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Book Reviews

Book's Title: Living With Hugo: U.S. Policy toward Hugo Chávez's Venezuela/U.S.-Venezuela Policy: A Reality Based Approach.

Authors: Feinberg, Richard

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Reviews & Products: LIVING With Hugo: U.S. Policy Towards Hugo Chavez's Venezuela (Book)

U.S.-Venezuela Policy: A Reality Based Approach (Book)

Author: Richard Lapper.

Publisher: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006, 56 pp

Abstract: This article reviews the book "Living with Hugo: U.S. Policy toward Hugo Chavez's Venezuela," by Richard Lapper and "U.S.-Venezuela Policy: A Reality Based Approach," by Daniel Restrepo.

Hugo Chávez presents the inter-American system with a tough dilemma: What do you do when free people elect a charismatic autocrat intent on dismantling democracy? Lapper, whose articles in the Financial Times have repeatedly highlighted Chávez's rhetorical taunts and spreading influence, now counsels the United States to ignore the strongman's theatrics. Instead, the United States should tackle the underlying problems of inequality and poverty that feed Chávez's appeal--a tall order if we accept Lapper's apparent view (expressed through the journalistic device of "many Latin Americans perceive") that the U.S.-backed market-oriented economic reforms of the 1990s have failed. Lapper also suggests rallying other Latin American countries to establish "red lines" that Chávez should not cross, although he does not specify what sanctions should follow any violation. Finally, Lapper proposes bilateral engagement with Venezuela on specific issues (security, drugs, and energy), an approach now favored by the State Department.

In contrast, Restrepo, who directs the Americas Project at the Center for American Progress, labels attempts to engage the purposefully anti-U.S. Chávez "an exercise in unwarranted futility." Instead, the respected former congressional aide foreshadows possible elements of a future Democratic Party policy toward Latin America: U.S. condemnation of antidemocratic behavior by Chávez, a "results-neutral" multilateral promotion of democracy throughout the region, "smart trade agreements" that feature assistance for displaced workers, beefed-up bilateral aid, and, most innovative, a U.S. energy policy built on renewable fuel sources, creating new opportunities for partnerships with Brazil and the sugar-rich Caribbean basin.

Neither contribution, however stimulating, fully comes to grip with the central Chávez challenge: his emotive appeal to deep-seated Latin American instincts that privilege authoritarian centralism over independent institutions, political polarization over democratic compromise, and state populism over market incentives. As both studies imply, the inter-American system requires new tools to counter these retrograde reflexes.

Abstract Summary/Summary of Book Review

The article highlights the new form of socialism projected by Hugo Chavez in the region, an idea he claims will liberate the poor from the grip of capitalism. The author of the article argues that the United States should take less importance in Chavez's rhetoric rather to focus on the inequality and poor status of the people. Doing that, the U.S can divide the pool where Chavez gets its support.

The author also believes that sanction could be a measure to break the power of Chavez though that can only be possible through the co-operation of other Latin American countries. Despite, the advice to take strong stance on Chavez, Lapper nevertheless argues that U.S can still cooperate with Chavez on security, drug and energy front. But, a former congressional aide disagree with such cooperation, rather believes it will fail because of the personality and policy of Chavez. Yet, U.S can only gain more respect in the region if Washington can further promote and support democratic government and to open up trade and multilateral relations with friendly countries in the region.

If U.S must maintain good standing and image in the region, it has to change its strategy than what it has been known for in the region.

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Report Summary/Argentina

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Argentina is celebrating its 200th anniversary of independence from Spain. In this occasion the president of Argentina received many greetings from her counterparts from different countries like Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Pakistan. The prime minister of Pakistan Mr. Gilani said in his greeting message that he wants to increase more cordial relations with Argentina.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geo-strategic Issues

Argentine ambassador to Philippines said in a round table with some editors and reporters of The Times of Manila that Argentinean business men want to invest in the energy sector of Argentina. He said Argentina's technology of gas production is among the most advance in the world. He then discussed on the bilateral trade between both countries and said Argentine trade with Philippines decreased last year but Philippines' trade increased. Argentina is exporting agro-industrial, tobacco, wine and cereals etc while Philippines is exporting electronic products to Argentina.

Report Summary/Brazil

Political Issue

According to the latest Datafolha's poll of the presidential candidate, Ms. Serra got more favor of voters as she climbed 7 points and Mr. Serra's points decreased to 5 percent as compared to the previous poll. It is said Ms. Serra is getting benefit of the current president Mr. Lula's economic policies who is the most favorite president of Brazilian history. She said in a speech in New York that Brazilians are ready to elect a women candidate now. She would be the first woman president in the history of Brazil. While unveiling her economic policies she said the government can gradually reduce its inflation target in between 2011 and 2014. She also said that the tax reforms in the country will be from the top priorities of her government.

It is said that in BRIC countries China and Russia are more exposed economically rather than India and Brazil. Brazil and India are facing more social problems than China and Russia which are hurdle in their development. China's economy is most vulnerable in BRIC countries due to in terms of trade protectionism and its strong international financial position. China is considered the most and Brazil the least vulnerable economy of the BRIC. Meanwhile, Brazilian foreign minister said in an EU-Latin summit in Madrid last week that BRIC countries would be account for two third of the global economic growth in next five years as these countries comprises 40 percent of the world's population.

President Lula said to create more jobs and to counter drugs would be from the top priorities of his second tenure's last months. Now he is going to launch an anti drug campaign especially against the cocaine which addiction is increasing in Brazilian society. President Lula said \$200 million would be spent on this anti-drug plan to reinforce health services, social assistance, Church sponsored programs and social organizations tackling the issue. He said last year 995,000 jobs were created in the last year and 962,300 jobs are creates in the first four months of this year and 305,000 jobs were create in the month of April only. He is very hopeful that he could be provide 2 million jobs in this year and if the growth rate continue growing in the same speed, Brazil would have the lowest unemployment rate in the world.

Economic Issue

The head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a seminar in Brazil that the major challenge for the Brazilian government is to contain economic overheating. He said as the Brazilian economy is growing that can be overheated and the Brazilian government is aware of it and it is taking measures. He said at the global level the economy is growing faster than expected and the economic crisis doesn't mean that these ere forever. He said there should be the central coordination among all economies of the world and no matter if the policies are different.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has launched TV Brasil, a new Portuguese-language network based in Mozambique's capital Maputo and tasked with "saying good things" about Brazil. It will be broadcast in 40 countries of the world mostly of Africa and Brazil. The president of Mozambique recorded a message that this channel would be as a bridge between

African and Latin American nations especially between Portuguese speaking nations of these regions.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

The foreign minister of Bangladesh called new ambassador of Brazil in Bangladesh in her foreign office in a meeting. She said both Brazil and Bangladesh enjoy good and friendly relations and now there is need to extend their relations in trade, commerce, cultural and sports. Also both countries should organize the visits of their high officials to work on common issues of interests.

Health Issues

Brazilian ministry of health is going to prolong its campaign against A/H1N1 influenza as it was limited only in the children who are less than 1 year old, pregnant women and old persons. Now it will be above 1 years old children and the people of all ages, the minister of health since March 61 million Brazilian have been vaccinated and now the doses will be increased till 10.8 million.

Report Summary/Chile

Political Issues

Chilean court has again sent Mr. Saifur Rahman to the jail by labeling him a danger for the society. Mr. Saif was released after the US embassy's investigation from him when he was not found linked to the Time Square's case but later a local court of Chile again ordered to send him to jail as he can be a danger for the society.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

To control the tobacco consumption the ministry of health gave a proposal to the Chilean Congress to ban on the electronic cigarettes whose popularity increased in last five years and now almost 18,000 people are using this device.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geo-strategic Issues

Report Summary/Mexico

Political Issues

Mexican police has arrested the mayor of Cancun state at airport of Cancun state when he was coming back from Mexico City. He is charged of supporting drug cartels and money laundering. He was under investigation from January. The mayor belongs to the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution and now he was going to contest the election for the governorship

from a Caribbean state. Mexican government has arrested such high official first time who was involved in supporting drug cartels. Before this Mexican government has arrested a former governor of a state and extradited him to the United States.

Mexican drug cartels pay heavy amount to the Mexican officials as bribe to supporting them in their business. Many officials have been arrested who were accused of taking bribe from Mexican drug cartels and supporting them. More than 23,000 people have been died in Mexico's war against drug cartels and several security personnel as well. Drug members are killing those who are creating hurdles in their ways or do not support them as a candidate for the governorship from Mexico's National Action Party (PAN) was killed last week.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geo-strategic Issues

President Obama has told that he is spending US \$500 million on US-Mexico border for its security and other than this he is sending 1,200 National Guards troops on the border. But the two senators are asking president Obama to increase more forces and funds to protect the border. The funds would be utilized on technological instruments to monitor drug cartel's and illegal immigrants' activities. And the national guards will be doing intelligence, surveillance and provide information about drug related activities till the time more border security forces are deployed. Already 344 US national security guards are doing their job at the border. US authorities also want Mexican government's cooperation on the border to protect it and the Mexican president's last week tour to Washington was revolving around this discussion.

Mexican government has asked Canadian diplomats to get visa permission before coming to Canada. It is considered as retaliation as few days back Canadian Immigration Minister has required visa permit from Mexican and Czech Republic's citizens who were free to go to Canada before. The critiques on this is that it may affect Canada's trade with EU and Mexico because Czech Republic is a member of EU and Mexico is the member of North American Free Trade Area. On the other hand Canadian Immigration Minister told this is not the permanent requirement but for a few time which would be abolished soon. He also said the immigration issues would be discussed in the next NAFTA meeting which is gonna held in August in Mexico.

President Felipe Calderon said during his address to the joint session of the US Congress that US should ban on assault weapons because Mexican drug cartels are bring these assault weapons from US who are using against the Mexican troops and citizens in drug related war. He said Mexican government has seized 75,000 weapons in Mexico last year and 80 percent of those weapons were brought from the United States. Calderon's speech regarding ban on weapons was criticized by the Republicans' members from Texas that Calderon should not speak on United States' internal matter while it was received applause from the Democrats. Arizona's senator John McCain also criticized on Calderon's speech that he should not speak on immigration law of Arizona in the Congress and said Calderon's attitude was inappropriate.

Recently US government has pledged to give \$1.4 million to Mexico which will be spent on new equipments and to train Mexican forces to counter drug related cartels. As for as ban on assault weapons in US is concerned, one author wrote in an editorial that it is United State's internal matter which is not the work of Calderon to teach us. It is also said that such statements can harm the historical relationships of both states.

Report Summary/Venezuela

Political Issues

President Hugo Chaves has threatened to a private food company Polar to not to do the hoardings of food otherwise their business would be nationalized. He also asked to the attorney general to investigate the matter. The national guards seized their food few days back when the company stored the food somewhere. The workers of that store protested to not to nationalized the store. The president of Polar said his company is paying much wages to the workers and it is running the best quality food in Venezuela but if it is nationalized then it would not be profitable. As when Venezuela's gas company is not profitable now as it was much profitable when it was a private company.

Venezuelan government has started crackdown against the illegal currency traders and arrested 4 persons who were involved in brokerage of currency. Chavez said these illegal currency trade is causing inflation in the country.

President Chavez has criticized the leftist party of Venezuela which was the traditional ally of Chavez's leftist party before and now has left him. He also received criticism from his political party on his actions. His party is having no opposition in the parliament because most of the opponent parties boycotted in 2005 elections but now they have presented the names of their candidates.

Economic Issue

Due to the electricity shortage in the country the factories could not work properly which caused the production fall and it affected the Venezuelan economy. Industrial production plunged 9.9 percent and inflation raised much as compare to the last 7 years. According to the Bloomberg survey the economy of Venezuela declined 7 percent and also the Central Bank mentioned in its first quarterly report that Gross Domestic Product fall 5.8 percent in the first quarter of this year. An economist from New York said Venezuela's economy is the worst in the Latin America countries in spite of having large oil reservoirs. The entire decline is due to the electricity shortage in the country. The president now has ordered to ease the electricity shortage as heavy rains fall in Venezuela which could be useful to overcome the electricity shortage.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geo-strategic Issues

President Hugo Chaves said China is ready to invest in Venezuela's energy sector. He said China will come for coltan which is a metal that is used to make cell phones, in missile and

space technology. He also said Chinese team is also exploring gold and iron reservoirs in the country. Meanwhile he asked a Whitehouse's spokesperson to provide the names of those who are involve in money laundering from Venezuela so that the government could crackdown then if they are really involved but the spokesperson refused to give their names. Chaves told it in response of a spokesperson of Whitehouse accused Venezuela that some persons are involve in money laundering from Venezuela.

Detailed Report/Argentina

Argentina celebrates 200 years of its revolution

Argentina yesterday celebrated the 200th anniversary of its revolution, which brought independence from Spain, with lavish parades in Buenos Aires and a phalanx of visiting heads of state and dignitaries. The capital's famous Teatro Colon concert hall opened late Monday, after a four-year refurbishment project, for a special ceremony that included ballet and extracts from famous operas and was beamed via projectors onto walls outside. Uruguay's President Jose Mujica presided over the celebratory parade in the 9 de Julio Avenue, alongside Argentine President Cristina Kirchner and counterparts from Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay and Ecuador.

Gilani greets Argentina's President on Independence Day

Islamabad, May 25 (APP): Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani has sent a message of greetings to Mrs. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, President of the Republic of Argentina on Independence Day falling on May 25. In his message of felicitations, the Prime Minister said: "It gives me great pleasure to convey on my own behalf and on behalf of the people and the Government of Pakistan our very cordial and sincere greetings to the Government and people of Argentina on the auspicious occasion of the National Day and the anniversary of 200 years of the establishment of the National Government of Argentina."

The Prime Minister said Pakistan attaches great importance to its relations with Argentina and is desirous of further developing the existing bonds of friendship in diverse fields to the mutual benefit of the two countries.

"It is our earnest desire that cordial and cooperative ties between Pakistan and Argentina should continue to gain strength in the years ahead," he added.

Argentine investors eye Philippine energy sector

Investors from Argentina are eyeing investments in the Philippine energy sector, according to the Argentine ambassador to the Philippines.

During a roundtable with editors and reporters of The Manila Times on Thursday, Ambassador Joaquin Daniel Otero of Argentina said that businessmen from his country would likely invest in energy-related endeavors.

He noted that two years ago, Argentine company Grupo Galileo, opened in the country a plant that produces compressed natural gas.

The ambassador cited Argentine technology in gas production as “among the most advanced in the world.”

On bilateral trade, Otero said that Philippine exports to Argentina last year grew to about \$57.213 million from about \$54.386 million in 2008. He added that the Philippines exports mostly electronic parts to Argentina.

But Otero said that Argentina’s exports to the Philippines last year decreased to \$467.451 million compared with about \$585.925 million in 2008. He added that Argentine products sold in the Philippines included agro-industrial produce, cereals, tobacco, minerals and wine.

“Argentina would want to export beef products to the Philippines, but some technical issues prevent us from doing so,” the ambassador said.

According to him, these “technical issues” are being addressed by the Argentine embassy with the Philippines’ Department of Agriculture.

Otero announced that the embassy of Argentina in the Philippines would soon conduct a seminar among Filipino businessmen on investment prospects in Argentina.

He said that the Philippine Embassy in Argentina is promoting the Philippines as a trade, investment and tourism destination among Argentine businessmen.

Detailed Report/Brazil

Dhaka seeks Brazil's support

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni has sought support of Brazil in favor of Bangladesh's candidature for Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of UN.

She made the request when the new Ambassador of Brazil to Bangladesh Richardo Luiz Viana called on her at the foreign ministry yesterday. CEDAW is UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

States Parties to CEDAW will elect 11 members of the committee on June 28 that will serve four-year terms from January 2011.

The foreign minister told the envoy that Bahrain, Malaysia and Nigeria have already withdrawn their respective candidatures.

During the meeting Dipu Moni said Bangladesh and Brazil enjoy friendly bilateral relations. She expressed the intention of the present democratic government to work further to strengthen the relationship.

She said the two countries may undertake steps such as exchange of high-level visits, explore new avenues of cooperation in trade and commerce, culture and sports.

Viana welcomed the decision of Dipu Moni to join the third forum of the Alliance of Civilization (AoC) to be held in Rio de Janeiro on May 27-29.

Foreign minister said Bangladesh would actively participate in the third forum. She appreciated Alliance that promotes policies and initiatives aimed at improving relations between diverse cultural groups.

Viana told the foreign minister that Turkey, Brazil and Iran are jointly working on Iranian Nuclear issue.

Brazil launches international TV network

"We want a network that talks about politics in quality terms, leaving aside prejudices because this will be a public network showing how Brazilians are beyond our borders," he said in a ceremony in Brasilia.

From Maputo, the new channel will be broadcast to more than 40 countries, mostly in Africa and Latin America.

Mozambique President Armando Emilio Guebuza sent a pre-recorded message for the launch hailing the channel's mission to "enrich communication between Brazil and Africa," especially Portuguese-speaking African nations.

Rousseff, Serra tied in Brazil presidential poll

Brazil's ruling party presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff rose to a dead heat with opposition hopeful Jose Serra in the latest Datafolha poll released on Saturday, matching a similar trend in recent competing polls.

Rousseff, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's former chief of staff, climbed 7 points from Datafolha's April voter survey, to win 37 percent of the 2,660 voters' questioned across the country on Friday.

Former Sao Paulo Governor Serra dropped five points from the April tally to even with Rousseff at 37 percent support ahead of the October election to succeed Lula.

The poll had a 2 percentage points plus or minus margin of error.

The latest results of the Datafolha poll followed a trend that has been unfolding in other polls in recent days.

Rousseff -- from the ruling Workers' Party -- has been gaining ground on Serra thanks to a strong economy and support from Lula who is one of Brazil's most popular presidents in history.

Datafolha showed Green Party candidate Marina Silva with 12 percent of potential votes.

Trade dependence and economic-political vulnerability vary greatly among the BRIC economies

In terms of trade openness, China and Russia are more exposed to international trade, but also stand to benefit more in terms of medium-term economic growth and wealth generation, than Brazil and India according to deutsche Bank Research. China is undoubtedly the BRIC

(Brazil, Russia, India, China) economy most vulnerable in terms of trade protectionism and access to strategically important commodities, its strong international financial position notwithstanding. Maintaining an open trading system and creating a level playing field as regards foreign direct investment will remain a central plank of Chinese economic diplomacy.

DBR economist, Markus Jaeger, says trade openness benefits economies in terms of medium-term economic growth and wealth generation, even if, admittedly, the empirical evidence on this score is somewhat mixed; it also benefits less advanced economies relatively more than advanced ones. On the flipside, greater trade openness exposes economies to greater economic volatility and potentially resulting social instability. More open, less advanced economies are typically more sensitive than less open, more advanced economies. Due to the greater opportunity costs of trade closure and protectionism, it also renders the former more vulnerable to protectionist threats, especially by the latter.

In terms of trade openness, China and Russia are more exposed to international trade than Brazil and India. In terms of social stability, China and India are, *ceteris paribus*, more exposed than Brazil and Russia. Lower per capita incomes and the relatively greater labor intensity of their exports tend to magnify the impact of trade shocks on social stability. In this very simple framework, China would be the most, and Brazil the least vulnerable BRIC economy – the latter's non-negligible dependence on volatile commodity exports notwithstanding. This may appear somewhat counter-intuitive given China's recent economic performance, but one must not forget that economic growth did slow down dramatically in the last quarter of 2008 before the authorities launched a massive stimulus program.

Brazil ready for first woman president: candidate

The woman vying to become Brazil's first female president said Friday that the most populated country in Latin America is ready for a female at the helm.

"Brazil is ready to be led by a woman," Dilma Rousseff said in a speech to political and business leaders in New York.

Rousseff, the favorite of outgoing leftwing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, said she could bring unique benefits.

"It's something important for Brazil," she said. Women "know how to nurture."

Rousseff is the official chosen successor to Lula, who has to step down at the end of this year after serving his maximum two mandates.

Her main opponent is conservative candidate Jose Serra.

Rousseff is campaigning on a platform of continuing Lula's policies, which sought to address massive social inequality and poverty in Brazil.

"In some way," she said, "Lula's legacy includes my presence." The candidate said Brazil "will continue to grow, with inclusiveness and upward social mobility," if she is elected.

Brazil prolongs vaccination against A/H1N1 flu

Brazil's Health Ministry announced on Friday its decision to prolong the national campaign of vaccination against the A/H1N1 flu until June 2.

The campaign, which started in early March, was due to end this Friday.

The ministry also decided to extend the vaccination to children aged two to five years old. Initially, the campaign targeted only children aged six months to two years old, adults aged 20 to 39, elders, pregnant women and people with chronic health conditions such as diabetes or heart diseases.

In order to include the children aged two to five in the campaign, the Brazilian government will need 10.8 million extra doses of the flu vaccine. The children will take the vaccine in two turns, with a gap of three weeks between the doses.

Health Minister Jose Gomes Temporao also made a balance of the campaign so far. According to him, since March over 61 million Brazilians have been vaccinated against H1N1 flu.

That represents about 70 percent of the campaign's goal. Among pregnant women, 68 percent were vaccinated, much lower than the 80 percent expected by the Ministry. Among adults aged 20 to 29, 77 percent were vaccinated, and among those aged 30 to 39, only 37 percent were immunized against the H1N1 flu.

Brazil Can Reduce Inflation Target, Rousseff Says (Update1)

May 21 (Bloomberg) -- Brazilian presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff said the government can "gradually reduce" its inflation target between 2011 and 2014.

"Prudence dictates that this reduction has to be gradual," Rousseff, candidate for President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's Workers' Party, said during a speech to investors in New York. "We have to do it with care, because we live in a very turbulent world."

Rousseff, Lula's former Cabinet chief, is telling investors what they want to hear ahead of October elections, said Pedro Tuesta, a senior economist for Latin America at New York-based 4Cast Inc., in a report. Tuesta cautioned against taking her remarks at face value and said he would be interested in seeing if she repeats them on the campaign trail in Brazil.

"Coming from a representative of a government that did not want to make the move when there were good arguments to do it, the statement is almost startling," Tuesta said in the report, referring to Rousseff's comments on the inflation target.

Brazil's national monetary council sets the government's inflation target, currently 4.5 percent plus or minus two percentage points for this year and 2011. The council consists of the central bank president, finance minister and budget minister.

The country's benchmark inflation index has fallen to 5.26 percent in April from a high of 17 percent in May 2003, the year Lula took office.

Honoring Meirelles

Rousseff arrived in New York yesterday to attend an event honoring Central Bank President Henrique Meirelles.

The candidate said it is “fundamental” to maintain the central bank’s operational autonomy and make the bank chief remain a member of the president’s cabinet, as Meirelles is.

Rousseff said implementing tax reform would be one of her main goals if she is elected. Financing by state-controlled banks has “reached its limit” and one of the challenges of the next government will be to stimulate financing through pension funds and equity markets, Rousseff added.

“It’s very important to diversify sources of financing” other than state development bank BNDES, she said. “First because we can’t put everything on the back of BNDES and secondly because other sources exist.”

Rousseff is in a statistical dead heat with opposition candidate Jose Serra, the former governor of Sao Paulo state. She was supported by 41.8 percent of those surveyed in a May 10- 14 poll by Sensus, compared with 40.5 percent for Serra. The poll of 2,000 people has a margin of error of 2.2 percentage points.

BRIC nations to drive global growth - Brazil

The world's top four emerging markets, the so-called BRIC countries of Brazil, China, India and Russia, will account for two-thirds of global economic growth over the next five years, Brazilian Finance Minister Guido Mantega said on Wednesday.

"During the next five years, it is the emerging nations, the BRICs, which will lead global growth and represent two-third of the growth of the global economy," he said at a conference in Madrid on the Brazilian economy.

Brazil is forecast to grow between 5.5 and 6.0 percent this year, China by 10 percent, India by 7.0 percent and Russia by 5.5 percent, the minister said.

The BRICs, a term coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001 to describe the growing influence of big emerging economies, will account for 61 percent of global gross domestic product growth in 2014, according to the International Monetary Fund.

The four nations, which represent 40 percent of the world population, already accounted for about half of global growth between 2000 and 2008.

Mantega was in Spain for an EU-Latin America summit. - Sapa-AFP

‘Who said Iran is a matter for US?’: Lula

Brasilia - Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva hit out at the United States Thursday, challenging its muscular approach on Iran that sidelined diplomatic efforts he made this week to resolve the showdown.

Newspaper columnists “say that it was none of Brazil’s business to be an intermediary with Iran. But who said it was a matter for the United States?” he asked after returning from an overseas tour that included Tehran.

“The blunt truth is, Iran is being presented as if it were the devil, that it doesn’t want to sit down” to negotiate.

To the contrary, said Lula, “Iran decided to sit down at the negotiating table. It wants to see if the others are going to go along with what (it) has done.”

In an implied swipe at the US government of President Barack Obama, Lula added: “There are people who don’t know how to do politics without having an enemy.”

The bitter outburst to reporters in Brasilia came three days after Lula and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran to secure a deal meant to stave off UN sanctions the United States is pushing for.

Initially hailed as a diplomatic master stroke, the deal fell by the wayside on Tuesday when the United States submitted a UN resolution calling for a new round of sanctions against Iran, saying the Tehran agreement was insufficient.

Brazil and Turkey, the two non-permanent members of the UN Security Council most opposed to the resolution, immediately sent a letter calling for the resolution to be dropped and their deal to be considered.

Lula said he believed his contribution upheld the spirit of multilateralism.

He added that the media backlash at home over his perceived failure was part of the “inferiority complex” Brazilians felt when pitted against the traditional Western powers.

“We went to Iran and we succeeded, after 18 hours of meetings... to get Iran to do what the UN Security Council had been asking it to do for the past six months,” he said.

He also highlighted the case of a young French teacher, Clotilde Reiss, accused of being a French spy by Iran, who was released to return home during his visit to Tehran, although he stopped short of saying that that had been a bargaining chip in the negotiations.

“We were talking for four and half months to get her freed. Nobody knew that, except us,” Lula said.

A top Iranian MP, deputy parliamentary speaker Mohammad Reza Bahonar, said Tehran will withdraw from the Brazil-brokered deal to swap low-enriched uranium for fuel for a research reactor if sanctions are applied, the ISNA news agency reported.

Turkish and Brazilian diplomats, meanwhile, said Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan would be traveling to Brazil next week to speak with Lula.

President Lula unveils national war against crack cocaine

Brasilia, Brazil (AFP) -- President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva yesterday unveiled a national war on crack cocaine, a drug that is increasingly causing addiction, health problems and crime in Brazilian cities and towns.

"We are going to find a way to play tough in the fight against crack," Lula told a meeting of mayors in Brasilia.

He said more than \$200 million would be spent on an anti-drugs plan to reinforce health services, social assistants, Church-sponsored programs and social organizations tackling the issue.

Brazil will also step up anti-narcotics checks along its vast borders with other South American nations.

Lula said the drug was being used mostly by the poor living on the outskirts of cities and towns. "What is most serious is that it is deadly, it's cheap, anybody can be a user and it has a devastating effect," he said.

Crack is typically made from a paste of unprocessed cocaine mixed with chemical additives, often paraffin, benzene, ether or sulfuric acid. It creates high levels of dependency and ravages the health of addicts.

Officials said crack had not yet become a big criminal industry in Brazil -- a fact which created its own problem in efforts to stamp it out.

"At least in Brazil there are no big dealers. They are basically small-time. The drug is scattered everywhere, which makes it difficult to fight," Justice Minister Luiz Paulo Barreto said.

According to a recent study, 90 per cent of the homeless in Rio de Janeiro -- the host city of the 2016 Olympic Games -- use crack cocaine.

Job generation, anti-drug war top priorities for Brazil's outgoing president

Brazil's outgoing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Monday his priorities for the remaining term will be generating more jobs and cracking down on drugs.

Leftwing Lula, though popular in the country, has to step down by the end of the year after serving his maximum two mandates.

In a weekly speech broadcast on national radio Monday, Lula cheered over the surprisingly rapid growth in new jobs since last year, vowing to generate up to 2 million more by the end of the year.

After over 995,000 jobs were created in 2009, a total of 962,300 jobs were already generated during the first four months of this year, with 305,000 new jobs in April alone, he said.

"We are working with the hypothesis of two million jobs created only in this year. If Brazil keeps on like that, I think that we will take an extraordinary quality leap towards having one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world," the president said.

Brazil's unemployment rate is currently at 7.6 percent.

The president also stressed that the fight against drugs, especially crack cocaine, would be another priority.

Last week, he announced a National Plan to Combat Crack, under which a total 410 million reais (220.43 million U.S. dollars) will be invested in such projects as training health care professionals, treating addicts and supporting their families.

He called for a concerted effort from the federal government, the states, municipalities and civil society in fighting against crack cocaine. Lula called crack cocaine a "devastating" drug because it was readily available to both rural and urban residents and because it is cheap.

At least 600,000 Brazilians use crack cocaine, according to a recent study released by the health ministry.

Economic overheating top challenge for Brazil: IMF chief

The biggest challenge for the Brazilian government is to contain economic overheating, said the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday.

"With (Brazil's economic) growth reaching 7 percent this year, it is sure there is risk of overheating," Dominique Strauss Kahn told a seminar held by Brazilian TV channel GloboNews in Sao Paulo, according to Brazilian media reports.

However, the IMF chief said the Brazilian government is aware of that risk and is taking measures.

Kahn said that the country's economic growth rate should not be above 5 percent next year. "The history of Brazil is a successful one, but success does not last forever and can be destroyed," he cautioned.

On global economy, the IMF chief said that the recovery is faster than his organization had expected, and recent declines in stock markets do not mean the world economy is getting worse.

"We have many countries that emerged from the crisis such as those from Asia and Latin America and that bring us confidence. And we believe that the recovery will continue," he added.

Kahn noted that the main risk to global recovery is the debt crisis in Europe, where some countries owe a very high level of debts, leaving many question marks.

The IMF chief also said it will take time to establish new regulations for financial markets. Related measures being taken by the United States and the European Union are positive, though their effectiveness is still to be determined.

He stressed the need for a "central coordination" among all economies, but said that doesn't mean all countries should adopt the same policies.

Detailed Report/Chile

Chile likely to ban electronic cigarettes

May 26, 2010—Electronic cigarettes will be banned in Chile from November if Congress passes regulations recently proposed by the Ministry of Health, according to a report in the Santiago Times.

These devices are said to have enjoyed a small rise in popularity around the country during the past few years and are now to be used by more than 18,000 people.

"The law will help us further control tobacco consumption and make a real impact on the health of Chileans," said Health Minister, Jaime Mañalich. "We can't help addicts by giving them another drug to be dependent on."

Chile orders Pakistani back to jail

A court in Chile has ordered back to jail a Pakistani man who was briefly detained and charged after being found with traces of explosives at the US embassy in Santiago, the Chilean capital, officials have said.

The court labeled Mauhannas Saif ur Rehnab Khan, 28, "a danger to society" and revoked his freedom on Saturday after he was released last week on probation following charges of illegally possessing weapons.

The court was responding to an appeal filed by prosecutors on Thursday against Khan's release that asked he be placed under preventative detention.

The interior ministry had also joined the attorney general in requesting preventive detention.

Khan, an intern at a hotel in Santiago, went to the embassy after being called in for a discussion about his US visa, which had been revoked.

Police said traces of the explosive Tetryl were found on Khan's documents, bag and mobile telephone as he went through a security check at the embassy.

Tetryl is a compound used as a booster to help detonate explosive charges.

US officials say they will conduct their own investigation of the incident, but the US state department has not disclosed why Khan's American visa had been revoked.

PJ Crowley, the state department spokesman, acknowledged at a news conference on Tuesday that there might be a legitimate reason for the trace amounts of explosives.

"It's a fair question, but this is all something that will come out while we're reviewing during the course of the investigation," Crowley said.

A local newspaper, El Mercurio, reported that Khan was in Chile to study tourism.

Detailed Report/Mexico

Mayor of Mexico resort arrested for drug gang ties

Cancun, Mexico (Reuters) - The mayor of the Mexican beach resort of Cancun has been arrested and charged with money laundering and drug-related crimes, making him one of the highest-ranking public officials swept up in Mexico's crackdown on narcotics traffickers.

The arrest of Mayor Gregorio Sanchez, who is running for governor of the Caribbean state of Quintana Roo for the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), has cast a fresh shadow over July local elections across much of Mexico amid a spate of violence and threats against candidates.

Sanchez was arrested by police late on Tuesday at Cancun's international airport after returning from Mexico City, Mexico's attorney general's office said on Wednesday. The mayor had been under investigation since January, it added.

"He was moving so much money and it just didn't match up with the amount he made as a public servant," the prosecutor's office said in a statement.

The mayor was accused of protecting drug gangs and money laundering. Sanchez has not commented on the charges.

Cancun, a city of more than half a million people, attracts millions of U.S. and European tourists annually with its white sandy Caribbean beaches, warm turquoise sea and its proximity to many of the stunning Mayan ruins on the Yucatan Peninsula.

Bribing Public Officials

Mexico's powerful drug-smuggling cartels regularly use their deep pockets to bribe public officials and police, complicating President Felipe Calderon's army-led drug offensive launched when he took office in December 2006.

More than 23,000 people, mainly drug traffickers and police, have been killed in cartel turf wars and battles with security forces since then.

Mexico this month extradited former Quintana Roo Governor Mario Villanueva to the United States on charges of helping drug cartels shuttle hundreds of tons of Colombian cocaine.

Villanueva pleaded not guilty in New York on May 10 on charges of trafficking cocaine into the United States and laundering millions of dollars through Lehman Brothers bank.

Election campaigns for state governors and municipal presidents across Mexico, especially along the U.S.-Mexico border, have been shaken by violence in recent weeks.

A ruling National Action Party (PAN) candidate for mayor of a small town in the drug-plagued border state of Tamaulipas was murdered this month. Other election candidates have received death threats.

A string of mayors in Calderon's home state of Michoacan were arrested on drug trafficking charges last year, but were later freed for lack of evidence. A year earlier, two of Mexico's top anti-drug officials were arrested and accused of taking huge bribes to leak intelligence to drug smugglers.

Obama to send troops to Mexican border

President Barack Obama will seek \$500 million (347.4 million pound) for security and send up to 1,200 National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexican border, an administration official said on Tuesday, after demands from both Republicans and Democrats for more federal resources along the frontier.

The announcement comes as the Democratic president seeks Republican support for a sweeping overhaul of U.S. immigration laws, and seeks to rally opposition to a tough new immigration law in Arizona that has caused tension in U.S. relations with Mexico, without seeming soft on illegal border crossings.

The troops will provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support, intelligence analysis, immediate support to counternarcotics enforcement and training capacity until the Customs and Border Patrol agency can recruit and train more border officers and agents, the official said.

The funds will be used to enhance technology at the border and share information and support between law enforcement agencies as they target illegal trafficking in people, drugs, weapons and money.

Sparring With Republicans

Arizona's two U.S. senators, John McCain and Jon Kyl, and Governor Jan Brewer, all Republicans, have asked Obama for more federal support to secure the border.

McCain and Kyl introduced a Senate amendment to force Obama to deploy 6,000 National Guard troops to the border.

The administration rejected the request in a letter to Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin.

"It represents an unwarranted interference with the commander-in-chief's responsibilities," wrote national security adviser James Jones and counterterrorism chief John Brennan.

Illegal immigration across the border with Mexico has been in intense focus since Arizona last month passed the law to drive 460,000 illegal immigrants out of the desert state, which straddles one of the principal corridors for human and drug smugglers heading up from Mexico.

The law requires state and local police to investigate the immigration status of people they reasonably suspect are in the country illegally.

It was a central issue last week during a state visit to Washington by Mexican President Felipe Calderon, who said the law discriminated against foreign-born workers.

Mexican officials said on Tuesday they respected Obama's right to make the decision, but thought Washington should address problems originating on its side of the border.

"The Mexican government considers that the decision ... should translate into the channeling of additional resources to make efforts more effective to combat the trafficking of illegal arms and cash to Mexico," the Mexican foreign ministry said in a statement.

Mexico also urged "shared responsibility" on the fight against drug gangs along the border.

There are currently 344 U.S. National Guard troops working along the border.

U.S. officials are also concerned drug-related violence will cross the border from Mexico, where some 23,000 people have been killed since Calderon took office in late 2006 as drug gangs fight turf wars and battle federal agents and troops.

A prominent cattleman, Robert Krentz, was shot dead on his ranch in southeast Arizona in late March. Police followed tracks from the scene of the shooting to the Mexican border, but made no arrests.

Cochise County sheriff Larry Dever, whose office is investigating Krentz's death, said he doubted that many troops would make much difference, given the border's nearly 2,000-mile (3200-km) length.

"If you put 1,200 in perspective ... that's about one every two miles ... so we're woefully short of doing anything significant, unless they are all deployed in a very specific area," he told Reuters.

Obama met on Tuesday with Senate Republicans, none of whom has come out in support of his immigration plan. He pushed them to support an overhaul, which he said he wants passed this year, but did not bring up the National Guard plan.

Kyl said it was not a good idea for Democrats to "try to hold hostage the security of the border in order to get comprehensive immigration reform passed."

Mexico retaliates in 'visa war' with Canada

Washington — Mexico's government on Thursday said it would require visas of all Canadian diplomats in retaliation for the Harper government's announcement this week that Mexican visitors to Canada will immediately need visas to enter the country.

Mexican foreign secretary Patricia Espinosa informed the Harper government of the decision during a bilateral meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon at the U.S. State Department in Washington, telling him she was "strongly against" the decision and warning Canada's move would fail to deter the flood of refugee claimants that Ottawa says triggered its action.

"We were in disagreement with this measure," Espinosa told reporters during a news conference here with Cannon and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "This is not something that is going to help Canada solve the problem."

Canadian Immigration Minister Jason Kenney announced the new visa requirement for Mexicans, as well as residents of the Czech Republic, on Monday, sparking widespread anger in both countries.

Critics and experts have said Canada has sparked a "visa war" that could hurt trade relations with the European Union, because of the Czech Republic's membership in the EU, and with Mexico, a North American Free Trade Agreement partner.

Pressed Thursday to resolve the controversy, Cannon held out an olive branch of sorts to both Mexico and the Czechs by saying he does not expect the visa requirement to be permanent.

"We will be working . . . to find a way to be able to eventually lift the visa requirement," Cannon said. "What needs to be said here clearly is that we are not looking for difficulties with our allies . . . Nothing in this situation would lead to believe that there is a permanency."

The Mexican action on Canadian diplomats mirrors a similar decision taken earlier this week by the Czech Republic, which also recalled its ambassador to Ottawa in protest.

But despite the Mexican government's unhappiness with the move, Espinosa made it clear it would not risk alienating tourists by issuing a reciprocal requirement for visas from all Canadians travelling to Mexico. With more than 1.3 Canadian visitors each year, Espinosa said such a move would simply be too economically damaging to her country's economy.

"We would not like in any way to endanger the flow of people between the two countries," she said. "We do not expect to impose a visa requirement on Canadian tourists."

Of potentially greater concern to Canada is a brewing debate within the European Union over whether it should show solidarity with the Czech Republic by imposing visa requirements on Canadians travelling to any of its 27-member nations.

Concern over that possibility was sparked by foreign wire service reports Wednesday from Sweden, which holds the rotating EU presidency. Tobias Billstrom, the Swedish minister for migration and asylum policy, was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying "we are in favor of this reciprocity."

The Canadian government on Thursday questioned the accuracy of the story, telling the European news agency it presented an "erroneous interpretation" of the Swedish presidency's position on requiring visas for Canadian travelers.

"To set the record straight, that was not our interpretation in the discussions we had with the new EU presidency," the Canadian government said in a terse dispatch.

The Swedish embassy in Ottawa issued a statement saying their position is clear: "The goal is reciprocity as regards visa-free travel and equal treatment of all European Union citizens."

The European Commission on Thursday said it is investigating why so many Czech Roma are seeking asylum in Canada before it makes any judgment on Ottawa's decision, AFP reported.

"We need to examine the complaints formulated by Canada against the Czech Republic and determine if they are founded before reacting," Jacques Barrot, the European commissioner for justice and security, said.

A senior Canadian official said the Mexican decision to require visas of Canadian diplomats won't take effect until early October, so it won't impact Ottawa's ability to prepare for the upcoming North American leaders' summit Aug. 9-10 in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Still, the Canadian decision has added an unexpected irritant into Prime Minister Stephen Harper's otherwise warm relations with the government of President Felipe Calderon.

The visa issue has dominated the front pages of newspapers for the past two days in Mexico, where travellers are still feeling wounded over restrictions placed on them by several countries during last spring's outbreak of the H1N1 virus.

"It is causing an uproar in Mexico," one Mexican reporter bluntly told Cannon. "There are thousands of businessmen and students in Mexico currently who one week ago didn't need a visa and now they are required to produce a medical exam and proof of not having a criminal record. How are you going to solve this crisis?"

The Harper government contends the rules for Mexico and the Czech Republic were needed — and imposed reluctantly — to help stem the waves of refugee claimants from those two countries, which are now the top two sources of refugee applicants.

Cannon defended the controversial decision, saying Canada's asylum system needed a major overhaul to reduce delays and abuse from fraudulent claims.

"We reached an unacceptable level (of refugee claimants) and therefore we had to intervene and we had to act. This is precisely what we did," he said.

Espinosa said Mexico was informed Monday of the Canadian government's decision after being warned Ottawa was considering the move.

Despite the diplomatic row, Cannon maintained that relations between the two countries remain positive.

"I want to make this perfectly clear — the relations between Canada and Mexico far supersede the elements of visa requirements," he said. "It's a very important relation that we want to continue to nourish and develop."

Mexican President Felipe Calderon urges U.S. to reinstate assault weapons ban

Washington - Mexican President Felipe Calderon urged the U.S. Congress on Thursday to reinstate a ban on assault weapons to help cut cross-border gun smuggling and reduce drug gang violence for its southern neighbor.

In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Calderon described efforts to fight organized crime in Mexico, where 23,000 people have been killed in drug violence since he came to power in late 2006 and launched an army offensive.

Washington is also aiding Mexico's battle against drug gangs with a 2007 pledge of \$1.4 billion for equipment and police training to help fight the cartels that ship some \$40 billion worth of illegal drugs north each year.

The drug violence has become a major political test for Calderon and a growing worry for Washington and foreign investors as violence has spread across the southwest border.

"There is one issue where Mexico needs your cooperation. And that is stopping the flow of assault weapons and other deadly arms across the border," Calderon said to a standing ovation from U.S. lawmakers.

Calderon said the increase in violence in Mexico had coincided with the 2004 lifting of a U.S. assault weapons ban.

The 10-year ban on the sale of assault weapons to civilians expired without being extended by Congress. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder has said the administration favors reinstating the ban, though guns rights groups oppose it.

Calderon said he respects Americans' Second Amendment right to bear arms but said many of the guns are getting into the hands of criminals.

Seizing Guns

Mexico has seized around 75,000 guns and assault weapons in the last three years, Calderon said. He said more than 80 percent of them came from the United States and noted there were more than 7,000 gun shops along the border.

"I would ask Congress to help us, with respect, and to understand how important it is for us that you enforce current laws to stem the supply of these weapons to criminals and consider reinstating the assault weapons ban," he said.

Though Calderon's request received applause and a standing ovation from mainly Democratic lawmakers, Republicans criticized the Mexican leader for discussing U.S. laws.

"It was inappropriate for President Calderon to lecture Americans on our own state and federal laws," said Senator John Cornyn, a member of the Republican leadership. "Moreover, the

Second Amendment is not a subject open for diplomatic negotiation, with Mexico or any other nation."

On immigration — a common theme during his visit to Washington — Calderon said his country was trying to improve economic conditions so Mexicans would not feel the need to leave their country in order to succeed.

He said Mexico expected more than 4 percent growth this year, even though data released on Thursday showed the economy shrank quarter-on-quarter in the first quarter of this year.

Millions of people are still crossing the U.S. border illegally to seek work. An estimated 10.8 million illegal immigrants live in the United States, most of them from Mexico and Central America.

Calderon repeated his opposition to a new Arizona law that requires police to check the immigration status of anyone they suspect is in the country illegally.

"We must find together a better way to face and fix this common problem," he said.

Editorial: Calderon's shot at American guns

Felipe Calderon received liberal plaudits for falsely claiming Arizona's new immigration law uses racial profiling, but that wasn't the only baloney the Mexican president peddled during his state visit. Over four minutes of his Thursday address to Congress was spent lecturing Americans to renew the federal Assault Weapons Ban that sunset in September 2004. His justifications for the ban were all garbage.

Mr. Calderon claimed that guns covered by the federal ban were particularly "powerful weapons." While the term "assault weapons" may conjure up visions of military hardware, the inside guts of these feared guns are essentially the same as deer hunting rifles. The firing mechanisms in semiautomatics and machine guns are completely different. The entire firing mechanism of a semi-automatic gun has to be removed and replaced to turn it into a military weapon like an AK-47.

Mr. Calderon's propaganda aside, Mexican drug gangs are getting real military weapons from within Mexico, countries south of his border and other places around the world. Reports indicate that grenades and rocket launchers in use in Mexico aren't even available for sale in the United States and come from places like South Korea, Israel and Spain. Between 2007 and 2009, 2,239 grenades were seized by the Mexican government, and those weren't from here. Markings similarly show that machine guns in Mexico largely originate from China, Israel and South Africa.

"If you look carefully, you will notice that the violence in Mexico started to grow a couple of years before I took office in 2006," Mr. Calderon said. "This coincides, at least, with the lifting of the [U.S.] assault weapons ban in 2004." He also patronized Americans by warning that our own gun ownership endangers the United States. The problem with these talking points is that

murder rates dropped in America and Mexico between the 2004 expiration of the ban and 2008, when the latest data is available.

Likewise, Mr. Calderon's claim that 80 percent of guns used in Mexican crimes come from the United States is completely false. Most weapons seized in Mexico have traceable serial numbers that show they come from countries other than the United States. The 80 percent number reflects how many guns sent to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives for tracing end up being from America. Most weapons seized in Mexico aren't transferred to U.S. authorities, so that figure is meaningless for calculating overall totals.

It is offensive for Mr. Calderon to come here as our guest and make up facts to blame America for Mexico's many problems. But it was more frightening to witness Democratic House and Senate members jump up and give a standing ovation when the foreigner called for renewing the Assault Weapons Ban. That's a warning all American gun owners should heed.

Calderon speech 'inappropriate,' lawmakers say

Several Texas lawmakers say Mexican President Felipe Calderon's chastisement of Arizona's immigration law was "inappropriate."

Calderon took his opposition to a new Arizona immigration law to Congress Thursday, saying it "ignores a reality that cannot be erased by decree."

Calderon's comments on the Arizona law and his request that Congress do something about the availability of high-powered weapons along the border drew criticism from several lawmakers saying he was interfering in U.S. internal matters.

"I think it's inappropriate for him to come in and criticize our law," said U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul, a Republican whose district includes Washington County. "When we go down to Mexico, we don't do that to the Mexicans.

"The Arizona law is not the problem. I see the Arizona law being passed in response to a problem. The problem is the growing violence down the border and securing the border and the Obama administration enforcing federal law."

That was echoed by U.S. Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas).

"President Calderon said a few things Congress and the American people needed to hear. Mexico has gone all in against the drug cartels," said Cornyn. "Mexico is one of America's best trade partners, thanks in large part to NAFTA.

"Mexico has lowered its budget deficit to just one percent of GDP, a record of fiscal discipline that should shame Washington. And President Calderon has acknowledged that a lack of economic opportunities south of the border is a primary cause of illegal immigration north of it.

"But it was inappropriate for President Calderon to lecture Americans on our own state and

federal laws. Arizona's immigration law has been amended to make clear it does not authorize racial profiling by law enforcement.

"Moreover, the Second Amendment is not a subject open for diplomatic negotiation, with Mexico or any other nation."

The Mexican leader also told lawmakers reluctant to take up the immigration issue this year that comprehensive immigration reform is crucial to securing the two countries' common border.

Calderon, the first foreign national leader to address Congress this year, said he strongly disagrees with the Arizona law that requires police to question people about their immigration status if there's reason to suspect they are in the country illegally.

"It is a law that not only ignores a reality that cannot be erased by decree but also introduces a terrible idea using racial profiling as a basis for law enforcement," he said to cheers, mainly from the Democratic side of the chamber.

Speaking in English, he warned of the risk when "core values we all care about are breached."

Arizona's senior Republican senator, John McCain was not present at the joint meeting, while the office of Jon Kyl, the other Arizona senator, did not respond immediately to inquiries about whether Kyl was present. McCain attended a lunch with Calderon at the State Department Wednesday.

McCain issued a statement that it was "unfortunate and disappointing the president of Mexico chose to criticize the state of Arizona by weighing in on a U.S. domestic policy issue during a trip that was meant to reaffirm the unique relationship between our two countries."

And broaching another highly sensitive issue, Calderon urged Congress to restore a ban on assault weapons, saying easy access to high-powered weapons is contributing to drug-related violence along the border.

Calderon also took up the Arizona law in a meeting Wednesday with President Barack Obama, who referred to the law as a "misdirected expression of frustration."

The Mexican leader said his country was doing its best, by promoting more jobs and opportunities at home, to reduce the flow of immigrants to the United States.

But he stressed the "need to fix a broken and inefficient system ... the time has come to reduce the causes of migration and to turn this phenomenon into a legal, ordered and secure flow of workers and visitors."

Obama is pressing lawmakers to take up legislation that would deal with border security, employment and citizenship. It is questionable whether Congress, in an election year, has an inclination to tackle such a highly sensitive issue.

Calderon also got a standing ovation from Democrats when he asked the United States to stop the flow of assault weapons and other arms across the border and reinstate the ban on many assault weapons that was enacted in 1994 but allowed to expire during the George W. Bush presidency.

He said there are more than 7,000 gun shops along the border where almost anyone can purchase weapons.

Texas Republican Sen. John Cornyn said it was inappropriate for Calderon to lecture Americans on state and local law.

He defended the Arizona law and added: "moreover, the Second Amendment is not a subject open for diplomatic negotiation, with Mexico or any other nation."

Calderon led off his 40-minute speech by emphasizing Mexico's war against narcotics traffickers that has left roughly 23,000 dead since the end of 2006.

But he added that "we cannot ignore the fact that the challenge to our security has roots on both sides of the border."

He cited a statement from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton that, at the end of the day, it is high demand for drugs in the United States and elsewhere that drives much of the illicit trade.

Also attending the speech were Attorney General Eric Holder, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

Democrats gave Calderon a rousing cheer when he said Mexico planned to have universal health care by 2012 and said that would be one less reason for Mexicans to migrate to the United States.

He got smiles and applause from Republicans, as well as Democrats, when he said that in Mexico's efforts to recover from the recession no taxpayer money went to bail out banks.

Calderon broke into Spanish briefly to address Mexicans now living in the United States, saying Mexicans admire and miss them and are working to protect their rights.

Mexico's president criticizes state immigration law, pushes Congress for fair immigration

Washington (AP) — Mexican President Felipe Calderon took his opposition to a new Arizona immigration law to Congress Thursday, saying it "ignores a reality that cannot be erased by decree."

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Detailed Report/Venezuela

Workers in Venezuela on alert after Chavez warning

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- Venezuela's socialist president is threatening to "go after" the country's biggest food producer, and the corporation's workers are not happy about it.

Union leader Richard Prieto says employees of Empresas Polar held meetings Monday and agreed to "defend our jobs throughout the country."

Chavez on Sunday called for authorities to investigate whether the company has been hoarding food, saying if it continues "we will have to go after Polar."

Employees say they fear a government takeover would leave them worse off.

That's a twist on the situation in many Latin American countries, where workers have often protested efforts to privatize state-owned companies.

"All the companies the president ... has expropriated, all those companies have gone bust," Prieto said in a telephone interview from the northwestern city of Barquisimeto.

He cited the example of Vengas, a natural gas company that was seized by the government and is now called Gas Comunal.

"That company was the best gas business here in Barquisimeto," he said. "Now you can't get gas."

And the workers of that company have been at loggerheads with the government on a new union contract for four years, Prieto added.

At Polar, "we're the best-paid of any company in the country" and have good benefits, said Prieto, who is president of the union at Cerveceria Polar, the group's beer-making unit. "We feel proud to work for this business."

Chavez wondered aloud Sunday what the government would do with Polar's brewery in the event of a takeover, and said he would shut down the beer-making operation.

Last week, National Guard troops seized 132 tons (120 metric tons) of food that officials accused Polar of hoarding in storage. And last month, Chavez ordered a state takeover of property in Barquisimeto where Polar has warehouses and offices. Workers have protested that decision.

The government's tough stance against Polar comes as the country is struggling with sporadic shortages of some food, including sugar, corn meal, beef and butter. Analysts blame government price controls for the shortages.

Chavez has called Polar a monopoly and has accused it in the past of evading government price controls on basic foodstuffs by producing fewer of the price-controlled items.

Polar has denied wrongdoing and called the recent seizures of its merchandise an arbitrary "confiscation" by the government - which has nationalized other businesses in areas from cement to telecommunications in recent years.

Polar's president, Lorenzo Mendoza, is one of the country's wealthiest men. He said last week that "private investment has no substitute, and that's been shown not only in Venezuela but in the world."

Empresas Polar produces food made from grains, margarine, sauces, vinegar, ice cream, sea food, sodas, jams, animal food and Polar beer, among other items. It has 17 plants across the country and employs about 32,000 people.

Chavez: China to Aid Mining Plans in Venezuela

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez says China plans to help with mining projects in the South American country.

The president says Beijing has shown interest in Venezuela's deposits of coltan, a mineral used to make cellular phones and other electronics.

He says he gave China a sample for analysis, and now the Asian nation hopes to "help Venezuela exploit the coltan mines." Chavez notes the mineral is also valuable for the space industry and for making missiles.

He said during his Sunday broadcast that a visiting team of Chinese experts has also been examining large deposits of iron and gold.

The socialist president said he plans to visit Beijing at the end of the year.

President Chávez demands Obama's administration give names involved in dollar laundering

President Hugo Chávez demanded on Wednesday that the Obama administration give the names of those who are involved in dollar laundering through the Venezuelan parallel market.

Chávez reacted before the declarations of a spokesperson of the US government, and a few minutes after Minister for Planning and Finances, Jorge Giordani, announced that the sale of securities is suspended for securities firms and emphasized the dollar laundering issue.

Chávez pointed out that “there is an Obama administration spokesperson, a representative of the US government, who says that they have proof [of the money laundering operation], which [the U.S.] will handle before a tribunal, of about I-dont-know-how-many persons who have been involved in dollar laundering through the so called Venezuelan parallel market.”

“What a chance!”, he exclaimed, “A few minutes after [Jorge Giordani's announcement], they had proof. Im sure they knew it long ago.”

Diplomatic Process

Chávez also explained that before this situation a diplomatic process [was planned to] take place, in which the Minister for Peoples power for Foreign Affairs, Nicolás Maduro, will formally demand the US government [provide], through the US Embassy to Venezuela, the names of such persons.

“Now, Nicolás, we have to address a formal request to the government of the United States through its Embassy in Caracas, demanding the information; because as far as I know, the spokesperson said: 'No, we will not give names' and he also said that no arrests proceeded,” Chávez stated.

In this connection, Chavez added that the aggressors “live there, they are there; part of them; the others are here.”

“Give us their names; for us, there are no sacred cows; there are no untouchables.”

As for the opinion of the dollar issue that Venezuelan private media are creating in order to destabilize, President Chávez [confirmed]: “If I had to close all the securities firms, I would; they’d better abide by the law.”

"Shake, bourgeois! *Long live the Bolivarian Revolution!*", he exclaimed and added:

“We have to spread more information, because as it is a mathematics issue, it implies mechanisms [about which] the population does not know; we have to explain them well.”

He said this in connection to the measures announced by Minister Giordani.

The president added, “We have to explain how they increased the value of the dollar to Bs. 10 and more. Is it theft? Is it fraud?”

Chavez eases power rationing

Caracas, Venezuela - Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is ordering authorities to ease power rationing measures that have darkened homes and businesses for months.

Chavez says the electrical grid is no longer in danger of collapsing, and weekend, holiday and peak-usage rationing will come to an end.

He said Friday night in a televised speech that authorities eventually expect to lift the state of emergency he declared in February.

Recent heavy rains have eased a drought that threatened to stall the Guri hydroelectric plant, which generates most of Venezuela's power.

Chavez has also accused his political opponents of trying to sabotage the power grid, while critics say his government has not invested enough in electrical infrastructure.

4 brokerage executives arrested in Venezuela

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) - Venezuelan authorities arrested four brokerage firm executives Thursday as part of a crackdown on a sector where President Hugo Chavez says widespread currency speculation is driving up inflation.

Pedro Castillo Torcat, general director of Positiva Sociedad de Corretaje; Jose Rivero, general director of BanValor; and Marcos Siervo and Eduardo Sacco, two executives from Venevalores, will all face trial, the Attorney General's Office said in a statement. It did not elaborate.

In the past two weeks, pro-Chavez lawmakers have passed legislation letting the Central bank tighten control over the previously unregulated bond market. Authorities also halted bond trading for two weeks, and the government took over management at 31 of the country's 107 brokerage companies.

Authorities have raided 15 other brokerages on suspicion of irregularities, including BBO Casa de Bolsa and Bencorp Casa de Bolsa on Thursday, the prosecutor's office said in a statement.

Chavez is seeking to crack down on currency trading that he blames for soaring inflation and the Venezuelan bolivar's declining value on the black market. The socialist leader has ordered authorities to investigate alleged illegal trading and money laundering.

Venezuela maintains strict currency controls and sets official exchange rates, but another route for trading currency has been the bond market, where the bolivar has recently fetched about 8.20 bolivars to the U.S. dollar - almost double the official rate of 4.30 to the dollar for nonessential goods.

Eduardo Fortuny, director of the Venezuelan Association of Brokerage Firms, said Wednesday that the government's measures are forcing many brokerages to lay off employees as they struggle for survival.

Some 4,000 people are employed by Venezuela's brokerage firms, he said.

Chavez: Dissident party has joined opposition

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- President Hugo Chavez lashed out Wednesday at former political allies who have distanced themselves from him, accusing them of joining Venezuela's opposition ahead of September congressional elections.

Chavez harshly criticized Fatherland for all, a leftist party that had traditionally supported the president's socialist government, calling its leaders traitors and predicting its candidates will be defeated in the Sept. 26 vote.

"They are allied with the right wing," Chavez said, speaking to members of his ruling party. "The reformists can stay behind. Here we have true revolutionaries."

The falling out between Chavez and Fatherland for all began months ago. But the breakup appeared definitive Wednesday after Chavez condemned the party's decision to not form an alliance with his Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela ahead of the elections.

Chavez also seemed irritated by the party's criticism of what it called his uncompromising attitude and authoritarian tendencies.

Political analyst Ricardo Sucre said he believes the rupture "could have an impact in some states," but that candidates fielded by Fatherland for all are not going to receive significant backing from the majority of Chavez's supporters.

Sucre noted Fatherland For All appears to have gained strength in some regions since Lara state Gov. Henri Falcon broke ranks with Chavez's party in March and joined its former ally-turned-rival. Falcon is popular in Lara, where he served two consecutive terms as the mayor of the state capital and was elected governor by a comfortable margin in 2008.

Chavez has repeatedly warned his allies that an opposition victory in September's elections would be a devastating blow to his efforts to transform Venezuela into a socialist state, because adversaries could veto bills proposed by his party.

The president's supporters currently have an unbeatable majority in the National Assembly after most opposition parties boycotted Venezuela's last legislative elections in 2005.

The opposition is competing this time, though, and aims to field a single candidate for each seat up for grabs.

Chavez's antagonistic comments Wednesday came just hours after Fatherland For All presented its candidates.

One of its hopefuls, Margarita Lopez Maya, said the party hopes to win enough seats in the National Assembly to help regain the institution's independence. She noted the assembly's majority of pro-Chavez lawmakers have done Chavez's bidding for years.

"The National Assembly must be a counterweight to the executive branch," Lopez Maya, a history professor, said in a telephone interview.

The party's other candidates include former guerrilla leader Rafael Uzcategui, professional basketball player Ricardo Lugo, union leader Jose Bodas and Yoel Acosta Chirinos, a former military officer who joined Chavez in a failed 1992 coup attempt but later split with the president.

Venezuelan Recession Deepened After Electricity Cuts (Update2)

May 25 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuela's economy fell deeper into recession in the first three months of the year as electricity rationing decimated manufacturing and investment dried up because of government takeovers.

Gross domestic product shrank 5.8 percent in the first quarter from a year earlier, the central bank said today in a statement. Economists forecast a 7 percent decline, according to the median estimate of 11 analysts surveyed by Bloomberg.

"This is the worst performing economy in Latin America," Alejandro Grisanti, an economist at Barclays Plc in New York, said in a phone interview before the report. "The government expropriations are weighing on production and it's impossible to have adequate investment in that kind of climate."

Venezuela, South America's biggest oil producer, is entering a second year of recession as President Hugo Chavez's nationalization drive saps investment and his price and currency controls squeeze industrial output. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that Venezuela will be the only country in South America to see a decline in GDP this year.

"The results show Venezuela is experiencing stagflation due to much reduced economic activity," Boris Segura, an economist at RBS Securities Inc., said in a telephone interview.

Industrial production plunged 9.9 percent in the first quarter after Chavez ordered 20 percent cuts in electricity usage because of a severe drought that threatened to collapse the power grid. Inflation has accelerated to a seven-year high, with prices rising 31.9 percent in April from a year ago.

Financial Industry

In the first quarter, transport fell 15.9 percent, commerce shrank 11.6 percent and the financial industry contracted 9.7 percent, the central bank said. The decline stems from reduced imports, electricity rationing and the fall in investment.

Venezuela's oil industry contracted 5 percent, the non-oil sector fell 4.9 percent in the quarter and private consumption dropped 5.9 percent, the bank said in the report.

Chavez, who devalued the bolivar Jan. 8, said April 26 that the economy may shrink for a second straight year as it sheds "capitalist" consumption habits. GDP will probably shrink 2.4 percent in 2010, according to the median forecast of nine banks including Bank of America, Merrill Lynch and Citigroup Inc. The economy contracted 3.3 percent during 2009.

State oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA slashed output last year by more than 300,000 barrels a day in line with OPEC production quotas. The company says it produces 3 million barrels a day while Bloomberg estimates show that it produced an average of 2.18 million barrels a day in April. Oil exports fell 5.9 percent in the quarter, the bank said.

The mining industry plunged 4.8 percent in the first quarter.

Foreign Investment

In December, Venezuela halted some production lines at state-run aluminum companies Alcasa and Venalum as well as two units at Siderurgica del Orinoco's steel mill known as Sidor, to save electricity.

The government posted a current account surplus of \$7.2 billion in the quarter while the capital account had a \$11.5 billion deficit.

Venezuela had a \$3 billion direct investment outflow in 2009 as companies pulled capital out of the country following nationalizations in the steel, cement, oil and food industries.

Chavez reacted to the economic recession and fall in oil revenue by devaluing the currency and creating a multi-tiered exchange system in a bid to stimulate non-oil exports and to double the amount of bolivars received for every dollar from oil sales.

Venezuela may be facing a cash crunch as oil output wanes, Morgan Stanley said in March. Venezuela's economic recovery may also be hindered because of the recent fall in commodity prices spurred by concern about European government debt. Oil, which accounts for 94 percent of government export revenue, tumbled to a seven-month low on May 20.

Venezuelan imports and industrial output may be further hampered after the government dismantled the unregulated currency market on May 18 that companies used as an escape valve to obtain dollars through bond swaps at brokerages.

The central bank will now oversee currency transactions through the buying and selling of dollar-denominated securities within a price band. The bank, which said the system would take at least two weeks to get started, may not be able to supply enough dollars to meet demand.

Venezuela imported about 30 percent of its goods last year through the unregulated currency market, or about \$12 billion worth, according to Barclays Plc.

"These poor results are basically due to the electricity crisis but also the lack of dollars injected into the economy by the government and central bank," Segura said. "Importers have been strangled and that brought negative effects for investment."

Industrial association: GDP fall confirms economic recession

Carlos Larrazabal, president of the Venezuelan Confederation of Industries (Conindustria), said that official data coincide with the business association reports showing a steady deterioration of the production sector.

Carlos Larrazabal, president of the Venezuelan Confederation of Industries (Conindustria), said that the data issued by the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV), on a 5.8% fall of Venezuela's gross domestic product in the first quarter, confirms that the domestic economy is affected by "a major recession."

In the case of the manufacturing sector, he said that the official data reporting a 9.9 percent contraction and the industrial situational survey prepared by Conindustria coincide in their findings: there is a steady deterioration of the production sector.

"The recession in the manufacturing sector is increasing," said Larrazabal at a press conference.

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