast TV until last month, when the state-run telecommunications agency expanded them to include local pay-TV stations.

The new regulations have been roundly criticized by Chavez opponents, the Roman Catholic Church and media organizations.

Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director of Human Rights Watch, accused the president of cracking down on independent media that don't share his socialist views.

"Chavez has sought to intimidate and punish broadcasters who criticize his government," Vivanco said in a statement. "Now he's also going after those who refuse to promote his own political agenda."

On Monday, two youths were killed during skirmishes over an anti-Chavez protest in the western state of Merida. One of the victims was shot and the other was killed by an explosive, Merida Gov. Marcos Diaz said.

Police and students also clashed in Caracas, where at least six demonstrators and a journalist suffered minor injuries.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- Tens of thousands of Venezuelans opposed to President Hugo Chavez took to the streets Saturday, blaming him for rolling blackouts, water rationing, widespread crime and other problems they say are making daily life increasingly difficult.

Chavez backers flooded the capital's avenues with an equally impressive demonstration as the socialist leader confronts mounting criticism and an emboldened opposition ahead of upcoming congressional elections.

Waving Venezuelan flags, protesters accused Chavez of dragging the politically divided South American country into a severe crisis as he accelerates his drive to transform it into a socialist state.

"Chavez is leading the country to ruin," said 79-year-old Olga Damjanovich at the opposition protest. "He's controlled all the country's institutions for more than a decade, so how could it be possible that he's not responsible for the problems weighing down on us?"

Many wore T-shirts that read: "3 Strikes: Blackouts, Water Rationing and Crime. Chavez, You've Struck Out!"

Chavez backers rebutted the criticism, accusing opponents of exaggeration.

"Things aren't all as we would like them to be, but we know that El Comandante (Chavez) is doing what he can to help us, the poor," said Yorbert Rodriguez, a 39-year-old bricklayer.

Political rivals organized Saturday's demonstrations to coincide with the 52nd anniversary of an uprising that toppled Venezuela's last dictator, Gen. Marcos Perez Jimenez. Chavez allies argued that democracy is growing stronger, while government foes said their liberties are slipping away.

Opposition parties hope to make a strong showing in September's elections by holding Chavez responsible for rampant crime, a recent currency devaluation widely expected to boost inflation - which ended 2009 at 25 percent - and electricity rationing.

Chavez, a tireless campaigner who remains popular, has overcome bigger obstacles during his 11-year presidency. The former paratroop commander emerged unscathed from a botched 2002 coup and devastating two-month strike the following year.

Margarita Lopez Maya, a political science professor at the Central University of Venezuela, believes increasing numbers of Venezuelans are "putting the president's capacity to resolve problems in doubt," but they haven't embraced the opposition as a result.

"There may be doubts - even disapproval, but there's no alternative these people believe in," she said.

Thousands of protesters have turned out in Venezuela, both in support of Hugo Chavez, the president, and against him, signaling a heated political climate ahead of the 2010 elections.

Organized by the opposition to coincide with the anniversary of the downfall of General Marcos Perez Jimenez, a former dictator who was overthrown in the late 1950s, protesters marched to the centre of Caracas, the Venezuelan capital.

"2010 is the year of change for all of Venezuela ... when hatred will be overcome by unity," Julio Borges, an opposition leader told crowds of supporters on Saturday.

Andres Velasquez, another opposition leader, told the crowd the opposition movement was "building unity to bring about the end of the dictatorial regime."

Politicians critical of Chavez criticised the country's high crime rates and electricity rationing ordered by the government in response to an energy crisis stemming from a drought that drained the country's dams, as well as currency devaluation.

The marches were the first since Chavez sharply devalued the bolivar currency and deployed soldiers to stop retailers hiking prices.

## Government support

Thousands of government supporters also poured into western Caracas to hear a speech delivered by Chavez in which he told followers he embodied the heart and soul of the Venezuelan people.

"I demand absolute loyalty to my leadership... anything else is betrayal," Chavez said.

"I am not an individual, I am the people. It's my duty to demand respect for the people.

"Let's expand our socialist project," he said.

One supporter said he "came from far away to be here, to defend the revolution and the movement led by commander Hugo Chavez".

"Things aren't all as we would like them to be, but we know that El Comandante is doing what he can to help us, the poor," Yorbert Rodriguez, a 39-year-old bricklayer, said.

Over 5,000 police and national guard troops were deployed along march routes to prevent clashes between rivals. There were no reports of arrests or violence, which has marred numerous political rallies in the past.

Venezuela will hold elections in September in which Chavez hopes to secure at least two thirds of seats to maintain his current legislative majority.

According to opinion polls, the popularity of the leftist leader, which approached 60 per cent approval at the beginning of 2009, has reduced to less than 50 per cent.

Chavez, a vocal opposer of US influence in the region, has held onto power since 1999 and remains popular, especially among the country's poor majority.

Caracas: Foreign ministers of nine member nations of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) met here on Sunday to discuss how to help rebuild Haiti, which was battered by a 7.3-magnitude quake on January 12, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez announced.

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In his nationwide televised Sunday TV/Radio Program "Hello, President," Chavez said the meeting will work out a mid- and long-term strategic plan to rebuild Haiti, including the rebuilding of hospitals, waterworks as well as projects to boost farm, food and fishing production.

According to the Haitian Interior Ministry, the death toll had surpassed 110,000 in the devastating quake, which had also injured some 200,000 people and left more than 600,000. Haitian officials estimated that the final death toll could reach 200,000.

For the time being, ALBA's work in Haiti is centered on medical assistance, but its focus will shift to other sectors like education later, Chavez said, stressing that "we have to build schools for the new generations, so that they will not lose their roots."

Chavez said Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa will travel to Haiti next week on behalf of ALBA to discuss how to carry out the plans with Haitian authorities.

Also during the "Hello, President" program, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro said he believed "the plan will help rebuild an independent and sovereign Haiti."

The ALBA is made up of Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Honduras, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Venezuela's ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), Roy Chaderton, said that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has slandered the government of President Hugo Chávez in order to please the "far-right sectors of the hemisphere" by criticizing the shutdown of a cable TV station in Venezuela.

Chaderton criticized the fact that the IACHR rushes to act "when it comes to slandering" the Venezuelan government. Reference was made to the statement the autonomous body of the OAS issued a day after the suspension of several cable TV stations in Venezuela, among them RCTV Internacional, whose open-to-air broadcast license was terminated in 2007, AFP reported.

The IACHR rejected the "sudden" measure against several TV stations, which in its view "worsens the deterioration of the right to freedom of expression" in Venezuela.

The statement issued by the IACHR is intended "to please once again the hopeless coup plotters, the representatives of the Venezuelan media dictatorship and members of the far right of the hemisphere," Chaderton said.

Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive thanked on Monday the international community for its assistance to the Caribbean country and singled out Cuba and Venezuela, two countries that are not participating in a ministerial conference held in Canada.

At the opening session of the so-called ministerial preparatory conference on Haiti, which is being held on Monday in Montreal to coordinate aid for reconstruction in Haiti, Bellerive highlighted the solidarity and cooperation of several countries, international organizations and regional groups after the earthquake that devastated the Caribbean island on January 12, Efe reported.

Bellerive made a special mention of Dominican Republic, Cuba and Venezuela, which, "came immediately to help our people affected by the quake," Bellerive stressed.

The government of the Dominican Republic participates in the ministerial conference but Cuba and Venezuela, which have strongly criticized the US government in the past two week for its large military presence in Haiti, were not invited to the meeting.

Caracas (Reuters) - One student was killed and nine police officers injured on Monday in the Venezuelan city of Merida in violence linked to protests over the suspension of a TV station opposed to President Hugo Chavez.

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Venezuelan cable providers, responding to government orders, stopped showing RCTV Internacional on Sunday. The station is critical of Chavez, who pushed its parent RCTV off free-access television in 2007.

Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami said late on Monday that 15-year-old Josino Jose Carrillo, a pro-Chavez high school student, was killed while participating in a demonstration in the Andean city of Merida.

"Unfortunately several minutes ago a group of students that were protesting peacefully were attacked in a cowardly fashion, and this lamentable incident resulted in the assassination of a 15-year-old youth," said El Aissami in televised comments.

He said nine police officers from the state of Merida were wounded in the student demonstrations, two of them with firearms.

Police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators in Caracas and other cities protesting the new suspension of RCTV, along with some other small stations, a move that was criticized by media freedom groups and the U.S. government.

"Any time the government shuts down an independent network, that is an area of concern," U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.

Venezuela said Crowley "lied" when he said the stations had been closed, and that the suspension could be reversed if they comply with a new law requiring them to broadcast some of Chavez's speeches, among other things.

"This is not an attack on the freedom of expression, it is an administrative sanction under the law," Bernardo Alvarez, Venezuela's ambassador to Washington, told Reuters. He said the suspension was not politically motivated.

Students from universities and schools in the capital marched with their hands painted white and tried to reach the offices of the government media regulator.

They were repelled by a small group of Chavez supporters and then chased off by police in riot gear who fired tear gas after a rock was thrown.

#### President's Mounting Problems

The students chanted the slogan "1,2,3, Chavez you struck out," in reference to the president's mounting problems in the baseball-mad nation with issues ranging from water and electricity shortages to an unpopular currency devaluation.

"We are here because of the violation of freedom of expression," said 17-year-old medical student Yanuan Pedraza. "This is the second time they have closed RCTV."

Chavez in 2007 denied RCTV a renewal of its broadcast license, accusing the station of participating in a 2002 coup.

During the coup, the network showed nonstop footage of anti-Chavez protests leading up to his brief ouster but turned cameras off when loyalists restored him.

The 2007 move against RCTV triggered large student-led protests that snowballed throughout the year and are widely seen as a factor in Chavez's first-ever ballot box defeat in a referendum on allowing him to run again for office. He later won another referendum on the same issue.

The station soon reappeared on cable and continued its anti-government line and menu of popular soap operas.

"This move, condemned by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, reveals yet again the government's allergic reaction to dissident voices within the country's leading broadcast media," Reporter Without Borders said on Monday.

The Organization of American States' Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza said he "lamented the situation" regarding the removal from the air of the stations and called on the government to allow the OAS to visit the country.

Chavez has boosted pro-government broadcasting in recent years by creating several state-funded television networks including the Telesur channel, meant to be a Latin American left-wing counterpart to CNN.

Environment minister also quits for personal reasons (Adds official government statement)

Caracas, Jan 25 (Reuters) - Venezuela's Vice President Ramon Carrizalez, who was also defense minister, resigned on Monday citing personal reasons, adding to the political problems facing leftist President Hugo Chavez.

Chavez is facing growing discontent over shortages of electricity and water and a sharp currency devaluation this month as he heads into legislative elections in September that could reduce his tight grip of the OPEC nation's Congress.

Chavez named the even-tempered and soft-spoken Carrizalez to the number two job in 2008, and in 2009 tapped him to simultaneously serve as defense minister.

"The President of the Republic ... accepted the resignation that was presented for strictly personal reasons by Vice President Ramon Carrizalez," Communications Minister Blanca Eekhout said in a statement on state television.

State-backed news network Telesur reported that Carrizalez' wife, Environment Minister Yuviri Ortega, also resigned. Carrizalez denied the resignations had to do with differences with the government, Telesur reported.

The close Chavez confidant, who is a former army officer like the president, was seen as one of Chavez's more capable administrators. This month, Chavez fired a recently named electricity minister for botching a Caracas electricity rationing scheme.

He has also changed his finance minister, Ali Rodriguez, who he named electricity minister this month. Left-wing academic Jorge Giordani took over at finance.

Carrizalez previously served as infrastructure minister and housing minister, where he took on some of the nation's thorniest problems including its acute housing shortage and the 2006 collapse of a crucial bridge linking Caracas to the airport and its main port.

Chavez named Carrizalez vice president just after his first-ever ballot box defeat in a constitutional overhaul referendum in 2007, replacing the combative Jorge Rodriguez.

Caracas. President Hugo Chavez on Monday said that Petrocaribe, Venezuela's cut-rate regional energy alliance, will forgive quake-stricken Haiti's debt, AFP reported. Haiti's debt with Venezuela is USD 295 million, about one-third of its global foreign debt of USD 1 billion, according to International Monetary Fund figures. "Haiti has no debt with Venezuela -- on the contrary, it is Venezuela that has a historic debt with Haiti," Chavez said as he made the announcement. Chavez was referring to the support that Haiti -- which obtained its independence from France in 1804 -- gave Venezuelan independence leader Simon Bolivar in 1815 and 1816 in his quest to free his country from Spanish colonial rule.

Chavez made the announcement at the closing ceremony of a meeting of foreign ministers from leftist countries with the ALBA trade alliance, a Cuba and Venezuela-supported regional common market founded in 2004.

Petrocaribe provides preferential oil pricing for its Caribbean members, with Venezuela picking up 40% of the cost if oil is selling over USD 50 a barrel. When oil prices are above USD 50, member states will have up to 25 years to pay the bulk of the debt at a one percent interest rate, with two years grace.

Haiti, struggling to recover from the January 12 devastating 7.0 earthquake, received in the past days 225,000 barrels of Petrocaribe oil sent through the neighboring Dominican Republic. Both Haiti and the Dominican Republic are Petrocaribe members.

Other Petrocaribe members include Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, St Kitts-Nevis, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as founding member Venezuela.

Separately, ALBA foreign ministers approved an aid package for Haiti that includes sanitary, energy, financial and educational assistance.

The ministers also expressed their concern over the "excessive foreign military presence" in the Caribbean nation, with no clear parameters over its "authority, purpose, role and length of stay."

Their presence "threatens to further complicate conditions on the ground and... international cooperation" for Haitian reconstruction, the ministers said. They called on United Nations to take a central role in coordinating emergency efforts, and emphasized that the Haitians must take the lead in their country's reconstruction.

Jan. 27 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez yesterday named Agriculture Minister Elias Jaua as his new vice president, replacing Ramon Carrizalez who resigned on Jan. 25 citing personal reasons.

Chavez also appointed Carlos Mata Figueroa as Defense Minister, a post Carrizalez had also held. Alejandro Hatcher, president of Hidrocapital, the agency in charge of supplying drinking

water to the capital of Caracas, will head the Environment Ministry, Chavez said on state television.

Jaua held various government positions since 2000 and became agriculture minister six years later. He led Chavez's seizure of large plots of land, including that of Dublin-based cardboard maker Smurfit Kappa Group Plc and last year's takeover of Cargill Inc.'s rice plant, part of an effort to redistribute wealth and boost agricultural production.

"I'm committed to helping you lead, Mr. President," Jaua said in comments on state television. Chavez said that he chose Jaua because he's a "young revolutionary" who is "transparent and honest."

The government is facing a public backlash ahead of congressional elections in September following a currency devaluation, water and electricity rationing and the blocking of an opposition network from cable television. Chavez oversees more than 20 ministries and frequently replaces officials, many of whom participated with him in military uprisings in 1992.

#### Civil Militia

Mata Figueroa already heads the Strategic Operational Command inside the Armed Forces, a post he will retain. Chavez, a former paratrooper, has radicalized the military by institutionalizing the phrase "fatherland, socialism or death," and creating a civil militia designed to battle foreign invasions with guerrilla-style warfare.

Carrizalez unexpectedly resigned two days ago together with his wife, Yubiri Ortega, who was environment minister. Eugenio Vazquez Orellana quit the same day as the head of state-owned Banco de Venezuela as well as Bank Minister, El Nacional reported yesterday.

Hitcher implemented a plan to ration drinking water in Caracas last year after the country's worst drought in half a century caused reservoir levels to plunge.

Chavez recently fired his electricity minister over a failed plan to ration power in the capital after areas of Caracas were left without functioning traffic lights. He also merged the finance and planning ministries on Jan. 15.

On Jan. 8, he devalued the bolivar for the first time since 2005, saying he aimed to shore up the economy by boosting exports and cutting imports. He weakened the official exchange rate by 17 percent to 2.6 per dollar for "essential" imports and by 50 percent to 4.3 for "nonessential" items.

"I know you're going to continue improving the government's efficiency," Chavez said yesterday. "It's a tough job, but a passionate one."

Panama's Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture (CCIAP) rejected on Wednesday the Venezuelan government measures against several banks and the French-Colombian retail chain Éxito.

"At this crucial time for Venezuela, we cannot leave them alone. Therefore, we categorically condemn and repudiate the arbitrary closure of banks and retailers, since they violate all the principles we believe in and advocate," said Adolfo Linares, the president of CCIAP, in a statement.

Linares added that "the CCIAP is alarmed by the threats on future expropriations hinted by

Venezuelan officials, since they are violating once again the freedoms of the Venezuelan people."

The Panamanian businessperson also urged the Venezuelan government to reconsider "its actions, which are worthy of an authoritarian dictatorship" and urged the Panamanian authorities to speak up, Efe reported.

The Venezuelan government's payroll increased by 10.4 percent in 2009 and stood at 2,411,603 workers, according to data provided by the National Statistics Institute (INE).

At the end of December 2009, the percentage of people working in the public sector amounted to 19.5 percent of the working population in Venezuela, which is a 1.3 percentage point increase compared to a year earlier.

Last year, the government nationalized cement companies, rice-processing plants, ports, small banks, while the transfer of the steelmaker Siderúrgica del Orinoco (Sidor) to the State concluded.

Meanwhile, the private sector employed 80.5 percent of the working population in December 2009, which is equivalent to 9,978,002 workers, according to the data provided by INE.

Bond investments increased by 41.8 percent in 12 months

Venezuela is living in an environment where the economy has fallen into recession, the credit demand has lost ground and financial institutions increase the purchase of bonds issued by the government.

According to data from the Venezuelan Superintendence of Banks and Other Financial Institutions (Sudeban), total loans in 2009 grew 20.6 percent, a proportion that, in real terms, i.e., after deducting the effect of inflation, accounts for a 4.4 percent increase.

At the same time, the bond portfolio rose 41.8 percent, which in real terms represents a 16.8 percent increase.

At the end of 2008, the Venezuelan banking system allocated to loans VEB 60.8 out of VEB 100 received as deposits while in December 2009 the ratio declined to 58.8.

The possibility that the economy can be pulled out of recession in the first quarter of the year and there can be an increase of credit demand is complicated.

The statistics published by the Central Bank of Venezuela shows that in the fourth quarter the economy has declined 4.6 percent, increasing the downturn in the previous two quarters, while manufacturing and trade, two key sectors that will be deeply affected by the exchange rate adjustment and the electricity crisis have collapsed.

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WMR's intelligence sources have reported that the Obama administration has authorized an economic war against Venezuela in order to destabilize the government of President Hugo Chavez.

After a successful coup against Chavez ally, President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, and the very thin 51-49 percent electoral win by Chile's billionaire right-winger Sebastian Pinera on January 17, a buoyed Obama White House has given a green light for political operatives in Venezuela, many of whom operate under the cover of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to set the stage for massive street demonstrations to protest Chavez's devaluation of the bolivar, Venezuela's currency.

Chavez devalued the bolivar by 50 percent to make Venezuelan oil exports less expensive, thus boosting revenue for his country. However, the devaluation has also seen price rises and inflation in Venezuela and the CIA and its subservient NGOs have wasted little time in putting out stories about consumers rushing to the stores ahead of an increase in consumer products, with imported flat-screen televisions being the favorite consumer item being hyped by the corporate media as seeing a huge price increase and long lines at shopping malls favored by the Venezuelan elites.

The state has exempted certain consumer goods such as food, medicines, school supplies, and industrial machinery from being affected by the bolivar's devaluation through a different exchange rate and price controls, but it is the price increases on televisions, tobacco, alcohol, cell phones, and computers that has the anti-Chavez forces in Venezuela and abroad hyping the ill-effects on the Venezuelan consumer.

To battle against businessmen who are trying to capitalize on the devaluation of the bolivar, Chavez has threatened to close and possibly seize any business that gouges the consumer by inordinately raising prices. The first target of a temporary closure was a Caracas store owned by the French firm Exito.

International investment analysts praised Chavez's decision to devalue the bolivar and said the decision was overdue considering the fall of oil prices worldwide. However, the CIA and NGOs, many aligned with George Soros's Open Society Institute and the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy are planning large street demonstrations against Chavez's handling of the economy.

National Assembly elections are scheduled for September but the Obama administration has decided that if Chavez can be removed now, his allies in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and some Caribbean island states will quickly abandon Chavez's alternative to American-led Western Hemisphere financial contrivances and free trade pacts, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).

The Obama planners then see Cuba, once again, being isolated in the hemisphere and ripe for increased U.S. political pressure. Cuba was placed on the list of 14 countries requiring additional airline passenger screening as part of the policy to pressure and isolate Cuba. There is a possibility that with the outbreak of U.S.-inspired violence in the streets of Venezuela, that nation could join Cuba on the list as the 15th country.

The Obama administration's assault is two-fold: economic and political. Pressure is being applied against the gasoline chain Citgo, which is owned by the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, and Venezuelan investment favorability ratings. Politically, the U.S. is overtly and covertly funneling money to anti-Chavez groups through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and groups affiliated with George Soros.

There is also a small military component to Obama's strategy of undermining Chavez. U.S., P-3 Orion over flights of Venezuelan airspace from bases in Aruba and Curacao are designed to intimidate Chavez and activate Venezuelan radar and command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) systems to gather electronic and signals intelligence data that would be used by the United States to jam Venezuelan military networks in the event of a U.S.-inspired uprising against Chavez by U.S. loyalists embedded in the Venezuelan military, police, PDVSA, and media. The U.S. is also stoking cross-border incursions into Venezuela by Colombian paramilitaries to gauge Venezuela's border defenses. Last November, Colombian right-wing paramilitary units killed two Venezuelan National Guardsmen inside Venezuela in Tachira state. Weapons caches maintained by Colombians inside Venezuela have been seized by Venezuelan authorities. Venezuela has also arrested a number of Colombian DAS intelligence agents inside Venezuela.

Obama signed a military agreement with Colombia that allows the United States to establish seven air and naval bases in Colombia. An additional agreement by Obama with Panama will see the U.S. military return to that nation to set up two military bases.

It is estimated that some 25 percent of Venezuelans are likely Fifth Columnists who would take part in a revolt against Chavez. Many of them based in the Venezuelan oil-producing state of Zulia and the capital of Maracaibo, where successive U.S. ambassadors in Caracas have stoked secessionist embers and where the CIA and U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency have concentrated much of their efforts. In November, Venezuelan police arrested in Maracaibo, Magaly Janeth Moreno Vega, also known as "The Pearl," the leader of the right-wing United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which has been directly linked to Colombia's pro-U.S. President Alvaro Uribe and members of his government, including former Colombian Attorney General Luis Camilo Osorio Isaza, appointed by Uribe as Colombia's ambassador to Mexico.

Market economy in Venezuela was harmed by President Hugo Chávez's decision to nationalize the assets of the French-Colombian retailer chain Éxito, said on Friday the Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos.

"It is a decision that obviously strikes free economy, which step by step is dramatically disappearing in Venezuela," said Santos from La Paz, where he travelled to represent Colombia at the inauguration of re-elected Bolivian President Evo Morales.

The nationalization "is producing perverse effects such as the increase of the inflation rate, shortage of supplies," the Colombian Vice President told the special envoy of the Bogotá radio RCN to Morales' inauguration.

Santos said that he contacted the executives of Éxito in Colombia to express the solidarity of the Colombian Executive branch of government with the retailer chain. He told them that they could be reassured that the Colombian government would do everything possible to back them.

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