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Report Summary/Argentina

The ambassador of China said in a Argentine-Sino seminar in Buenos Aires that Argentina and China are new emerging economies of the world so both of them take a similar stance in international affairs. The ambassador was talking about UN reform, environmental issues, reform in world financial system and he said that both countries should also set a new global economic and political order in the favor of developing countries. He said that both countries are very good trade partner and have more potential to extend more bilateral trade and strategic relationships.

Bolivia is a big exporter of natural gas in the region. Recently it has made an agreement with the government of Argentina to export natural gas to Argentina. Basically the agreement was signed in 2006 but some clauses were missing which made it effective in this month when the heads of the energy companies of both of the countries participated along with the leaders of both Argentina and Bolivia. Bolivia was also exporting natural gas to Brazil but in recent years the supply of its gas has decreased because Brazil has explored new energy fields in this country.

Report Summary/Brazil

Brazilian official delegation is going to pay a visit to Zambia and some agreements will be signed to boost up the relationships with each other. The permanent Zambian secretary of delegation said that the relationships between the both countries already exist but in courtship style and now there is need to make them as married relationships.

President Lula is going to pay a visit to Iran and the purpose of his visit would surround the peace in the region. He said he defend Iran's nuclear program if it is to create energy as Brazil is struggling. He also said that he will try to mediate between Iran and its opposition in regard of nuclear program to create peace in the Middle East. He said the war between Iran and Iraq was just due to big powers which used both of the countries just to get their benefit. He addressed all in a dinner party from Arab community of Brazil due to his efforts to create peace in the region. Since Lula became president of Brazil in 2003 the relations between Brazil and Middle Eastern countries boosted 167%. Brazil comprises of 12 million Arabs which is the largest Arab community outside Arab World and the community contributes much to uplift Brazilian economy.

Due to the efforts of president de Silva the popularity has increased as 76%. The Datafolha polling institute has conducted a poll regarding president's popularity which shows that Lula has become most favorite since he took office in 2003. Now all these indicators shows that whoever elected the new president of Brazil he must be following Lula's policies in future to uplift the country's economy. Lula's nominated candidate for

the next presidency elections in Brazil Dilma Rouseff is getting more favor due to Mr. Lula as she is always with his in every trip. Indeed, the Brazilian political scientist César Romero Jacob has written that any candidate for the presidency in Brazil must now work in at least four "power-structures": the educated urban middle class, the evangelicals, the populism of the periphery, and the regional oligarchies.

The government of Brazil is gonna spend \$878 billion in the country for different purposes. Some of them would be invested in the capacity of health sector and some for uplifting the defense sector etc but most of the funds would be spend in a project 'My Home My Life'. This project is launched by the Lula's government which provides shelter for 1 million Brazilians who are living without house. Government will also invest funds in building infrastructure as airports, railway tracks and roads bridges etc as the country is going to hold two major events i.e. FIFA World Cup in 2014 and Olympic Games in 2016.

The president of Uruguay met with his Brazilian counterpart and complimented Brazil's policies in world politics. He said Brazil is a big power in Latin America and in the world so it should speak for the benefit of Latin America. He also said that Brazil always favored Uruguay when the country is in trouble so it should also speak for the region. Both of the countries clarified their role in the Union of South American Nations and discussed new policies for the benefit of the region.

The government of Sweden said that it is providing more opportunities to the government of Brazil to invest in the region. Swedish companies are urging to facilitate more to the Brazilian companies to invest in the country as the Brazil is becoming the world's big economy.

The foreign minister of Angola is going to travel to Brazil to attend a conference of Portuguese Speaking Countries Community (CPLP) around the world. The meeting happened in two parts and the agenda of meeting is to promote the language in professional in the Portuguese speaking countries.

TB has been a troublesome disease in Brazil since 2003 when World Health Organizations launched an emergency treatment for it around the world. Many of the Brazilian areas are suffering a lot in this disease and having a high ratio as in Rio de Janeiro almost 68 percent people are suffering and in Amazonas state 67 percent. This is not only the ita disease which is prevailing in Brazil but HIV/AIDS is also a very dangerous disease which prevails Brazil and a lot of casualties happens due to this disease. The health minister of Brazil has told that the government has taken several steps to counter these fatal diseases and launched many programs to aware such disease so that the affects would be control.

Report Summary/Mexico

President Felipe Carlderón told in a TV program with Farid Zakarya at CNN that the government of US is cooperating with the government of Mexico to counter drug cartels by providing funds to the Mexican government but a particular lobby in US is a great hurdle in this project. US government should expose the persons or groups which

are sending assault weapons to the drug cartels of Mexico. It is said that the government of United States should do efforts to strengthen the civilian institutions in Mexico as its judicial system etc rather than giving funds to Mexico to go against drug cartels only. US government has recently given \$331 million aid plan to counter drug cartels in Mexico which are taking drugs to USA.

Last week two employees of US consulate in Ciudad Juarez were killed by an attack from the drug cartel members when they were coming back from their child's birthday party. Last day the government of Mexico has claimed that it has arrested the persons who killed the US consulate's employee. It is said that they belong to the Barrio Azteca gang which works for the Juarez drug cartel and operates on both sides of the border. Recently Mexican forces have killed five drug related persons in a fight in Monterrey state.

In a recent International Energy Forum conference in Mexico both Mexico and New Zealand has made a bilateral agreement in various fields. New Zealand will expand their energy sales in Mexico and its energy companies will invest there. More than this both countries will cooperate in educational sector and climate change issues as well.

Report Summary/Venezuela

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez said that he is waiting for the Colombian elections when the president will be changed. He said the change of Colombian president can bring a change in relations of both Colombia and Venezuela. When the new president will come in Colombia after elections, the relations will automatically change between both countries. He also said that Venezuela is facing many problems which are coming from Colombia.

The government of Venezuela said that it does not believe in the report of Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on Venezuela. According to the report Venezuela is declared a country with less freedom of judiciary and freedom of expressions. Venezuelan government has rejected the report.

President Chavez has claimed that Venezuelan energy exploring company has found a super well in Caribbean Island which is a giant reserve of gas. He said this is not the first time but a lot of reserves have been found but this is the largest one. The government claims that this new reserve of gas is reserving 14 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in it which is a huge quantity. In spite of all these energy reserves, the country is still facing the electricity crisis. Recently the government of Venezuela has extended the vacations of Easter in the country so that more energy could be saved.

The leader of Venezuela's Catholic Church accused Chavez influencing judicial system and using his authority over judiciary. The Catholic leader said that Chavez is taking decisions from the court according to his will and sending his opponents in prison so as a lot of his opponents are behind the prison bars just due to keeping hostility of Chavez. But Chavez said that he has never been used his authority to influence any institution of the country but those who are trying to spread the anarchy and disorder in the country they are sent behind prison. He has banned the owner of a local TV

Globovision behind bars and banned his TV network because he was trying to create anarchy in the country.

President Chavez holds a telephonic meeting with the president Vladimir Putin of Russia and expressed his sorrows for Russian president over the two suicide bomb blasts in a subway of Moscow last week. The Russian president told he is going to pay a visit to Venezuela in next few days where he will meet his Venezuelan counterpart and discuss the issues related to energy, industry, agriculture, defense and other areas. President Putin also invited President Chavez to pay a visit to Russia to make their relationship as true and friendly. Chavez has already claimed that Russia and Iran are supporting Venezuela in developing a nuclear technology to create energy, not for an atomic bomb. A Russian analyst has written in Global Affairs magazine that Russian president's visit is to convey a message to the US authorities that it has also a lot of friends in the world.

Detailed Report/Argentina

Buenos Aires - China and Argentina, two of the world's major emerging economies, should enhance coordination on international affairs and jointly face global challenges, Chinese ambassador Zeng Gang said Thursday.

Reforms on international political and economic systems were of vital importance to all countries, Zeng said at a seminar on Sino-Argentine relations here.

Zeng said China and Argentina, which had many similarities, should coordinate actions on such global issues as UN reform, world financial system reform and fighting climate change among others, in a bid to protect their common interests and seek new global economic and political orders in favor of developing nations.

The two countries should strengthen high-level exchanges and boost strategic mutual trust, said the ambassador, adding China is expecting Argentine President Cristina Fernandez's upcoming visit this year.

Meanwhile, the two countries should promote pragmatic cooperation, enrich bilateral relations and expand investments, he said.

The two countries had been important trading partners; however, there was still great potential in bilateral economic cooperation, Zeng said, noting the two were currently negotiating on railway and subway infrastructure projects and China was willing to expand investment in energy and mining in Argentina.

The Bolivian and Argentine governments have made updates to a natural gas contract dating back to 2006, establishing guarantees for both sides and also for construction of a \$98 million gas pipeline.

The changes to the agreement were signed in this southern city by the presidents of the countries' state-run energy companies - Carlos Villegas of Bolivia's YPFB and Exequiel Espinosa of Argentina's Enarsa - with Bolivian head of state Evo Morales and his Argentine counterpart Cristina Fernandez in attendance.

Also taking part in Friday's ceremony at a sports coliseum in Sucre were Argentine Planning Minister Julio De Vido and Bolivian Energy Minister Luis Fernando Vincenti.

According to a report issued by YPF, new clauses in the contract call for penalties to be assessed if the Bolivian company fails to supply the amount of gas specified in the contract or if Argentina's purchases fall below a minimum level.

The revised contract also stipulates construction of a \$98 million gas pipeline that will measure 15 km in length and 32 inches in diameter on Bolivia's side of the border and 32 km in length and 30 inches in diameter on the Argentine side.

Bolivia will contribute \$43 million and Argentina \$55 million to the cost of the pipeline, which will expand transport capacity from 7.7 million cubic meters of natural gas per day to 13 million cubic meters per day.

Bolivia has been sending just 4-5 million cubic meters of natural gas per day to Argentina due to limited production, although it plans to boost output this year thanks to increased investment by foreign energy firms.

The president of YPF, Carlos Villegas, has signed agreements with different energy firms - including Spain's Repsol YPF - that call for further investment to boost natural gas output and allow more of the fuel to be shipped to Argentina.

With the revised contract, Bolivia is looking to ensure a steady market for its natural gas. The country's biggest export market, Brazil, has become less reliant on Bolivian gas due to the bringing online of new gas fields and new liquefied natural gas terminals for imports.

Washington: A former Columbian beauty queen is now on the most wanted list of the Argentinean drug enforcement agencies for alleged drug trafficking crimes.

The Interpol has issued a Red Corner notice against Sanclemente Valencia, a former beauty queen and lingerie model who led a band of beautiful women who transported cocaine from Buenos Aires into several European countries.

The network of model-mules was discovered at the beginning of December 2009, after Argentine authorities found 55kg of cocaine in the suitcase of a young and attractive woman who was travelling first class to Cancun.

Following the tracks of the 21-year-old woman, identified only as María N, the police went to a hotel where they suspected Sanclemente had been staying, but it was too late.

As per the Interpol red alert, Valencia is wanted for "drug related crimes" and upon any information about her, one can contact either the local police, national police or the General Secretariat of Interpol.

Valencia's case highlights the trend of women rising to the top of the criminal underworld involved in drug trafficking. Daring women also appear on most-wanted lists in the United States, Mexico and Colombia or are awaiting trial on charges of trafficking large quantities of cocaine.

Detailed Report/Brazil

The Brazilian delegation visiting Zambia has said the Zambian and Brazilian governments need to sign practical partnership agreements because the relationship between the two countries has existed for a long time.

Head of delegation, Tulio Costa said yesterday when his team paid a courtesy call on Copperbelt Permanent Secretary Villie Lombanya that there was need to strengthen the partnership between the two countries.

“The partnership between Zambia and Brazil is like a courtship, but there is need to turn the courtship into marriage,” he said.

Mr Costa said both countries could exchange vital information and skills that could improve the national economies.

The delegation was an advance party to the group that would soon come for the joint permanent commission (JPC) to meet in Zambia and then in Brazil.

Mr Lombanya said trade between countries like Zambia and Brazil was the key to economic survival for the emerging world.

He said even if Brazil was more advanced than Zambia, it still had a lot to offer that could benefit Brazil.

Mr Lombanya was happy that Brazilian President Lula da Silva would soon visit Zambia. And when the delegation and officials from the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Child Development toured Cichetekelo Youth Training Centre in Minsundu area in Ndola, Youth, Sport and Child Development Permanent Secretary Teddy Mulonga said he was happy that the Brazilian government was ready to partner with Zambia in areas that concerned the youth.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president of Brazil, said that he will visit Iran in May, to prevent that the crisis provoked by that country’s nuclear program create a conflict with some Western powers.

"You already know the amount of criticism I have received because I decided to meet President Ahmadinejad. And I have decided to go there. I'm going there because I do not want a repeat in Iran of the mistake made in Iraq," the president said while being honored at a dinner sponsored by the Arab community in São Paulo.

According to Lula, the war against Iraq was the result of a "lie" told by the "great powers" that the country had weapons of mass destruction.

The Brazilian leader said he will try to mediate the differences between the Islamic nation and the countries that disagree with the Iranian nuclear program. "We will put together all

these concerns of Brazil and other countries to tell president Ahmadinejad: we want peace."

Lula also said that he will defend Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, but he will also make it clear that he is against the use of nuclear technology for weapons production.

"I'm going to tell president Ahmadinejad in Tehran: 'I am against you wanting to make nuclear weapons, but I support you to enrich uranium as Brazil does to generate power'"

In his speech, the president also demanded a more active participation of the United Nations in favor of peace in the Middle East. He pointed out that Brazil can play an important role in mediating conflicts in the region.

"Peace in the Middle East does not depend on the mood of the American government or the European governments, is a necessity for mankind to live in peace," concluded Lula.

While attending a dinner promoted by the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce at the Mount Lebanon Club, this Thursday night, in the city of São Paulo, to celebrate the National Day of the Arab Community in Brazil, Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva commented that "No people treats immigrants as well as Brazilians do."

In addition to hailing the good relations between the two communities, Lula also called for debate on peace between Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, and stated that such attitude must not be left only to large powers such as the United States.

Aside from celebrating the date, the event was organized by the Chamber in return for Lula's efforts for establishing closer ties between Brazil and the Arab countries, as he was the first Brazilian head of state to travel to the region.

Before him, only (19th century emperor) Dom Pedro II had traveled the same route. Since the beginning of Lula's government, i.e., from 2003 to 2009, the business volume between the country and the Arab world has risen by 167%.

The president improvised his address and called attention to the integration of Arab immigrants and their descendants in Brazil. "We feel Arab just like you. This tribute is for all of you," he claimed.

In the middle of his address, Lula highlighted the presence at the event of 102-year-old Violeta Jafet, honorary president of the Women's Beneficent Society, which manages the Syrian-Lebanese Hospital. "No one represents the meaning of the Arab community in Brazil more than you do."

Stressing the importance of trade relations with the Middle East, Lula stated that the diversification of foreign trade helped the country overcome last year's economic crisis. "Without it, we would have sunk," he explained.

While discussing greater participation in the international scenario, the president claimed that issues such as peace between Arabs and Jews do not depend solely on the actions of wealthy countries.

"Peace in the Middle East is not up to the United States," he said. "The problem is being addressed the wrong way. There will be no peace until we get the involved parties to sit around the table and start debating," he asserted.

The declarations regarding peace ended with a mention of the situation of Iran. "I do not want to see a repetition, in Iran, of what took place in Iraq," he said. "The great powers made up the lie of chemical weapons and, so far, no one has proved anything."

At the event, Lula was awarded the Grand Collar of the Order of Merit of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce by the organization's president, Salim Schahin. He was also presented with a copy of the Koran translated into Portuguese, along with "The Grand Sash," granted to a Brazilian authority for the first time, which he received from the metropolitan archbishop of the Orthodox Church of São Paulo, Damaskinos Mansour, and a present from the Council of Arab Ambassadors in Brazil. The first lady, Marisa Letícia, was given a blessing in the form of an icon of Our Lady.

An Arab Thank You

With his foreign policy, Lula has laid the foundations of a new phase in relations between Arabs and Brazilians. And with his domestic policy, he distributed income, benefiting the country's poorest. With these and other statements, the president of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, Salim Schahin, paid his tribute to Lula on the Day of the Arab Community in Brazil at the Mount Lebanon Club.

The president of the organization, and the president of the country, was heard by approximately 1,000 people, mostly members of the Arab colony in Brazil.

"The implementing of a series of policies for generating and distributing income has benefited the poorest citizens and led the middle class to represent nearly 50% of our population," said Schahin, highlighting that these people have become a part of the consumer market, thanks to the Lula administration, and that this was an important contributing factor for Brazil's having had a smoother situation than the world average during the crisis in 2009.

He also claimed that these consumers have contributed to the performance of the most popular shopping street in Brazil, 25th of March Street, established precisely by Arab immigrants and their descendents.

The date for the tribute to the Arab community, by the way, was chosen because of the street. "25th of March, as we all know, is the name of the best known shopping street in Brazil, adopted by Arabs and their descendents as the center of their business in the country," said Schahin.

According to him, the social ascension of the new middle class, which goes shopping at the street, also reflects Lula's life story. "Brazil currently has a president who was able to draw, from adversity, the strength for his personal victory," said Schahin. He also stated that in foreign matters, Lula has assumed a diplomatic stance of inclusion and diversity.

That, according to Schahin, boosted the expansion of relations with the Arab world. He claimed that in the beginning of Lula's term in office, the Arab Brazilian Chamber handed him a document on the potential of trade between Brazil and the region.

"We estimated that Brazilian exports to the Arab nations had the potential to grow by 270% in four years, rising from US\$ 2.6 billion in 2002 to US\$ 7 billion in 2006," he said. As of 2008, however, trade between Arabs and Brazilians had already reached US\$ 9.8 billion. In 2009, a year of crisis, Brazilian exports to the region dropped by only 4.6%, a rate lower than the average.

Nevertheless, according to Schahin, the Arab Brazilian Chamber wants more out of relations with the Arabs, be it in trade and investment or tourism and culture. The organization, said its president, has established work committees in order to increase the flow of tourism and investment with the region.

It also has plans for establishing a Federation of South American Chambers and a House of Arab Culture in Brazil. According to him, the objective is to have the project for the Federation ready before the next Summit of Arab-South American Countries (ASPA), in Doha, Qatar.

The Colony

Schahin also underscored the importance of the Arab colony in Brazil. "We are approximately 12 million Arabs and their descendants. We, Arab Brazilians, have influenced the formation of Brazil in fields such as industry, trade, arts, architecture, medicine, language, cuisine," said Schahin. Such influence was evident, by the way, at the dinner itself, through the presence of politicians and ministers with Arab last names.

The mayor of São Paulo, Gilberto Kassab, an Arab descendent, attended the meeting and spoke on the matter. "São Paulo has the largest Arab community outside of the Arab world," stated the mayor. The colony's importance was also underscored in an address by state governor José Serra, who is of Italian origin and made several jokes about the subject.

According to Serra, the Arab community was the third one with which he became integrated in his life, after the Italian and Spanish ones. "I used to eat safihas and kibbehs before I even knew what the foreign community was," he said, drawing laughter from the attending crowd.

The governor made his calculations and claimed that the Arabs comprise roughly 6% of the Brazilian population. He mentioned the number of descendants in the government, including those attending the ceremony, such as the minister of Education, Fernando Haddad, of Arab origin.

Apart from Haddad, the dinner was attended by other non-government authorities of Arab origin, such as Paulo Skaf, president of the Federation of Industries of the State of Estado de São Paulo (Fiesp), federal representatives Beto Mansur, Jorginho Maluf and Paulo Maluf, and senator Romeu Tuma, the author of the project for establishing the National Day of the Arab Community.

The dean of the Council of Arab Ambassadors, Yousuf Al-Usaimi, also talked about the ties that bind Brazilians and Arabs. He praised the efforts that the federal government has been putting on to bring Brazil closer to the Arab world, not only through blood ties, but also in other spheres, such as the diplomatic, economic and political ones.

"Thanks to His Excellency, the first Summit of Arab and South American Countries was held in 2005," said Al-Usaimi. The dean stated that the Arab world acknowledges Lula's stance in favor of the Arab nations, as well as his work as president. "The world looks with respect and admiration on his actions for Brazil to attain progress," he said.

The dean claimed that the Arab community in Brazil takes pride in having Lula as its president, and that the Council of Arab Ambassadors is also proud of functioning in a "friendly country such as Brazil." The compliments paid to president Lula by both Schahin and the dean were applauded by the community attending the ceremony.

Poll finds 76% of Brazilians see the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as good or great. The popularity of Brazil's president is at its highest level since he took office in 2003.

The Datafolha polling institute says 76% of Brazilians see the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as good or great.

The poll reflects the highest support for a president since Datafolha began conducting such polls in 1990.

The institute says the president's popularity has increased three points from the last survey in February due to Brazil's socio-economic climate.

Da Silva's second term ends this year. The survey was published today in the Folha de S Paulo newspaper.

Brasilia, March 29 (Reuters) - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva launched a \$878 billion program to upgrade Brazil's infrastructure on Monday, setting out a major campaign banner for his chosen candidate in October elections.

Days before Lula's chief of staff, Dilma Rousseff, must step down to be able to campaign for president, the government said the program would spend 1.59 trillion reais (\$878 billion) on infrastructure in the coming years, with 959 billion reais (\$530 billion) earmarked for between 2011 and 2014.

Rousseff said the program would improve the lives of millions of Brazilians and reduce inequality by improving access to clean water, medical posts and energy as well as modernizing the country's air, road and rail system.

"We crossed the desert of stagnation and Brazil has resumed the path of development," Rousseff said in a speech in the capital Brasilia to launch the new package, her last major public event before leaving office. "But Lula's government, our government ... does not accept a path that doesn't have development with redistribution of income."

The hugely popular Lula, who cannot run for a third term, has anointed Rousseff the "Mother of the PAC," the acronym of the flagship infrastructure program, making clear he sees it as a key campaign strength for her.

The former union leader sought to allay concerns that the package signals a loosening of government spending discipline in an election year even as figures show inflation expectations rising sharply in recent months.

"We will do all this without losing sight of the need to take care with fiscal responsibility and inflation," he said. "An election year is time for us to think of the next generation."

Rousseff is expected to tout the massive investments to voters as evidence that Lula's center-left government is rapidly improving the pot-holed roads, clogged ports and underfunded health system that dog Latin America's biggest economy despite strong growth in recent years.

Delays

The centrist opposition, whose presidential candidate is expected to be Sao Paulo state Governor Jose Serra, has criticized the program as propaganda, pointing to lengthy delays in projects in its first phase, which began in 2007 and totaled about \$300 billion in investments.

Government figures show that only about half of the nearly 2,500 projects mandated under the first phase of the program have been completed.

Rousseff is trailing Serra in opinion polls, but has recently narrowed the gap and is seen by many analysts as the favorite because she will benefit from Brazil's rebounding economy and the support of the charismatic Lula.

By 2014, the new phase of the plan will spend an estimated 278 billion reais (\$154 billion) on the "My House, My Life" government program to provide low-income families with 2 million new homes, while 104.5 billion (\$57.7 billion) will go to upgrading the often decrepit transport system.

The country's energy sector will receive 465.5 billion reais (\$257 billion). The plan also calls for more than 2,800 new community police posts, nearly 8,700 basic health posts and 6,000 preschools to be set up in towns throughout the vast country.

As well as making Brazilians' lives harder, transport and other infrastructure bottlenecks prevent the country from achieving more lofty economic growth rates comparable to fellow emerging giants like India and China.

Brazil's ability to successfully host the world's biggest sporting events -- the soccer World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016 -- will also depend on ramping up spending on transport and stadiums.

As a cooling Rio summer sees the refreshing "March waters" clean the streets of Ipanema and the souls of the Cariocas after the Carnival, the political season is warming up. Beyond the next big occasion for many Brazilians - the South Africa-hosted football

World Cup in June 2010 - lies a series of nationwide elections on October 3: for the Brazilian congress, state governors and legislatures, and for the presidency itself where if necessary a second-round run-off will be held on 31 October.

What makes the presidential contest all the more riveting is that for the first time for a generation, one of the great figures of modern Brazilian politics, president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will not be a candidate. After waging three unsuccessful contests (in 1989, 1994, and 1998), Lula won the presidency in 2002 and has served two terms which in many ways have transformed Brazil.

Now he is leaving the stage, since Brazil's constitutional term-limits forbid a third consecutive period in office; though so successful has Lula been, that his return in 2014 must be at least a possibility. In any event, Brazilians are now faced with a great democratic test in which new figures - albeit in most cases familiar ones in the Brazilian political scene - will emerge to command the stage.

What does this moment reveal about the nature of Brazilian democracy in 2010, and about Lula's own impact and legacy?

The campaign starts officially at the beginning of April 2010. Brazil's leading parties are preparing intensely for the fight, none more so than the two giants: president Lula's Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party / PT) and the former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Party of the Brazilian Social Democracy / PSDB). Their competition promises to be one of the most intriguing aspects of the election.

The other parties' candidates are already flourishing their own wares and doing their best to attract media attention. A few days after the glamorous performances at Rio's Sambódromo, Marina Silva - Lula's former environment minister, now a senator running for president on the ticket of the Partido Verde (Green Party / PV) - lands in the city's Santos Dumont airport. The choking traffic delays her arrival at the powerful national radio station, CBN, so she tweets to say she is on her way.

In the interview, she declares that her campaign represents a "political realignment" in Brazil, one that could break the polarization between the PT and the PSDB: "My mission is to show people that we have to build a symphony, to create an orchestra - something that changes our way to produce, consume, and our relationship with nature."

It is an attractive image which also points to a deeper truth about the coming contest. For Brazil's presidential election of 2010 will in my view rather consolidate the current polarization in the country's political scene between these two major forces, making them and their leading politicians - and not candidates per se - decisive in the outcome. That is the logic behind the green senator's desire for a different alignment; and the reason why she has no chance of winning.

Moreover, I would argue that this current PT/PSDB standoff is a very positive trend for the Brazilian polity, and one that underpins the country's current economic advance that has received so much worldwide attention and praise. Whoever is victorious after (most likely) a second round on 31 October, there will be overall continuity. The political

substance of this continuity is also worth noting: in Brazil today, nobody wants to be "on the right."

Across-Boundaries Agreement

A clue to the shape of post-Lula Brazil is that the two certain candidates for the respective major parties have each been close presidential servants. José Serra, the governor of São Paulo who represents the PSDB, is a very experienced politician with a huge profile in the country's richest state; but he also gained national visibility and power as health minister in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1994-2002).

In 2002, Serra actually won the political fight for succession against other of Cardoso's ministers, but lost to Lula in what was the former lathe-operator's first victory.

For her part Dilma Rousseff, Lula's chief-of-staff, has never been a candidate in any major election before. Her rise to power was facilitated by the mensalão (big monthly allowance) corruption scandals of 2006-07, which engulfed influential PT figures such as José Dirceu (Rousseff's predecessor as chief-of-staff) and Antonio Palocci (Brazil's former finance minister), who otherwise would have been certain candidates for the presidency.

Dilma Rousseff, a distant product, as her name suggests, of the great Bulgarian Diaspora that also produced Venezuela's Teodoro Petkoff, has for months been doing her best to accrue the benefits of closeness to an enormous popular incumbent.

Indeed, the influential Brazilian polling institute DataFolha measures Lula's approval-rating as the highest recorded for any president in Brazil since 1990, with 73% of Brazilians saying that Lula's government is "good" or "very good." No wonder that Dilma travels around the country with Lula and is often pictured alongside him.

It is already evident, however, that an effort is being made to transform the 2010 election into a comparison of Brazil's two longest administration's since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985: Cardoso's (1994-2002) and Lula's (2002-10).

The rhetorical heat hasn't waited for the official campaign to start: the PT's new head, José Eduardo Dutra, said in November 2009 that Brazilians "will compare two projects known to them", while Cardoso retorted that "Lula is passing through an euphoric moment" that leads him "to distort what has happened in my government."

This comparison will play out in coming months, with the (very similar) economic record of the two governments being a key issue. The Cardoso side are bound to argue that context is everything: for it was Cardoso's real plan that rebalanced the Brazilian economy after decades of chronic instability, and thus left Lula an enviable freedom of governance.

A Shared Road

The trend towards a stable political duopoly at the heart of Brazilian democracy is also favored by the pragmatic character of the country's politics since the restoration of

democracy after military dictatorship. These two decades have strengthened the political parties and - even with a popular leader as Lula - diminished the once-dominant "personalizing" trend that elevated charisma into a political principle.

Indeed, the Brazilian political scientist César Romero Jacob has written that any candidate for the presidency in Brazil must now work in at least four "power-structures": the educated urban middle class, the evangelicals, the populism of the periphery, and the regional oligarchies.

Lula, for example, made an alliance with the evangelicals in choosing José Alencar to be his vice-president. Alencar, from the Partido Republicano Brasileiro (Brazilian Republican Party / PRB), is a conservative politician who has been a vocal critic of same-sex marriage and of homosexuality.

The current president, always loved by the Brazilian urban middle class, has won many votes in the periphery and among regional oligarchies (often mediated through the support of politicians with a strong regional base, such as ex-president José Sarney in north and northeast Brazil).

In addition, the success of Lula's social programs like Bolsa Família (Family Allowance) - which distributes a small amount of income to 15 million Brazilian families, and has had a huge progressive impact on their human security - both helps in poverty-reduction and also reinforces local political authorities in very poor regions against traditional oligarchies, thus guaranteeing political support (and votes) for the government on the periphery.

True, this process was started in Cardoso's administration but was consolidated and expanded in Lula's and this may work in Dilma Rousseff's favor. In fact, some polls suggest that 40% of those who receive the Bolsa Família will vote for Dilma Rousseff against 25% who prefer José Serra. In a broad sense, the alliances and strategies that made Lula's election possible in 2002 and 2006 - after three successive defeats - will be behind Dilma Rousseff in 2010.

The PSDB side, without the benefit of incumbency, also seeks to build a coalition for victory. The key figure for the party's political strategy is Aécio Neves, governor of the state of Minas Gerais. Neves is the grandson of Tancredo Neves, a politician of historic stature strongly linked to the democratization process in Brazil; he was elected president by the Brazilian congress in 1985, in the first free election after two decades of the military regime, but died before assuming the presidency.

Aécio Neves has served two terms as governor of Minas Gerais, whose voting power is second only to that of São Paulo in Brazil, and retained 70%-plus levels of popularity among the Mineiros. He has never hidden his desire to be the PSDB candidate in the 2010 election, but as a younger man he has not yet been able to overtake position of Serra, an older and more senior figure, within the party.

This makes the prospect of a joint José Serra-Aécio Neves ticket very attractive to the PSDB, though Neves has yet to be persuaded of the virtues of being a vice-presidential candidate. This partnership could secure a majority of votes in Minas Gerais and heavy

support from politicians linked to the powerful governor, and in addition deflect the criticism of those who see Serra as too Paulista and rather an arrogant politician.

Some in the PSDB even see opening a glorious path to a sixteen-year political hegemony, with a re-elected Serra in 2014 passing the baton to Neves for two further terms. Brazilians in the Lula era have, after all, learned to dream.

A Left-Hand Drive

At this early stage, the outcome in 2010 is in the balance. José Serra leads in the polls, though he has lost some ground to Dilma Rousseff: the DataFolha agency gives him 32% supports and Dilma 28% (as against 37% for Serra and 23% for Dilma in December 2009). These emerging great rivals are also not very different from each other in political character: both are centralizers and politicians who value administration skills.

But whatever the election outcome, Brazil's current political map guarantees the existence of a strong opposition and an alternative source of power; it thus strengthens the country's political institutions and political continuity.

In general terms, the administrations of Cardoso and Lula were very similar. Both sustained economic stability and applied policy in social areas that had been completely neglected for decades. Cardoso put more emphasis on healthcare and basic education; Lula on the universities, the Bolsa Família and infrastructure.

It may be too that the Partido dos Trabalhadores believes more than the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira in the capacity of the state to solve social and economic problems. The two parties also have somewhat different approaches towards foreign policy, though this too has its limits; both Serra and Cardoso would be considered "liberals" in the United States sense.

Thus the PSDB is most definitely not a party on the "right wing" of Brazilian politics, even if this is what the PT would like it to be. Psdebistas are much more social democrats than liberals or conservatives. But it is also true that the need for political alliances has moved the PT from the left to the center - and kept it there.

Within this context, Brazil's party-polarization both guarantees continuity and makes the center-left the dominant position in the country. It may seem paradoxical, but this makes the 2010 election more interesting than ever. It can be said again: welcome to politics, Brazil.

Visiting Uruguay's President Jose Mujica said Monday that Brazil should take the lead in Latin America's ascent onto the world political arena.

The energy-rich Brazil should speak for Latin America when the world is being reorganized into big blocs, Mujica said before meeting with Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brasilia.

But Mujica cautioned that such a position comes with political and economic burdens.

"The problem is that those make the invitation must pay the lunch," he said.

Highlighting the importance of the Brazil-Uruguay relations, he said that Brazil has always helped Uruguay when it is in trouble.

On trade cooperation, Mujica said "Brazil is our main trade partner. We must secure the flow of dairy products, meat and grains between the two countries. That is very important to Uruguay."

The two leaders are expected to discuss the role of their countries in the Union of South American Nations, joint energy projects and the construction of a bridge on the Brazil-Uruguay border.

The Government decided today to contribute SEK 1.6 million for a pilot scheme in 2010 involving investment promotion activities in Brazil. The funds will go to the Invest in Sweden Agency (ISA).

The ISA plans to establish an office in Sao Paulo and will market Sweden as an attractive investment country by presenting investment opportunities in Sweden to actors in Brazil, building up contacts and preparing Brazilian business delegations to Sweden.

One prioritized area is health technology. On 25-28 May, the ISA, together with the Swedish Trade Council, Swedish businesses and trade associations, will take part in HOSPITALAR, Latin America's largest - and the world's second largest - industrial fair for health products. In order to take part in the fair, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has decided to allocate SEK 400 000 to the Swedish Trade Council.

"Brazil is by far Latin America's largest economy, and in addition has experienced strong growth in recent years. We also see that Brazilian companies are increasingly looking to set up operations abroad, and it is therefore important that we are in place there and market Sweden. This can lead to more jobs and increased business cooperation between our countries," says Minister for Trade Ewa Björling.

The value of Sweden's exports to Brazil in 2009 amounted to some SEK 6.6 billion. This corresponds to about 0.7 per cent of Sweden's total exports. Brazil's exports to Sweden in 2009 amounted to SEK 3.7 billion.

Last year, the ISA conducted a pilot study that indicated considerable potential for investment exchange between Sweden and Brazil, including cleantech, the packing industry and material technology (focusing on cellulose), and IT and telecommunications.

The Angolan Foreign Affairs minister, Assunção dos Anjos, travelled this Tuesday to Brazil to attend the sixth extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Portuguese Speaking Countries Community (CPLP), to happen until March 31.

According to a press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which reached ANGOP at Luanda's 4 de Fevereiro International Airport, the incumbent ministers of the CPLP's member countries will meet on Wednesday in its extraordinary session to analyse the strategies and actions that will project the Portuguese Language in the world and they make recommendations for the next summit of the community to take place in Luanda in 2010.

According to the document, the conference started on March 25 and it was split into two stages. Thus, the first stage ended on March 27 and it gathered writers, journalists, teachers, scholars, publishers, among other professionals directly connected to the dissemination of the Portuguese Language.

These professionals reflected on the need to strengthen the teaching of the Portuguese Language, its implantation in international organizations and its importance for the Diasporas of the CPLP's member states.

The second stage, to end on Tuesday, will gather governmental delegations to discuss the proposals considered likely to make up an action program of the community to accomplish the objectives outlined by the heads of state and government in the "Declaration on Portuguese Language", which was approved in 2008 in Lisbon.

The international conference on the future of the Portuguese Language and the extraordinary meeting of the Council of Minister happens under the joint Presidency of Brazil (host) and Portugal as the current chair of the community.

The meeting was attended by delegations of the CPLP's member states, invited delegations from Equatorial Guinea, Mauritius, Senegal as Associated Observer states of CPLP, reads the press note.

In 2003, the Brazilian Ministry of Health declared combating tuberculosis one of its top priorities ten year after the World Health Organization had declared tuberculosis a world emergency. According to Health minister José Gomes Temporão, there was then a change in strategy.

"First, reducing TB was made a priority, then combating TB was decentralized."

Since then Brazil has managed to slowly reduce TB cases but remains one of the twenty-two countries where 80% of all TB cases occur. In 2007, total TB cases were 72,140, which fell to 70,989 in 2008, reducing the rate of infection from 38.1 cases per 100,000 inhabitants to 37.4.

During that period, Brazil improved on the world list of countries where TB occurs, going from 18th to 19th place in number of cases.

One of the high points of the new strategy used since 2003 is Directly Observed Treatment (TDO) where new patients are monitored and their treatment is supervised for a six-month period.

In 2002, less than 4% of all new cases of TB were monitored in Brazil. Today the ministry is able to closely monitor 43% of all new cases. Supervised treatment sharply increases the chances of a cure, explains the minister.

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by the Koch bacillus (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*) that can attack various organs in the body, but is found mainly in the lungs. TB is an airborne disease, spread by coughing and sneezing.

Rio de Janeiro is the state with the highest rate of tuberculosis cases per 100,000 inhabitants: 68.64. It is followed by Amazonas (67.88 cases per 100,000 inhabitants), Pernambuco (47.61), Pará (43.72), Ceará (43.2) and Rio Grande do Sul (42.53).

The lowest rates of TB infection are found in the Federal District (13.73), Tocantins (13.67) and in Goiás (13.91).

The Ministry of Health reports that the national average rate of TB infection is 37.4 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. Some groups are much more likely to be infected: indigenous populations have an infection rate four times the national average; people with HIV/AIDS are thirty times more likely to get the disease and prison inmates twenty-five times more likely to get TB.

In Brazil, the numbers show a sad reality: that among patients with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis is the principal cause of death. In 2002, the percentage of patients with HIV/AIDS who had tuberculosis was 26.7%. In 2008, that number had risen to 48%.

However, the Ministry of Health warns: "Tuberculosis is a disease that can infect anyone, regardless of income, social class or educational background."

The percentage of cases of tuberculosis that were cured in Brazil went from 69% in 2002, to 73% in 2008. The World Health Organization says the standard should be an 85% cure rate.

The key to successful cure rates is early detection, says Dráulio Barreira, who runs the National Tuberculosis Control Program. And Diego Victoria, who represents the Pan American Health Organization in Brazil, adds that precise diagnosis and efficient treatment are also essential.

But, Victoria points out, good diagnosis and treatment are things that one in three people infected with TB worldwide do not have. "We need new, better means to combat this disease, along with new medicines, faster diagnostic tools, vaccines and health services that are easily available. We need to attack TB on a united front, at the federal, state and local levels. This is something that has to be at the top of our list of priorities all the time."

In its most recent report, the World Health Organization dealt at length with the problem of drug-resistant tuberculosis, that now exists in two types: the XDR (extensively drug-resistant) and MDR (multidrug-resistant).

The problem can be summed up as follows: standard TB can be cured in six months when treated with a cocktail of four drugs that cost around US\$ 20 if the patient takes the drugs as prescribed.

Drug-resistant TB can take more than two years to cure using highly toxic drugs that cost US\$ 5,000 per patient. Drug-resistant TB usually appears in patients with standard TB who have not taken their drugs correctly - incorrect usage, instead of killing the bacillus, allows it to mutate.

Detailed Report/Mexico

Mexico's drug problem is America's problem. That was particularly evident this month when hit men murdered three people connected to the U.S. Consulate in Ciudad Juarez. So it was good to see President Barack Obama's senior national security team visit Mexico this week to underscore America's commitment to fighting drug-related violence.

The \$331 million aid plan the administration announced should lay the basis for a much more effective counter narcotics strategy. Rather than supplying Mexico with military aid to fight the drug war, Washington will now focus on building strong civilian institutions — effective local police forces, a functional judiciary and community groups in the border towns struggling with poverty, violence and crime.

That was the right message with the right messengers: the secretaries of state, defense and homeland security. The violence that killed 3,400 people in Mexico the past year stems heavily from the American appetite for drugs and the trade of weapons across the border. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said proposals to cut drug demand and gun smuggling will be unveiled soon.

Drug violence in Mexico threatens to spill even farther into American cities as gangs battle to control territory, exact revenge and maintain pipelines. Obama's security team signaled the American interests at stake. But the United States will need to follow through if it hopes to keep the drug-related violence from exploding across both sides of the border.

(Reuters) - Powerful groups in the United States appear to be blocking efforts to stem the flow of assault weapons fueling Mexico's drug war, Mexican President Felipe Calderon said in an interview broadcast on Sunday.

Calderon, who has deployed tens of thousands of soldiers and police to fight drug cartels, told Fareed Zakaria's "GPS" program on CNN that there was resistance in Washington to Mexico's demands that sales of such weapons be stopped.

"They (U.S. officials) say that they are facing strong opposition and there are powerful lobbies in the Congress in order to change that situation," Calderon said in a pre-taped interview in Mexico City.

The Mexican leader added that solving the cross-border gun trafficking problem was critical to his bid to crack down on the drug-related violence that has killed 4,600 people in the past two years.

Mexico says 90 percent of the weapons used by drug gangs are bought in the United States, often legally. Mexican officials also want to see the U.S. Congress reinstate a ban on the sale of assault weapons that expired in 2004.

U.S. gun rights groups generally oppose such a restriction.

The United States is already deeply involved in Mexico's struggle with drug gangs and has pledged some \$1.4 billion over three years in a thus-far unsuccessful effort to crush cartels that ship \$40 billion worth of illegal drugs north each year.

But concerns the violence in Mexico is escalating -- two U.S. citizens were shot to death this month in the violent Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez -- has led top U.S. officials to pledge more assistance.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton led a high-level delegation to Mexico City last week for talks, underscoring the Obama administration's concerns about the drug violence south of the border.

Washington has started to increase searches of southbound vehicles on its border with Mexico for guns and money heading to Mexican cartels.

Mexican soldiers have arrested a suspect in the killings of three people linked to the U.S. consulate in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua state police said Monday.

Police spokesman Enrique Torres said the suspect arrested on Friday was a member of the Barrio Azteca gang.

Torres did not release the man's name, but a Chihuahua state investigator who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to discuss the case identified the suspect as Ricardo Valles de la Rosa, 45.

Consulate employee Lesley A. Enriquez and her husband, Arthur H. Redelfs, were killed March 13 in Juarez when gunmen opened fire on their sport utility vehicle after they left a birthday party. Their 7-month-old daughter was found wailing in the back of the vehicle.

Jorge Alberto Salcido, the husband of a Mexican employee of the consulate, also was killed by gunmen after leaving the same event in a separate vehicle.

Torres said the suspect is a leader of the Barrio Azteca gang, but gave no other details. He said the suspect would be presented to the media later Monday.

U.S. and Mexican authorities say the Barrio Azteca gang works for the Juarez drug cartel and operates on both sides of the border.

Initially a Texas prison gang, Barrio Azteca expanded across the Rio Grande into Juarez in the late 1990s, U.S. authorities have said.

Last week, El Paso police and Texas state troopers arrested 25 people in a sweep of suspected gang members.

Ciudad Juarez, across from El Paso, Texas, is one of the world's deadliest places. More than 2,600 people were killed last year, and another 500 so far this year in the city of 1.3 million.

Elsewhere in Mexico, at least 16 people were killed Sunday in drug violence.

In the northern state of Durango, gunmen killed 10 youths traveling in a pickup truck after they refused to stop at an illegal roadblock, state investigators said in a statement.

The youths, ages 8 to 21, were heading to the town of Los Naranjos to collect federal financial aid given to students when they were shot at and attacked with grenades. Four of the victims were siblings from one family.

Also Sunday, three gunmen died in a clash with soldiers near a park packed with families in the border city of Nuevo Laredo, across from Laredo, Texas, authorities said in a statement.

Tamaulipas state investigators said police on Sunday also found the bodies of three men who had been shot to death in the town of Miguel Aleman, about 60 miles (100 kilometers) east of Nuevo Laredo.

Tamaulipas has seen a surge of violence in recent weeks that authorities blame on a turf battle between the Gulf cartel and the Zetas.

Drug-related violence in Mexico has claimed 17,900 lives since President Felipe Calderon declared war on the drug gangs in December 2006. Powerful drug cartels have been battling not only authorities but each other for turf and drug routes.

At least five alleged criminals were killed during a clash with the Mexican Army near Monterrey city, capital of Nuevo Leon state in northern Mexico, the Mexican Defense Ministry said on Monday.

The clash occurred on Sunday in a motel in Santa Catarina municipality of Nuevo Leon near Monterrey, 900 km north to the capital Mexico City, the ministry said in a statement.

The patrolling troops were attacked by gunmen when they arrived at the motel in response to an urgent call from a citizen.

Five gunmen were killed, including two women and three men. One of them was nicknamed El Boxer, who was allegedly linked to the murder of Arturo Esparza, the public security chief of Garcia municipality, and four of his bodyguards last November.

Energy and Resources Minister Gerry Brownlee and Mexico's Secretary of Energy Georgina Kessels have signed a cooperation arrangement in Cancun, Mexico to facilitate bilateral collaboration in the field of renewable energy.

The Arrangement on Cooperation in the Field of New and Renewable Energy between the Secretariat of Energy of Mexico and the Ministry of Economic Development of New Zealand formalizes cooperative institutional relationships that will encourage development of renewable energy and promote good bilateral relations.

"The types of initiatives that may be pursued under the arrangement include closer cooperation between New Zealand and Mexican research organizations and businesses, and educational exchanges between energy and climate change researchers between our countries," Mr Brownlee said.

“The focus will be on improving renewable energy knowledge and expertise, so that both our countries can benefit and encourage renewable energy development.”

The arrangement is a non-binding memorandum of understanding that has been negotiated between Mexico’s Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Economic Development, in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The agreement could lead to New Zealand clean energy companies expanding their sales in Mexico.

Mr Brownlee has been attending the International Energy Forum in Cancun, Mexico. The International Energy Forum is the world’s largest gathering of Energy Ministers, with countries participating in the forum accounting for more than 90 per cent of global oil and gas supply and demand.

March 25 (Bloomberg) -- Mexico’s peso rose for the third time this week as the unemployment rate in February fell more than forecast.

The currency gained 0.2 percent to 12.5655 per U.S. dollar at 5 p.m. New York time, from 12.5857 yesterday.

The unemployment rate fell to 5.43 percent in February, from 5.87 percent in January, the national statistics agency said today. Economists forecast a jobless rate of 5.7 percent, according to the median of 15 estimates compiled by Bloomberg.

The unemployment number in Mexico “is a good sign that signals steady improvement and progress of the economy,” said Aryam Vazquez, an emerging-markets economist at Wells Fargo & Co. in New York. “This certainly brightens the outlook of the economy on the demand side, which had been somewhat weak.”

The yield on Mexico’s 10 percent peso bond due in 2024 rose three basis points, or 0.03 percentage point, to 8.05 percent, according to Banco Santander SA. The price of the security fell 0.26 centavo to 116.172 centavos per peso.

Detailed Report/Venezuela

During a meeting in the Palace of Miraflores (the seat of the Venezuelan government) with cycling and athletics medalists coming from the South American games, President Hugo Chávez said he was decreeing the whole week of Easter as holidays in order to save energy.

"Easter is coming and we have decreed (the first three days of next week) Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday as holidays. The whole week over Easter will be days off. "The goal is not for people to laze around, but to save energy," Chávez said during the meeting.

Venezuela is undergoing severe power shortages amid a drought that has brought water levels at the Venezuelan main hydroelectric dam down near critical level. Chávez declared a nationwide power emergency on Feb. 8.

Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez said on Friday in Quito that his government has decided to "wait for the upcoming elections and see the attitude of the next Colombian President" to make a decision on resumption of bilateral relations.

Chávez added that Colombia's next president must be "someone with the ability of a statesman." He warned that "as we respect Colombia and its sovereignty, and we have the burden of the problems coming from there, we expect that they respect the sovereignty of our countries."

Finally, he stressed that "the Colombian government has shown profound disrespect against its neighboring countries, especially Venezuela, and also Ecuador," DPA reported.

Diplomatic relations between Venezuela and Colombia are "frozen" since July 28, 2009.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro described as "politicized" the position of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which reported the "lack of independence" of the Judiciary in Venezuela. Further, he accused the body of "meddling in the internal affairs" of Venezuela.

"We reject and repudiate this," said Maduro from Quito early Friday, as quoted in a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry.

According to the government, the IACHR -whose stance was based solely "on the arguments of the put schist opposition in Venezuela"- is endorsing "two public figures who are currently facing trial for violating the law and inciting hatred," the statement said, as reported by AFP.

The IACHR "can not impose a sort of supranational law, a sort of power than can meddle in the internal affairs and institutions of all our countries," Maduro said.

March 26 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said the South American nation discovered a "super well" that shows an offshore field holds almost twice as much natural gas as originally estimated.

The field may hold as much as 14 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, more than the previously reported 8 trillion cubic feet, Chavez said today on state television, without identifying the gas deposit.

"We have drilled tens of wells in the Caribbean and recently discovered a super well," Chavez said from Ecuador, where he met with President Rafael Correa. "A super deposit that was at 8, now could be as much as 14 trillion cubic feet."

Repsol YPF SA struck as much as 7.7 trillion cubic feet of gas in the Gulf of Venezuela, the company said Sept. 11. OAO Gazprom also found "significant quantities" of gas in a nearby field, Energy and Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez said Nov. 3. State oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA, or PDVSA, has the right to buy a stake in any natural-gas discovery made in the country.

Correa said PDVSA and Petroecuador failed to discover commercially viable amounts of gas after drilling on the island of Puna in Ecuador's Gulf of Guayaquil. Exploration will continue after additional seismic surveys, Correa said.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela's highest court on Sunday barred an outspoken opponent of President Hugo Chavez from talking to news media about criminal charges alleging he struck a police official.

The Supreme Court's order prohibits lawmaker Wilmer Azuaje from "talking in relation to the present issue through any media outlet," including television, radio, newspapers or the Internet.

It said the measure is meant to protect the "reputation, integrity and honor of the victim."

The court order comes as a chorus of Chavez critics and human rights groups are accusing the government of increasingly using the courts to punish its adversaries while ignoring other allegedly illegal acts by the socialist leader's allies.

Chavez rejects such accusations.

Azuaje, a former supporter of the president, has denied any wrongdoing, saying the charges against him are politically motivated for his criticism of the Chavez and his family.

The legislator from Chavez's home state of Barinas has long complained of harassment by authorities that he claims is retaliation for his allegations of corruption and nepotism against Chavez's family. The family denies the accusations.

Police official Yuraima Castillo has accused Azuaje of verbally abusing her and grabbing and hitting her on the shoulder during an argument while he was picking up a car that had been stolen from his mother and recovered by police.

Azuaje was detained Thursday after prosecutors accused him of insulting a public official and breaking a law that prohibits violence against women.

The National Assembly, which is dominated by allies of Chavez, lifted Azuaje's immunity as a lawmaker from prosecution Friday — a rare step usually reserved for crimes such as corruption.

Azuaje was released from police custody after appearing in court Saturday.

The order issued by the Supreme Court on Sunday said Azuaje was freed on the condition he return to court every 15 days while awaiting trial. He is also banned from leaving the country and must undergo an evaluation conducted by court authorities who specialize in cases involving violence against women.

Azuaje, a former member of the president's ruling party, has called Chavez a "coward" and accused him of using the judicial and legislative branches of government to go after opponents.

The Venezuelan government "strongly condemned" the attacks on Moscow's subway on Monday, which killed at least 38 people, and voiced confidence that Russia "will defeat the scourge of terrorism."

The Venezuelan government "expresses its sorrow and reiterates its solidarity with (Russian) authorities, and offers its words of encouragement to the brotherly people of Russia, with the conviction that (Russia) will defeat the scourge of terrorism and will continue living in peace and harmony in its independent road to prosperity and development," read the statement released by the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez "expresses his deepest sorrow for the loss of dozens of innocent people and expresses his sympathies to the relatives of the victims," the statement added.

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) — The leader of Venezuela's Roman Catholic Church accused the government of President Hugo Chavez on Monday of using judges and prosecutors to punish political adversaries.

Cardinal Jorge Urosa said authorities are unfairly prosecuting Chavez opponents for simply criticizing the government.

Urosa said an increasing number of Chavez's foes are being "imprisoned for their opinion" and he urged Venezuelans to speak out against "any violation of human rights." Human rights groups already have expressed concerns that Chavez is becoming increasingly authoritarian and cracking down on dissent.

Chavez denies doing that. The president says he holds no sway over the justice system, but encourages authorities to uphold Venezuelan laws.

Meanwhile, a Venezuelan lawmaker said Monday he was being prosecuted for his outspoken criticism of Chavez and his family and appealed for international support. Wilmer Azuaje said charges that he struck a police official are politically motivated and that Chavez intends to keep him from running for re-election and to silence him.

"Chavez's goal is to eliminate me" from the political arena, he told The Associated Press.

Over the past week, prosecutors brought criminal charges against Guillermo Zuloaga, the majority shareholder of Venezuela's lone anti-Chavez television channel, and opposition politician Oswaldo Alvarez Paz for making remarks that authorities deemed misleading and offensive to the president. Both deny any wrongdoing and say they stand by their statements.

Zuloaga, owner of the TV channel Globovision, is facing charges for making what prosecutors consider false and "offensive" remarks about Chavez at an Inter American Press Association meeting in Aruba.

Alvarez Paz, a former state governor, has been charged with conspiracy, spreading false information and publicly inciting crime after commenting during a TV interview that

Venezuela has turned into a haven for drug traffickers, and also backing allegations by a Spanish judge that Venezuela has cooperated with the Basque separatist group ETA and Colombian rebels — accusations Chavez denies.

Cardinal Urosa also called attention to the case of Maria Afiuni, a judge jailed on charges of corruption and abuse of power for freeing a high-profile banker. Afiuni denies breaking the law, and government critics argue her arrest in December shows the judiciary's lack of independence.

In a case the cardinal did not mention, the lawmaker Azuaje has been accused of insulting a police official and striking her on the shoulder during an argument last week.

Azuaje, a former Chavez ally, called on the Organization of American States to step in after pro-Chavez lawmakers voted to strip him of his immunity from prosecution — a rare step that in the past has usually been reserved for serious crimes.

A court on Sunday ordered Azuaje suspended from his post and barred him from holding public office while he is being tried. But Azuaje told the AP he aims to run for re-election in September's congressional elections.

"I'm going to do it because I haven't committed any crime," Azuaje said. "This is a political trial."

The legislator, who is from Chavez's home state of Barinas, has long complained of harassment by authorities and violent incidents that he believes are in retaliation for his allegations of corruption and nepotism against Chavez's family. Relatives of the president deny the accusations.

Azuaje claims he and his family have been the targets of repeated violence aimed at pressuring him to halt his accusations against the president's relatives. In a shooting last year, hooded gunmen sprayed his Caracas home with bullets, injuring two neighbors. Azuaje contends the gunmen were trying to kill him, but police called it an attempted robbery.

Months earlier, one of his brothers, Cesar, was gunned down at a service station in Barinas. Azuaje claims the shooting was also meant to shut him up. But police, who have arrested two suspects, counter that the slaying was the unfortunate outcome of an attempted robbery.

Caracas -- Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will visit Venezuela on Friday, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said on Tuesday.

A statement of the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry said that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev confirmed Putin's visit to Venezuela during a phone call with Chavez.

The Venezuelan leader expressed his sorrow for the victims of the subway attacks in Moscow during the phone conversation.

The statement said that during the conversation, Medvedev said Putin's visit to Venezuela is an opportunity to move ahead on the cooperation mechanisms between the two

countries on energy, industry, agriculture, defense and other areas. Medvedev also invited Chavez to visit Moscow again in order to strengthen the true friendship between both presidents and the strategic alliance between both countries.

Both presidents agreed to discuss a date for a meeting between them, according to the statement.

(Reuters) - Russia will cement energy and arms ties with Latin America when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin travels to Caracas this week to meet two of the United States' biggest foes, Venezuelan and Bolivian Presidents Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales.

The two leftist leaders can view Putin's visit as a boost after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said this month that Washington's critics were losing force in the region.

Kremlin watchers will be also tracking comments by Putin on ties with Washington and specifically on a landmark arms-control treaty that his handpicked successor, President Dmitry Medvedev, and U.S. leader Barack Obama have agreed to sign in April.

"It is always a good chance for Putin to show to the United States that we have a lot of friends all over the world," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the magazine Russia in Global Affairs.

Caracas and Moscow said one-day talks between Putin and Chavez would focus on energy, agriculture and defense. Putin's office also said energy would be at the center of talks with Morales, who will meet Putin in Caracas also on Friday.

Venezuela, South America's top oil exporter and a member of the oil producers cartel OPEC, is seeking funds and technology to help develop its oil deposits and is also seeking loans to buy Russian military hardware.

"We should expect a lot of big arms and energy contracts. When Putin has traveled recently to centres like India he brought back a lot," added Lukyanov.

Putin secured \$10 billion in energy, nuclear and arms deals in India this month.

Chavez traveled to Moscow in September to receive over \$2 billion in loans for weaponry, including tanks and the S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile.

During the trip he announced Venezuela recognized two pro-Russian rebel regions of Georgia as independent states, a rare diplomatic success for Moscow, which has tried unsuccessfully to persuade its allies to do so.

Clinton expressed concern last September about Venezuelan arms purchases and their potential for triggering an arms race in the region.

Energy Relationship

Venezuela wants to beef up its arsenal to resist what Chavez terms U.S. imperialism in Latin America, though tensions have also been rising with neighboring Colombia, a close U.S. ally and historic rival of Venezuela.

"Russia sees the strengthening of its positions in this region as an extremely important and a good answer to the widening U.S. influence in Central Asia," said Alexei Mukhin, who directs the Moscow-based Center for Political Information.

In February, a consortium of Russian firms and Venezuela's state-run PDVSA agreed to set up a venture to tap the Junin 6 oil field in the Orinoco oil belt, which Venezuela says has the world's largest hydrocarbon reserves.

The development will require \$20 billion in investments over 40 years to produce 450,000 barrels per day, or almost a fifth of Venezuela's current oil production, and will involve state giant Rosneft and private major LUKOIL.

Valery Nesterov, analyst at Troika Dialog brokerage, said private Russian firms were struggling to expand on home turf because of limited access to big deposits and tax uncertainty.

"In Venezuela the geology is good, reserves are great. From that point of view, the conditions are ideal there, though this does not, of course, remove concerns about political risk."

Chavez, who says the United States could attack Venezuela for its oil reserves, has also said Moscow and Tehran are helping Venezuela develop its nuclear energy production -- but not an atomic bomb -- to confront a power crisis.

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