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Report Summary/Brazil

The president of Brazil said to the US president Obama to quickly negotiate the trade dispute matters over cotton subsidies. Lula said that if US would be there in Doha conference of 2008 then we were not fighting today. He also said that every country is demanding prestige and Brazil as well and every country should be treated equally. Trade minister of Brazil said that he will try to talk to his US counterpart to settle this issue in the next week.

Some former leftist militant demanded ministry of justice to create the truth commission for the trials of dictators and their companions who remained engaged torturing Marxist insurgents or their opponents. Many leftist Brazilians were captured and tortured by the military government in 1964-85 including some high officials and some of them are demanding government to establish the truth commission.

President Lula started his visit to Middle Eastern countries and arrived Israel first. The purpose of his visit is to create peaceful environment in Middle East and increase economic relations with the Middle Eastern countries. Lula said "The virus of peace has been with me

since I was in my mother's womb. I can't remember ever having a dispute with anyone". So he met his Israeli counterpart and prime minister there and then he went to meet Palestinian authorities on West Bank. In his meeting with Israeli prime minister he said that Israel should formulate the policies to establish peaceful relations with its neighbor countries. He also said that if 100 million Arabs and thousands of Jews can live together in a peaceful way in Brazil then how it is not possible in Middle East. The prime minister of Israel also said that Israel is promoting peaceful policies as the current government limited the building of houses in West Bank.

The foreign minister said he did not meet him due to many reasons as his increasing relations and support to Iran on several contradictory issues and also he did not lay a wreath on the grave of the founder of Modern day Zionism but on the grave of an arch-terrorist Yasser Arafat. The foreign minister is considered very pugnacious as he criticized Turkey last year when a Turkish news channel telecasted a TV series in which Israeli soldiers were shown murdering Palestinians. Then he criticized Swedish government to publish an article against Israelis who were used to use body parts of dead Palestinians.

Lula's visit to Middle East is seeing with the hatred eye by some big powers and is considered that he is showing his presence and influence in the globe. The critiques by the Miami Herald are these that Brazil wants reconciliation and a peaceful solution of the Middle Eastern conflicts but he has not any solution as alternate. The Miami Herald in an editorial last week called Lula's Iran policy "dangerously obtuse and unworthy of a country that aspires to be considered an equal among the world's leaders". Lula's support for Iran is being criticized severely by the western powers.

According to the recent presidential poll in Brazil Ms. Dilma Rousseff is considered as the favorite candidate for the Brazilian presidential elections. Ms. Rousseff belongs to a middle class and she has been the chief of President Lula's security staff. She is a handpicked candidate of President Lula. It is said that she doesn't has charisma but she is just favorite of President Lula. She also had been tortured and in jail during military dictatorship in Brazil.

Report Summary/Mexico

Mexican president has nominated a new tourism minister in the last week and it is considered that the new minister will boost this ministry once again which was declined last year due to A/H1N1 influenza and drug violence in the country. Mexico's tourism ministry told that it declined 15% last year in 2009 due to violence and swine flu infection around the country. Tourism is the third largest source of revenue for Mexico after two other sources as oil and remittance of the Mexicans which are living abroad.

Since president Calderon has deployed arm forces in some cities of Mexico to counter the drug cartels, many cases of human rights' violations have come before. Military is found in killing, raping women and torturing people as the government has received 3,388 complaints against the military forces and among them only three soldiers are sentenced. Victims and their families have also not their access or hearing in military courts where they could register their cases. It is said that Mexico's military system is not very good and independent to review its cases so very few soldiers are sentenced.

An employee of US consulate in Mexico has killed with her husband when she was coming from children's birthday party. Death toll of US citizens is rising every year in Mexico but it is also said that even it is still less than the murders are happening in US. The president of Mexico arrived in the deadliest city of Mexico to judge the incident and condemned the incident. He said that it is in the result of the commitment of Mexican government against the drug cartels. When the president arrived there the people gathered in the city and protested against the president and his war against the drug cartels. They were holding different placards to condemn the war. Now FBI is assigned to pursue this case and it has started working on US-Mexican border to protect it from drug trafficking. Homeland security has deployed 130 of 700 agents on southern border of US where they will work with Mexican border police.

It is said that Mexican elected officials are involved in drug trafficking as they are getting money of their involvement with the drug cartels. If some officials are not supporting drug cartels, they are killed and sometimes it also happens that the drug cartels killed the officials when he is found involved in helping two drug cartels. The president of the National Action Party Michoacan said that either the government has not the capability to crackdown these drug cartels or have capability to crackdown but not inclination to do it due to fear.

Mexican government was accused of protecting Sinola drug cartel and crackdown other cartels like La Familia and Gulf cartel etc but the president Calderon has clarified it in an interview that neither his government has supporting any drug cartel not protecting any. He said the government has arrested almost 72,000 drug related persons since it started crackdown against them which includes the Sinola members as well. He named some of the members of Sinola cartel which are captured by the government. The critiques came from the Mexican academia and some other groups that the Caldron government was protecting Sinola cartel.

Report Summary/Venezuela

The deputy prime minister of Spain said that he has the support of Venezuela against the Spanish rebel group ETA. Before it Venezuela was blamed of supporting the rebel groups ETA and FARC in Colombia. Colombian government accused Venezuela of supporting FARC in Colombia and after this the relationship between both of the countries were disturbed severely in last year. Now the president of Uruguay said that he will try his best to make reconciliation between both countries which is in the betterment of the region.

Venezuelan government has blocked some websites in Venezuela which were spreading rumors in the country against the government. The government started taken very strict actions against such persons who are trying to disturb government. Facebook and Twitter have been very popular in Venezuela and these social networks are considered as the platform to criticize the government. The Venezuelan government is thinking to ban these networks as these have been very troublesome for the government.

The president of Belarus paid a state visit to Venezuela where he signed some trade and energy agreements with the government of Venezuela. Chavez said during a meeting with his Belarusian counterpart that Venezuela will begin selling 80,000 barrels of oil a day to Belarus from May. The president of Belarus urged to sign some military agreements with the government of Venezuela and said that both countries should increase military relations so that we could counter our enemy.

Venezuela is covered in several issues from last year and the oil production has also been decreased. Now the government of Venezuela is thinking seriously to increase the oil production till 31 percent due to energy crisis. But the oil and energy minister said that the country cannot get crisis due to a large production of oil in the country. And since last year the oil minister could not participate in the OPEC meeting due to several domestic issues and he is also not going to attend in this year. But on the other hand another statement is also made that the minister of oil will participate in the coming OPEC meeting to propose the member countries to keep the production steady.

Detailed Report/Brazil

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will hold his first visit to Israel this week, and is slated to meet with President Shimon Peres and other officials.

Da Silva, who will be arriving along with three ministers from the Brazilian cabinet as well as 70 businessmen and 40 media personnel, will be received in a formal reception at the President's quarters. On Tuesday Da Silva will continue his Mideast trip and visit Jordan.

Former Brazilian radical militants who were tortured during the Brazilian military regime (1964/1985) supported the creation of a Truth Commission to unveil human rights violations, during a ceremony at the Ministry of Justice in Brazilian capital Brasília.

Maria Alice Albuquerque Saboya, former political prisoner called on the new generations to fight for the establishment of a Truth Commission proposed by the Brazilian government last December with the purpose of exposing the "horrors" committed under the de facto military governments.

"This history of tortures is not mine, it's our history, the history of a country that must be recorded and told so that we can all learn not to repeat mistakes," said Albuquerque Saboya who was honored together with 14 other women militants and political prisoners at the Ministry of Justice on the International Woman Day.

"It is far worse seeing how someone is tortured than being tortured. I still have recorded in my mind when a prisoner begged for his death, begged he be killed to end the suffering of torture," said Albuquerque Saboya who was imprisoned with her father and brother in the sixties.

Last December the Brazilian minister of Defense Nelson Jobim and the commanders of the three services threatened to resign when President Lula announced the creation of a Truth Commission to investigate military crimes committed during the dictatorship.

The Ministry of Justice that sponsors the creation of the Truth Commission, wants to look into the crimes of the military, an issue which triggered a major cabinet crisis for President Lula.

The military leaked to the press that they also would like to see a commission which exposed the crimes committed by the "Marxist insurgents," among which they listed top officials from the Lula administration including cabinet chief and incumbent presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff.

The Catholic Church also opposed the human rights initiative as drafted by the Ministry of Justice because the bill contained chapters referred to the legalization of abortion and same gender marriages.

Similarly Brazilian landowners rejected a wide interpretation of the use of land which they believed could encourage the occupation of farmland or allegedly non-exploited farms. Brazil has a strong movement of "landless peasants" which roam the countryside in search of plots to occupy.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, whose charm and everyman style have made him a hit on the world stage, is risking trouble at home and abroad with a puzzling embrace of Iran just as world opinion hardens over its nuclear program. Lula, a former union leader who was jailed by Brazil's military rulers in the 1970s, has refused to criticize Iran's human rights record and welcomed Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Brazil with hugs and smiles late last year.

In May, he plans to visit Tehran to boost trade ties even as support builds in the United Nations for a fresh round of sanctions. US patience with Lula was stretched further last week when he spurned visiting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's attempt to persuade Brazil to vote for new sanctions, warning against pushing Iran "into a corner". The against-the-grain approach on Iran has come as a surprise to many who have grown to see Lula as the likeable face of Brazil's economic and diplomatic rise in recent years.

The Miami Herald in an editorial last week called Lula's Iran policy "dangerously obtuse and unworthy of a country that aspires to be considered an equal among the world's leaders". Neither is Brazil's stance viewed kindly by Israel - where Lula will visit this week to push Middle East peace - which sees Iran's nuclear plans as a mortal threat. It is also opening up internal divisions ahead of elections to choose a successor to Lula in October as the opposition criticizes his government's warm ties with Iran, which Western powers fear is set on developing nuclear weapons despite Tehran's denials.

There's definite political risk here for the Brazilians," said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Council of the Americas in Washington and a former state department official. "Obviously, they've chosen to do something else, but at what cost? I think this will increasingly become an issue in the presidential election.

Analysts say that Lula's government, which holds a rotating seat on the UN Security Council, views itself as an important brake on any repeat of the rush to a consensus based on unclear evidence that led to war against Iraq in 2003. Its role as a developing world leader in trade and other fora and experience as a nuclear rebel also makes it wary of big-power pressure and gives it empathy for Iran, said Matias Spektor, a Brazilian scholar and visiting fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

Brazil's military dictatorship forged ahead with its own nuclear power capability in the 1970s despite US objections. Iran has pointed to Brazil to show that it could also have nuclear power without developing weapons, a ban that is written into Brazil's constitution. "Brazil is talking from the perspective of its own history. It was at the receiving end of an awful lot of pressure on nuclear (issues)," Spektor said. "One Brazilian official told me that when we look at Iran, we don't see Iran, we see Brazil.

Security Council diplomats expect Brazil to abstain or vote against fresh sanctions, along with fellow non-permanent members Lebanon and Turkey and permanent member China. "We will not simply bow down to the evolving consensus if we do not agree," Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said at a news conference with Clinton last week. Lula, who says he opposes any move

by Iran to get nuclear weapons, also appears to hope that Brazil's softer approach could help to broker a deal solving the nuclear impasse.

It could be a crowning moment for the popular Lula in his last year as president, but many are skeptical he could succeed where others far more experienced in Middle East diplomacy have failed. "The Europeans have tried this double-track approach with Iran for years and that's got exactly nowhere," Farnsworth said. While Brazil's engagement with Iran is unlikely to seriously strain relations with the United States, it could raise questions over Brazil's readiness to be considered for the permanent UN Security Council seat that it covets.

Some analysts view Brazil's decision to defend Iran and present itself as an alternative Middle East peace broker as a move toward a more activist, high-profile world role. But its policy could be seen as based on weakness as much as strength. Brazil has largely been quiet in Security Council debates on Iran and has not presented an alternative solution to the long-brewing crisis. "It doesn't seem to me we are seeing a positive, activist agenda. On the contrary, I think Brazil is acting defensively," Spektor said. "Even if Brazil is an emerging power, it is a relatively small, weak country still. It's not a major player in security issues; it's still learning how to do it."

Dilma Rousseff might lack charisma, but she has won the nomination of the ruling party in October poll. She has never been elected to office, hardly radiates charisma and inhabits a political landscape dominated by men, but Dilma Rousseff has a great chance of becoming Brazil's next president.

Once dismissed as simply an acolyte of her boss, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, she has clinched the ruling party's nomination for October's presidential election and is riding high in the polls. Analysts who wrote off Rousseff, right, now tip her as a favorite to take charge of a booming economy with almost 200 million people and become the most powerful leader – male or female – in Latin America.

Lula, who steps down with stellar ratings after eight years in office, said the first sign "that machismo will be defeated" was selecting his chief of staff as a successor. "She won't only carry on [my legacy], but... perfect it and do much more," he said.

An increasing number of Brazilians agree. After languishing in the polls a distant second to her conservative rival, São Paulo governor José Serra, Rousseff, 62, has closed the gap to just four points. Serra's backers are growing anxious and in the past week a would-be running mate has cried off.

The daughter of a Belo Horizonte teacher, she became a middle-class radical and joined the underground leftist resistance to the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Details of her guerrilla days are sketchy but it is said she helped in the famous robbery of \$2.4m from the safe of a corrupt former São Paulo governor. She was jailed for almost three years and tortured, including receiving electric shocks.

After democracy's restoration she became a state energy secretary, caught Lula's eye and became his cabinet enforcer. The former Trotskyist impressed colleagues and business leaders as a pragmatist and gifted administrator. Charming in private, Rousseff is an awkward public speaker with a somewhat dour image. Her biggest asset is Lula's backing. "If Dilma wasn't capable, if she had problems, I wouldn't have proposed Dilma," he said.

Rousseff's challenge will be to reflect Lula's shine while convincing voters she has her own vision of where to lead South America's giant.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva arrived in the Middle East on Sunday, seeking to bring a fresh outlook to the peace process on a trip to Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan.

His official program begins on Monday with a meeting with his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres, followed by talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Tzipi Livni.

On Tuesday he will visit the Israeli-occupied West Bank to meet Palestinian leaders, before travelling to Jordan on Wednesday.

Lula's visit, the first to the region by a Brazilian head of state, comes days after Israel's controversial decision on new settlements in east Jerusalem and as the new Security Council non-permanent member seeks a voice in efforts to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Israel announced approval for the construction of 1,600 new homes for Jewish settlers in Arab east Jerusalem, threatening US hopes of reviving stalled peace talks and sparking continuing fury in Washington with its key Middle East ally.

Before leaving Brazil, he said in an interview the Middle East peace effort needs "someone with neutrality to speak the truth to the Israelis, to tell the truth to Palestinians, Iranians, Syrians, and whoever wants to hear the truth."

While in the region Lula is also expected to reiterate Brasilia's stance on Iran's controversial nuclear program, which major Western powers fear may be a cover for a covert atomic arms project, despite Tehran's strenuous denials.

Lula has made it clear he considers Iranian participation a key to peace efforts in the Middle East. He visited Tehran in May last year and in turn welcomed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Brazil in November.

Earlier this month, Lula told US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton it is "not prudent to push Iran into a corner. It is prudent to make it so that Iran continues to negotiate."

Israel, widely believed to be the sole if undeclared nuclear-armed state in the Middle East, sees Iran as a threat to its existence. Neither Israel nor the United States has ruled out military action against Iranian nuclear sites.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman yesterday snubbed Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on his visit to Israel because he declined to lay a wreath at Mount Herzl.

Lieberman was absent from Lula da Silva's address to the Knesset and from his scheduled meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The foreign minister accused the Brazilian president of insulting Israel by refusing to make the customary diplomatic trip to the grave site of Zionist leader Theodore Herzl. However, Lula is scheduled to visit the grave of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during his visit to Ramallah.

Lieberman had set advancing diplomatic relations with Brazil as one of the Foreign Ministry's new goals. The Foreign Ministry said yesterday that Lieberman wanted to show the Brazilian leader that he took a grim view of the latter's dismissal of diplomatic protocol, and that Israel would not take it lightly.

Lieberman yesterday protested Lula's close ties with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his plans to visit Tehran soon.

Lula earlier yesterday called for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons in a special address to Israel's Knesset. The Brazilian president also spoke of his vision for peace between Israel and its neighbors.

"In Brazil, 10 million Arabs live in harmony with thousands of Jews," he said. "We hope for this to be used as a metaphor for seeking deep understanding in the Middle East."

American envoy George Mitchell is due to arrive today to hear PM Netanyahu's response to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's suggestions for restoring trust between Israel and the U.S., and for restarting talks with the Palestinians.

One of the conditions for doing so is revoking the construction in the East Jerusalem neighborhood Ramat Shlomo. Mitchell is to meet President Shimon Peres tonight and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tomorrow.

Netanyahu stated yesterday that Israel would continue to build in Jerusalem in the same way that it has over the last 42 years.

"For the past 40 years, no Israeli government ever limited construction in the neighborhoods of Jerusalem," he said in his Knesset speech welcoming the Brazilian president. He cited areas in the West Bank that Israel captured during the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed to the city.

However, Netanyahu's aides continued yesterday efforts to overcome the crisis with the American administration over the announcement last week of the construction of 1,600 new housing units in East Jerusalem during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman announced that he will not meet with the President of Brazil Lula da Silva after the latter refused to lay a wreath on the grave of Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern day Zionism, but laid a wreath on the grave of the arch-terrorist Yassir Arafat.

Lieberman did not come today to the celebratory meeting held in the Knesset in honor of the arrival of the Brazilian president and did not attend a three way meeting that was planned to be held with PM Netanyahu and Lula.

Jerusalem (AP) — Israel's foreign minister confirmed Tuesday that he boycotted meetings with the visiting Brazilian president, claiming he refused to visit the grave of the founder of modern Zionism.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman told Israeli media he did not attend President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's speech at the Israeli parliament on Monday or two other meetings.

Lieberman said he was upset at Silva's decision not to visit late Zionist leader Theodor Herzl's grave, especially while agreeing to lay a wreath at the tomb of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Wednesday.

"A person who is not prepared to visit Herzl's grave but is visiting Arafat's grave, I don't accept that," Lieberman told the Israeli news Web site YNet. He claimed the snub breached protocol.

A spokesman from the office of the Brazilian president countered that visiting Herzl's grave was not accepted protocol for a foreign leader's trip.

"It was never even considered as part of the president's agenda," the official said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter. He said the Israeli response was odd, considering recent trips to Israel by other leaders did not include a visit to Herzl's grave.

The official said French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi did not visit Herzl's grave on their latest trips to Israel.

Israeli officials say the trip to Herzl's grave was reinstated recently. Last week visiting Vice President Joe Biden visited the grave site.

The diplomatic spat threatened to overshadow an otherwise warm reception for Silva. On Monday, he and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed for their governments to hold joint meetings every two years.

Lieberman, known for his pugnacious style, has insisted Israel will not stand by when offended by other nations. His year as foreign minister has repeatedly been marred by diplomatic incidents.

He protested to Turkey over a TV series that reportedly portrayed Israeli soldiers murdering innocent children and demanded that Sweden condemn an article in a Swedish newspaper that alleged Israeli soldiers harvested the organs of dead Palestinians. Sweden refused, and its foreign minister canceled a trip to Israel at the time of the dispute.

Lieberman met with Silva on a South American trip last year, in a bid to enlist help in stymieing Iran's alleged effort to build a nuclear weapon.

Silva said his visit — the first for a sitting president of Brazil — was "a mission of peace" that he hoped would help his country emerge as a bigger player in foreign affairs.

He continued to the West Bank on Tuesday for meetings with Palestinian officials and was to depart to neighboring Jordan on Wednesday.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva told his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres yesterday that Middle East peace has long been his dream.

"Mr President Peres, I dream of the day when the Middle East will have peace so that all peoples can achieve prosperity," he said in Jerusalem where he met Mr Peres and other Israeli leaders.

"The virus of peace has been with me since I was in my mother's womb. I can't remember ever having a dispute with anyone," he said, stressing the need for dialogue.

Mr Lula, on the first visit to the region by a Brazilian head of state, hopes to bring a fresh outlook to the peace process during his talks in the Middle East. Today he is meeting Palestinian leaders in the West Bank, before travelling to Jordan tomorrow.

However, Mr Lula's visit comes hot on the heels of a controversial Israeli decision on new Jewish settlements in annexed east Jerusalem, leading the Palestinians to rule out peace talks amid continued settlement building.

Before leaving Brazil, Mr Lula said the peace process needed "someone with neutrality to speak the truth to the Israelis, to tell the truth to Palestinians, Iranians, Syrians, and whoever wants to hear the truth".

Later, he met Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the two agreed to strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries, Mr Netanyahu's office said.

The Cabinets of Israel and Brazil would hold a joint meeting every two years, the statement said. Israel has similar agreements with Germany and Italy.

Mr Lula also said he wanted to drum up business for Brazil.

"We hope to advance economic and business ties between Israel and Brazil as trade has increased significantly between our two countries in the past few years. We can continue with the current momentum," he said.

"I am launching a new investment plan in Brazil soon and I invite Israeli companies to take an active and significant part," he said.

The volume of two-way trade totaled \$1.6 billion in 2008, of which \$1.2 billion was in Israeli exports to Brazil, according to Israeli figures.

Detailed Report/Mexico

March 10 (Bloomberg) -- Mexico President Felipe Calderon named Gloria Guevara as the new minister of tourism, putting her in charge of developing an industry that is the country's third- biggest source of dollar inflows.

Guevara, who previously was chief executive officer of Sabre Holdings Corp.'s Mexican unit, replaces Rodolfo Elizondo who served as tourism minister since 2003.

"This will be of great importance to design effective strategies to attract visitors and consequently generate more jobs and well-being for Mexicans," Calderon told reporters today in Mexico City.

Mexico's tourism industry has been hit by potential visitors' concerns about violence associated with drug trafficking, an outbreak of H1N1 flu last year and the global economic slump. Tourism revenue fell 15 percent to \$11.3 billion in 2009 from \$13.3 billion 2008, according to the Tourism Ministry.

Guevara has master's degrees in marketing from the Universidad Anahuac in Mexico City and business administration from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Sabre, which manages software for travel Web sites used by hotels, airlines and rental agencies, handles 71 percent of Mexican hotel, airline and car rental reservations, newspaper Excelsior reported today. Mexico's biggest sources of dollar inflows are oil sales and remittances from workers living abroad

In its fifth periodic report, the Human Rights Committee raised important issues for Mexico to address regarding the use of the armed forces to confront organized crime, as it impacts the rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It is

disappointing that Mexico squandered this opportunity to acknowledge and tackle the lack of accountability for human rights violations committed by the military.

Since President Felipe Calderon deployed thousands of troops to combat drug trafficking starting in December 2006, there has been a dramatic increase in complaints of military abuse. From 2007 to the end of 2009, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission received 3,388 complaints of human rights violations by the military. Of these, it has already concluded that in at least 38 cases the military was in fact responsible for abuses.

Although the military usually accepts the commission's reports and, on occasion, pays monetary compensation to the victims, impunity for these crimes is the norm. The principal reason for this is that the Mexican military justice system, which lacks independence and impartiality, routinely takes over the investigation into even the most egregious abuses, including alleged rapes, killings, arbitrary detentions, and torture, by adopting an excessively broad definition of what constitutes an "act of service." According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, "Uniform Impunity: Mexico's Misuse of Military Justice to Prosecute Abuses in Counternarcotics and Public Security Operations," this impunity is rooted in the fact that, in Mexico, the secretary of defense wields both executive and judicial power over the armed forces, military judges do not have security of tenure, civilian review of military court decisions is very limited, and there is virtually no public scrutiny of military investigations and trials.

Paragraphs 92 and 183 of the government of Mexico's report to this committee state that, from 2000 to August 2009, 20 penal processes have been initiated against military personnel for human rights abuses, six of which have so far resulted in sentences. However, a closer look at the limited information provided by the government on these cases demonstrates that only three soldiers have been found guilty of human rights crimes committed during the Calderón administration. However, one of those convictions resulted from an automobile accident and another was overturned on appeal. Therefore, only one case qualifies as a conviction for a human rights abuse, in which a soldier was sentenced to 9 months in prison for killing one civilian by opening fire at a military checkpoint.

Although Mexico argues that it is possible to challenge decisions adopted by military courts before the civilian justice system through an injunction (*amparo*), this recourse exists, essentially, to protect the due process rights of the member of the military accused of committing a crime. Victims and their families are unable to challenge the basic question of which justice system should have jurisdiction to investigate human rights abuses. In August 2009, Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that a victim did not have legal standing to challenge the jurisdiction of military tribunals to investigate military abuses. The case was brought by the wife of a victim of an extrajudicial execution by the military. The ruling effectively closes all legal recourse for victims and their families to challenge military jurisdiction in cases of human rights abuses.

The military's practice of investigating itself through this flawed military justice system violates Mexico's obligations under international law. The ICCPR imposes on governments the obligation to provide an effective legal remedy for abuses, and to provide individuals with a "fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law." In addition, at the regional level, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights issued a binding ruling in November 2009 that ordered Mexico to modify its Code of Military Justice to comply

with its international obligations. The court specifically held that military justice is never applicable in cases of human rights abuses against civilians.

To end this pattern of impunity and to safeguard the rights enshrined in the ICCPR, Mexico must ensure that cases in which members of the military stand accused of human rights violations against civilians are immediately sent to civilian state or federal prosecutors.

The FBI has focused its anti-corruption efforts on the U.S.-Mexico border, a top official told a Senate committee Thursday.

Kevin L. Perkins, assistant director of the criminal investigative division, testified before a subcommittee of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. He said 120 of the 700 agents involved in anti-corruption investigations are assigned to the Southwest border.

Perkins said those agents, working with the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies, are getting results. In 2009 he said there were more than 100 arrests and 130 state and federal criminal cases.

In one case, Perkins said, agents determined a border inspector had sought the job in order to make money from drug trafficking. The inspector was sentenced to 22 years in prison after pleading guilty to conspiring to import more than 2,000 pounds of marijuana.

After another investigation, government employees working for 12 state, federal and local agencies were charged with drug trafficking, he said, with 84 guilty pleas so far.

The FBI has also been working with Mexican police he said. The office in McAllen, Texas, recently held a week of training in everything from ethics to firearms for 30 Mexican officers.

On Thursday, the Senate Homeland Security subcommittee heard testimony from top federal officials about growing corruption of U.S. law enforcement along the U.S./Mexican border.

FBI assistant director for criminal investigations, Kevin Perkins, informed the subcommittee that in the last two years, there have been 400 corruption cases involving U.S. federal, state and local law enforcement officers working in the Southwest border region.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection assistant commissioner, James Tomsheck, warned the Senators that Mexican drug cartels have stepped up their efforts to corrupt and infiltrate the Border Patrol. He also reported that in 2009 alone, Customs and Border Protection conducted corruption investigations on 576 of their own agents.

Unfortunately, in the U.S., we are now seeing the beginning of the kind of corruption which has become the order of the day in Mexico. In addition to scores of Mexican police and military

officials working basically as soldiers for the drug cartels, many elected officials in Mexico are also paid off by the cartels.

In May 2009, Mexican authorities arrested 10 mayors and 20 local officials after they were implicated through an investigation into the powerful organized crime ring known as La Familia Michoacana.

If La Familia cannot buy-off a politician (Often because they have already accepted bribes from a rival organization.), they simply kill him.

In April 2009, congressional candidate Gustavo Bucio Rodriguez was shot to death at the gas station he owned. Only days earlier, the body of Lazaro Cardenas Mayor Nicolas Leon was discovered. Leon had been tortured and shot to death, the initials "FM" (Familia Michoacana) left on his body.

German Tena, president of the Michoacan chapter of Mexico's National Action Party, recently spoke to the LA Times about the deadly tactics being used by La Familia. Tena said: "It is a way to win power with fear, where the authorities either don't have the capability to fight it, or have the capability but not the inclination."

The head of the Democratic Revolution Party in Michoacan, Fabiola Alanis bluntly added: "If we know or hear that a candidate is mixed up with narcos, we are not going to denounce it. It is not my job. It would put my candidates in danger. There is nothing to guarantee that they would wake up alive."

A high-ranking Michoacan official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, also told the LA Times: "There are mayors and politicians who 'let things happen,' and there are some who have sold their soul to the devil."

If the border remains unprotected, and illegal aliens are allowed to stay in this country, we can expect the U.S. to one day, be simply a mirror image of our Third World neighbor and narco-state, Mexico.

According to the FBI, the Mexican drug cartels are operating in 231 U.S. cities, from Tucson, AZ (Federation, Juarez Cartels) to Buffalo, NY (Gulf Coast Cartel).

President Felipe Calderon confronts an allegation long circulated that his government has gone easier on the Sinaloa cartel. 'It is absolutely false,' he says. The claim has floated around for months, circulating among academics and critics of President Felipe Calderon's military-led war on Mexican drug gangs.

It goes like this: Army and police operations that have included massive arrests, confiscation of drug shipments and numerous deadly shootouts, have left the largest and most powerful of the cartels relatively unscathed.

The so-called Sinaloa cartel, based in the drug-rich Pacific state of the same name, has been allowed to escape most of the government's firepower and carry on with its illegal business as usual, according to this theory.

Calderon had ignored such allegations until this week, when he finally felt compelled to address them.

"It is absolutely false," he said Wednesday to a reporter's question at a wide-ranging news conference. "I can assure you that this government has attacked without discrimination all criminal groups in Mexico . . . without taking into consideration whether it's the cartel of so-and-so or what's-his-name. We've fought them all."

The president went on to say that the suggestion he was playing favorites was "painful" and he questioned the motivations that lay behind it.

"These accusations are totally unfounded, false and the fruit of, in the best of cases, ignorance, if not because of ulterior interests that must be made clear," an unusually animated Calderon said. "We neither protect, nor shield, nor tolerate any criminal group in this country."

He then proceeded to tick off the names of members of the Sinaloa cartel who have been captured or killed, often using their noms de guerre: El Teo (Teodoro Garcia Simental, who allegedly melted hundreds of victims in vats of lye, captured in January), Vicente Zambada (son of one of the top leaders of the Sinaloa cartel, extradited last week to the U.S.), and so on.

Twice, Calderon interrupted reporters who were trying to ask other questions when he suddenly remembered additional Sinaloa associates who have been captured.

Those who are promoting the idea that Calderon is going light on Sinaloa gangsters point to a couple of factors. Edgardo Buscaglia, a respected academic and expert on organized crime, says arrest figures skew heavily toward the other cartels. By his calculation, of more than 53,000 people arrested in drug-trafficking cases in the three years since Calderon took office, fewer than 1,000 worked for the Sinaloa organization.

Buscaglia says that the Calderon administration may want the Sinaloa group to emerge as the main network of traffickers because it would be the easiest with which to negotiate a truce. Calderon has repeatedly said he would never negotiate with traffickers.

The government late Wednesday put out a different set of arrest figures. Of 72,000 arrested, 27% were tied to the Gulf cartel -- Sinaloa's chief rival -- and 24% to what was labeled the Pacific cartel, which included not only Sinaloa but the Beltran Leyva faction until it split off in early 2008.

The suspicions are also fueled by the near-mythic status attained by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the billionaire leader of the Sinaloa cartel. He has been on the lam since escaping from a maximum-security prison in 2001, but reports of sightings are legion.

(Most recently, a newspaper in Honduras reported that he has set up shop there in a network of luxurious, isolated ranches.) Yet he has not been caught, while some of the top leaders of other organizations have been killed or arrested.

And the "narcos" themselves have also fanned the notion that Calderon is protecting the Sinaloa organization. Rival gangs, especially the Gulf cartel and its paramilitary arm, the Zetas, have

hung signs, often next to a grotesquely displayed corpse, complaining of unfair treatment.

Undoubtedly, what hurt Calderon the most and perhaps prompted him to speak out was an accusation from a member of his National Action Party. Legislator Manuel Clouthier Carrillo of Sinaloa accused the government of leaving the Sinaloa cartel virtually untouched.

His party immediately scolded him and ordered him to retract the statements or face expulsion. He has refused to back down.

Washington - Three people with ties to the American consulate were killed in a drug-plagued Mexican city, including a U.S. couple shot to death within sight of the border with their baby in their back seat, officials said today.

President Barack Obama expressed outrage over the killings, and Mexican President Felipe Calderon promised a swift investigation.

Several U.S. citizens have been killed in Mexico's drug war, most of them people with family ties to Mexico. However, it is rare for Americangovernment employees to be targeted.

The three died during a particularly bloody weekend in Mexico, with nearly 50 people killed in apparent drug-gang violence. Nine people were killed in a gang shootout today in the Pacific resort city of Acapulco, one of Mexico's spring break attractions.

The U.S. consulate employee and her husband were shot to death Saturday in their car near the Santa Fe International bridge linking Ciudad Juarez with El Paso, Texas, said Vladimir Tuexi, a spokesman for Chihuahua state prosecutors' office.

Their baby was found unharmed in the back seat. Tuexi estimated the child was about 1 year old.

Killed were consular employee Lesley A. Enriquez, 35, and her husband, Arthur H. Redelf, 34, according to Robert Cason, Redelf's stepfather.

Redelf was a detention officer with the El Paso County Jail, Cason said.

He declined to discuss the welfare of his grandchild. "I don't want to give any more information to the psychotics out there," he said.

Tuexi said the baby was in the custody of Mexican social services.

The U.S. government has not described Enriquez's job at the consulate, and Cason said he didn't know what she did there. A neighbor of Enriquez, Zonia Rivas, also didn't know.

"I do know she just went back to work about three months ago after having her baby," she said.

The White House said the husband of a Mexican citizen employee was also killed Saturday, apparently in a separate shooting. Mexican authorities had no information on that slaying.

Obama was "deeply saddened and outraged" by the killings, the White House said.

"He extends his condolences to the families and condemns these attacks on consular and diplomatic personnel serving at our foreign missions," the White House said in a statement. "In concert with Mexican authorities, we will work tirelessly to bring their killers to justice."

Police said they had no information on a possible motives.

Civilians have increasingly gotten caught in the middle of drug gang violence that has made Ciudad Juarez one of the deadliest cities in the world, with more than 2,500 people killed last year alone. At least 11 people were killed in Ciudad Juarez over the weekend.

The State Department authorized U.S. government employees at Ciudad Juarez and five other U.S. consulates in northern Mexico to send their family members out of the area because of concerns about rising drug violence. The cities are Tijuana, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Monterrey and Matamoros.

Calderon's office said the Mexican president "expresses his indignation" and "his sincerest condolences to the families of the victims." He "reiterated the Mexican government's unwavering compromise to resolve these grave crimes."

The State Department noted the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City has advised American citizens to delay unnecessary travel to parts of the Mexican states of Durango, Coahuila and Chihuahua.

State Department spokesman Fred Lash said the decision to authorize consular employees' family members to leave the area was based not only on Saturday's killings but also on a wider pattern of violence and threats in northern Mexico in recent weeks.

Nearly 18,000 people have been killed since Calderon deployed tens of thousands of troops and federal police across the country in December 2006 in an offensive against drug traffickers.

In Acapulco, a battle between drug gangs killed eight gunmen and a 23-year-old woman caught in the cross fire as she rode in a taxi, according to a Guerrero state police report.

Weekend shootouts left more than 30 people dead in Guerrero, where several cartels are battling for drug dealing turf and trafficking routes.

The dead included two people found beheaded Saturday in a scenic road of Acapulco packed with nightclubs. A shootout between troops and gang members left 10 gunmen and a soldier dead in a rural town in central Guerrero.

Mexico City (AP) — More Americans in Mexico are falling victim to a wave of drug violence sweeping the country, a change driven home by the recent killing of a U.S. Consulate employee and her husband who were gunned down after leaving a children's birthday party.

The number of U.S. citizens killed in Mexico has more than doubled to 78 in 2009 from 37 in 2007, according to the U.S. State Department's annual count. No figures were available for the first two months of 2010.

While only some of the killings are specifically listed as "executions" or "drug-related," the increase in homicides appears to be related to drug battles. In Ciudad Juarez, the northern border city hardest hit by drug violence and where the consulate employee was killed, homicides of Americans rose to 23 in 2009 from two in 2007.

The annual murder rate for the estimated 500,000 American citizens in Mexico at any one time has risen — but still remains lower than in some U.S. cities: about 15 per 100,000. Baltimore's 2009 homicide rate was 37 per 100,000 residents.

American deaths make up only a tiny fraction of Mexico's 17,900 drug-related killings since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderon launched a military-led drug war.

On Saturday, a clash among armed men left eight people dead in the Pacific coast state of Sinaloa. The bodies of seven men were found inside two cars along a highway connecting the cities of Culiacan and Mazatlan, said Sinaloa prosecutors' spokesman Martin Gastelum. An eighth victim, dressed in a fake federal police uniform and holding a grenade, was found near the cars, Gastelum said.

The government says the majority of those killed were involved in the drug trade. But an increasing number of bystanders are dying in the crossfire, and Americans are among them.

Tania Lozoya, 15, of El Paso, Texas, was killed by a stray bullet at her aunt's house across the border in Ciudad Juarez in May 2009, after gunfire broke out when two men chased another man into the backyard of the residence.

In December, a California assistant school principal, Augustin Salcedo, was killed after he was abducted from a restaurant along with five other men while he and his wife were visiting her hometown of Gomez Palacio, in the northern state of Durango. The motive for the mass abduction remains unclear.

Other Americans appear to have been specifically targeted.

U.S. anti-kidnapping expert Felix Batista was abducted by gunmen in December 2008 in the northern city of Saltillo, where he had gone to advise local businessmen on how to avoid becoming victims of the country's wave of kidnappings. He has not been found.

"I see it as, my brother was interfering with their profit margin," said Batista's sister, Jackie Batista. "That's their line of business. Other than drugs, it's kidnapping, so people want to know how to keep themselves safe, and that intrudes into their profit margin."

More than a year after his disappearance, nobody knows for sure who took Batista.

The prosecutors' office in the state of Coahuila, where Saltillo is located, confirmed that no trace of Batista has been found, and they now consider it an inactive case.

"I think that's my biggest fear," Batista said. "That this case will never be resolved. ... Excuse the phrase, and I hate to use it, that it has gone to the grave with those people who were involved."

Americans whose relatives have become victims of Mexico's drug war have established an informal group to support one another and stay informed about what is happening south of the border. "America needs to wake up and smell the kidnappings, smell the drug war," Batista says.

She frequently keeps in touch with San Antonio, Texas resident Jose Esparza, whose two brothers and sister were kidnapped in the northern Mexico town of Cuencame more than a year ago; all were U.S. residents and had spouses or children who are U.S. citizens. As with Felix Batista, there has been no request for ransom, and no sign of the victims.

Esparza says that in Texas alone he has heard from about 10 other people with relatives or friends who disappeared in Mexico.

He and others say they have obtained little or no response from Mexican authorities. Esparza now places his faith in the possibility the U.S. may begin to directly investigate the cases.

"Unless the U.S. government gets involved, nothing is ever going to happen," he said. FBI officials are aiding Mexican authorities in the investigation into the March 13 killings of U.S. consular employee Lesley A. Enriquez, 35, who was four months pregnant, and her husband, Arthur H. Redelfs, 34.

They were gunned down in their white SUV on a Ciudad Juarez street as they were leaving the birthday party of a child of a U.S. Consulate employee. Their 7-month-old daughter was found wailing in the back of the vehicle.

Investigators are following several lines of investigation as to why gunmen followed the couple's vehicle and a second white SUV that left the same party and was hit in a separate, nearly simultaneous attack. Jorge Alberto Salcido, the husband of a Mexican employee of the consulate, was killed in that assault.

One theory being investigated is that assailants may have been ordered to attack a white SUV, staked out the wrong party and then opened fire on the wrong vehicles.

Another line of investigation is that Redelfs may have been targeted because of his work at an El Paso prison, which is holding several members of the Aztecas gang, believed responsible for the attacks.

More than 200 federal, state and local law enforcement officers swept through El Paso on Thursday, picking up suspected members of the gang in an effort to find new leads in the killings.

Ciudad Juarez Mayor Jose Reyes does not think the victims were targeted because of their U.S. ties. "I do not think this was a message to the consulate," Reyes said.

But Enriquez's cousin Vicky Torres doesn't see it that way.

"It's a message for the United States, like a challenge: 'Don't you mess around, you Americans, because this will happen,'" she said.

Lourdes Batista, the kidnap victim's wife, says she hopes the crimes will be a wake-up call for the American public.

"I pray that it will be," she said. "We're fighting a war across a big ocean, but what about here? What about our neighbor?"

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Mar 14, 2010 (EFE via COMTEX) -- Mexican President Felipe Calderon on Sunday condemned the murders of three people linked to the U.S. consulate in this northern border city, considered to be the most violent urban area in the country. In a communiqué, the president expressed his "outrage" over the incident and sent "his deepest

condolences to the relatives of the victims." He also reiterated "the unshakeable commitment of the Mexican government to clearing up these serious crimes," as well as its commitment "to continue dedicating all available resources to strengthen the conditions of public safety in Ciudad Juarez and throughout the national territory." U.S. President Barack Obama on Sunday said that he was "outraged" at the "brutal murders," according to a communiqué released by the U.S. National Security Council.

The dead are a U.S. woman, an official at the consulate, and her husband, who were shot to death in the central part of the city while driving in a white SUV with Texas license plates, the state that borders Mexico from the Gulf of Mexico up to Ciudad Juarez, the latter just across the Rio Grande from El Paso.

Authorities have not officially released the identities of the victims, but it was revealed that the couple, who were between 25 and 30 years old, were killed with 9 mm handguns.

A 3-month-old baby who was riding with the couple was unhurt in the attack.

In addition, a state policeman, the husband of an employee at the consulate, was murdered on Saturday by a group of armed men, also in downtown Ciudad Juarez.

The policeman was riding in a vehicle with his 4-year-old son, who was unhurt.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Relations Secretariat also said in its own communique that "the Mexican authorities will work with determination to clarify the situation in which the deeds took place and to bring those responsible to justice." The secretariat said that it will "maintain coordination with U.S. diplomatic authorities as the investigation moves forward." With these three killings, the number of homicides registered so far this year in the border city surpasses 480, to which must be added 2,650 in 2009 and 1,600 in 2008, the overwhelming majority of them specifically attributed to organized crime.

In the past three years, organized crime - primarily drug trafficking cartels - have caused more than 17,000 deaths in Mexico, according to press reports.

In the face of the rising violence, the United States and Mexico have tightened their cooperation to combat the drug cartels.

The United States, the largest consumer of illegal drugs in the world, has admitted - as per the words of some of the country's top officials - its responsibility in the problem of drug trafficking in Mexico.

Crowds of protesters damned President Felipe Calderon's military crackdown on drug cartels as he flew to Mexico's most violent city on Tuesday, three days after gunmen killed two Americans and a Mexican linked to the local U.S. consulate.

Hundreds of demonstrators held signs reading "government assassins" as Calderon arrived with U.S. Ambassador Carlos Pascual to meet officials and try to reassure Mexicans and Washington that his army-led crackdown on drug gangs is the best way to curb their violent turf wars.

"Calderon has no idea what he is talking about. He lives on another planet," said Susana Molina, one of many activists walking and driving to the hotel where Calderon is due to give a televised speech later on Tuesday.

"We told him we didn't want more soldiers and he sent more," Molina said, echoing frustration across the city, whose main newspaper El Diario ran the headline "We are sick and tired, Mr President."

Violence has exploded here in recent months as ruthless, heavily armed cartels flush with profits from U.S. drug sales battle for control of the desert manufacturing city across the U.S. border from El Paso, Texas.

Mexicans generally support Calderon's military-led drug war but polls suggest a loss of confidence in the campaign. Many Mexicans want a genuine reform of corrupt police forces that aid drug gangs, effective criminal investigations and an end to the culture of impunity that allows cartels to flourish.

Detailed Report/Venezuela

Spanish Deputy Prime Minister María Teresa Fernández de la Vega said on Friday that Spain has the support of Venezuela in the fight against the armed Basque separatist group ETA, as it occurs with other countries like France or Portugal.

Fernández de la Vega made these remarks during a press conference held after a meeting of the Council of Ministers. The top Spanish official was asked about the detention on Thursday of alleged ETA member Andoni Zengotitabengoa while attempting to board a flight to Venezuela using a fake Mexican passport, Efe reported.\

The detention of the suspected ETA member occurs after Judge Eloy Velasco of the Spanish National Court mentioned evidence of cooperation between the Venezuelan government with ETA and the Colombian rebel group FARC.

"We are cooperating and acting in cooperation with all countries, with Portugal, as it has been shown, but also with Venezuela," the Spanish Deputy Prime Minister said.

José Mujica, the president of Uruguay, said in Chile that he wants to help improve relations between Venezuela and Colombia and is willing to "talk to everybody." "I will try to talk to (President Hugo) Chávez and I will try someday to talk with God, if I may. I will do everything possible to reach a rapprochement between Colombia and Venezuela, because they are historically necessary," Mujica said, as reported by DPA.

The former leftist guerrilla fighter and leader of the Uruguayan "Tupamaros" guerrilla, who took office on March 1, said: "conflicts have not done anything but undermine" the countries in the region.

"We all must try to contribute modestly to improve relations," Mujica added.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) — A Venezuelan Web site that was accused by President Hugo Chavez of spreading false reports of killings said Sunday the government is trying to restrict criticism, but announced it had banned the visitors who posted the inaccurate rumors.

Chavez accused Noticiero Digital — a Web site popular among the president's opponents — of falsely reporting that two of his close political allies had been assassinated, and he called for regulation of the Internet, specifically urging prosecutors to act against the Web site.

"The Internet can't be something free where anything can be done and said. No, every country has to impose its rules and regulations," Chavez said in a televised speech on Saturday.

His comments came a few days after the state-run telecommunications company, CANTV, announced that it plans to establish a centralized, government-controlled gateway that all Internet traffic. CANTV President Franco Silva did not say how the system would work, but denied it would be used to control access to the Web.

Noticiero Digital responded Sunday, posting a statement that Chavez's comments are "a serious threat against freedom of expression, threats that are becoming increasingly frequent in Venezuela, affecting radio stations, the press and now — Internet."

Chavez and his allies have become increasingly critical in recent weeks of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, saying adversaries are using them to slander public officials and deceive the public.

Noticiero Digital conceded that the posts that Chavez singled out on Saturday contained "false rumors" and it announced the Web site "is taking measures so that these types of incidents do not occur again."

Noticiero Digital said it "doesn't practice prior censorship" of comments posted by visitors, but removes posts that it considers inaccurate or irresponsible. The posts that Chavez referred to were yanked from the site hours after they were posted, and the authors of the statements were permanently barred from the site, it said.

The Web site noted that its guests are warned that they are liable for their statements, and denied responsibility for comments made by visitors.

Venezuela's government revoked the licenses of 34 radio stations last year, saying some failed to update their registrations or allowed their concessions to expire while others held licenses granted to an operator now deceased. Human rights groups have accused Chavez of trying to stifle dissent.

The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, arrived in Venezuela to discuss the progress of economic and trade agreements signed by both countries.

Lukashenko was welcomed by Venezuela's Vice President Elías Jaua in the airport of Maiquetía, near Caracas, where he was paid the honors of a head of state, before heading to Caracas to meet with President Hugo Chávez.

In September, Chávez offered raw materials to his chief ally in Europe in exchange for the transfer of industrial technology, Efe reported.

Recently, Chávez mentioned the possibility of increasing the volume of oil pumped by the joint venture Petrolera Belovenezolana in Venezuela from 15,000 barrels per day (bpd) to 20,000 bpd.

President Alexander Lukashenko is visiting Caracas to solidify industrial and commercial cooperation between the two nations.

"Even though we have not sold even one barrel of oil to Belarus, we will begin to sell 80,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil to Belarus beginning May 1," Chavez told journalists Monday.

"It will allow us to enter the European market, in the center of Europe, to engage in joint ventures with Belarussian refineries. Belarus is being very generous with us," he added.

Lukashenko arrived in Venezuela Monday for a two-day trip set to include visits to housing built with assistance from his government, as well as Venezuelan gas fields and other petrochemical facilities.

Venezuelan Minister of Energy and Petroleum and President of the state-run oil company Petróleos de Venezuela (Pdvs), Rafael Ramírez, will not attend the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries meeting on Wednesday, said a source of the Venezuelan delegation in Vienna, Reuters reported.

The oil minister, who has not attended an OPEC meeting since May 2009, will not be present in the meeting that will take place in Vienna due to domestic issues, Reuters reported.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is expected to keep production unchanged in the meeting to be held on Wednesday.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko offered to help Venezuela strengthen its military, saying Tuesday that President Hugo Chavez's government should not have to worry about foreign threats.

Addressing lawmakers inside Venezuela's National Assembly, Lukashenko said Belarus hopes to "share the experience of creating an integrated defense system."

Chavez, a former paratroop commander who has built close ties with Lukashenko, has expressed interest in buying radar and anti-aircraft missiles from the former Soviet republic to bolster Venezuela's air defenses.

Lukashenko did not provide details on what type of support Belarus could provide, saying only that his government could help fortify Venezuela's defenses "in the short term" and enable Venezuelans "to live peacefully without having to be looking from side to side" for potential threats.

Venezuela has significantly increased military spending under Chavez, who has turned to allies such as Russia and China for arms while accusing the United States of plotting against him.

Chavez and Lukashenko share similarly hostile stances toward Washington. U.S. officials, in turn, have repeatedly raised concerns over growing authoritarianism and the gradual deterioration of democratic freedoms in both Venezuela and Belarus.

Lukashenko did not single out Washington as an adversary during Tuesday's speech, but he hinted the U.S. is among a group of powerful countries that "attempt to impose their will" on other nations by lecturing them on "human rights, democracy and freedom."

"Together, we can counter this threat," he said.

Later, Lukashenko and Chavez toured a housing project that Belarus is helping to build in Venezuela's northwestern Aragua state.

Venezuela's Minister of Energy and Petroleum, Rafael Ramírez does not believe that the South American country will be affected by an electricity collapse. "We will not allow a collapse and we will not collapse," Ramírez told journalists.

He added that energy officials expect an estimated consumption of 100,000 barrels of diesel per day to generate about 5,000 MW. Ramírez also reported that the government will purchase 100 semitrailer Chinese trucks to improve the logistics of fuel shipments.

The oil industry has the capacity to produce currently 300,000 bpd, of which 296,000 bpd are destined for export, he added.

He also said that industry officials are discussing the possibility of using the coke produced by heavy crude upgrades at the Orinoco Oil Belt in electricity generation plants.

The minister added that Pdvsa plans to purchase 1,200 MW this year to generate its own electricity rather than using power from the national electricity system.

Meanwhile, he announced that the Venezuelan government is close to reach a compensation agreement with cement companies Lafarge and Holcim after the nationalization of their assets. He highlighted that Cemex should return ships it removed from the country. These ships are included in the nationalization process.

Ramírez said that OPEC members will gather soon. In the meeting, Venezuela will propose that member countries keep production levels steady.

The Venezuelan government plans to increase its fuel consumption by a third in 2010 to fuel thermoelectric plants with which President Hugo Chávez hopes to overcome energy crisis.

Officials expect a total consumption of 104 million barrels in 2010, about 285,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day (bpd) of fuel oil, diesel and gas, which will be used to increase thermoelectric capacity by 4,000 megawatts (Mw).

The projected figures for the year do not specify which part corresponds to liquid fuels and which part to gas, Reuters reported.

Electricity Minister Alí Rodríguez acknowledged some days ago that the ability to increase domestic supply of gas, which is mostly associated with oil extraction, will remain limited in the future.