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Usman Choudry

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Report Summary/Argentina

Political Issue

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Geostrategic Issues

Argentine president Cristina Kirchner appreciated Uruguay president's remarks over Falkland Island where he supported Argentina and said British government is sending its forces to overcome the oil and mineral resources of our region. President Mrs. Kirchner has also said that Argentina will not allow British ships to stay at Argentine's ports and she also requested Uruguay and other neighboring countries to not to allow British ships at their ports. In the meanwhile, president of Argentina has also signed an agreement with India to use peaceful purposes of nuclear energy.

Report Summary/Brazil

Political Issue

President Lula has criticized on some media channels that they are playing their part as biased by supporting one political party. Some people also criticized President Lula's statement against media that he is also going towards Hugo Chavez's policies by sanctioning media channels.

According to Brazilian polls Ms Rousseff will be the next president of Brazil as she has more than 50 percent favor of Brazilians with her while her opponent just has around 29 percent. It is said she will be the world's most powerful lady with Merkel of Germany and Clinton of USA, if she is elected as a president. She is very committed to follow Lula's policies to run her government in an effective way. She has Bulgarian parents and she has also been captured and tortured by the military government. It is said she was the part of guerilla group in Brazil but she confessed and also said that she never used weapons against her enemies.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Brazil is one of the largest producers of ethanol in the world which is producing 26 billion liters of ethanol in 2010. But the energy minister of Brazil is very optimistic of growth in ethanol in next years as he said that Brazil would be able to produce 64 billion ethanol in 2019 that is a great achievement. Brazil's resources like sugarcane are playing very efficient role in boosting its production of ethanol and also Brazil is exporting sugarcane on a large scale as compare to the previous years.

President Lula said Brazil is not worry of influx of oil deposits in the country because it has ability to control all of its deposits by its energy company. And he also said Petrobras is one of the largest energy company of the world which has ability to explore and refine oil to export and bring it in use in various sectors. It is said the new oil exploration in Brazil may be the third largest oil depot in the world that is explored and controlled by the Petrobras which is government's energy company.

Geostrategic Issues

Brazilian foreign minister said that he is ready to help Cuba to develop its economy. He said Brazilian economy is boosted when it cared its small and medium kind of business and Brazil has experience of it now so Cuba can follow Brazil's policy to uplift its economy.

Report Summary/Chile

Political Issue

President Pinera of Chile has said government of Chile is striving its best to reduce poverty in Chile and the government has taken various steps to reduce the poverty successfully.

He said poverty rate decreased till 13 percent from 2009 and would be decreased more by efficient policies of the government.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

In another occasion the president said the government is also working to rescue all 33 mine workers who are still trapped in mines. Now the government has called a cage like capsule that is going to be sent in the mine and it will bring out all rescue mine workers from the mine.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

President of Chile met with the governor of California and signed agreements regarding education, environment and business between California and Chile. Both governments are enjoying good trade relationships since many years and even increasing on these years.

Report Summary/Colombia

Political Issue

President of Colombia said that FARC wants peaceful agreements with the government of Colombia but it is just possible if they assure government that they will not attack at the government forces, they will not recruit personnel in their group against the government and they will leave all hostages. But on the other hand the spokes person of FARC said it is just possible if there is not attack and war from both sides because if they stop then the government should also assure them that the government is not going to attack on them.

In a joint operation by Colombian police and special forces in the surroundings of Bogota they killed the second top chief of FARC leader. In the operation five security personnel are also wounded but the president received applauds from the president of US and he said it is the biggest victory of the government of United States since the new president took office in last month.

After the killing of Money Jojo, the second chief of FARC rebel in Colombia the approval rating of the president Santos increased before the people of Colombia. In a poll almost 300 people are interviewed and 88 percent of them said they are happy with the death of the FARC leader and with the operation of the government.

Colombia's attorney general has called a senator of Colombian senate and received resign from him due to his links with FARC. It is said the senator was helping the rebel group of Colombia secretly and since last 18 years was also a renowned politician of Colombia. The senator is also accused of releasing 16 hostages from the government to help FARC.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

President Santos spoke to a representative of Washington Post in USA about Colombia's relationships with Venezuela and said that he is very optimistic that the relationships with Venezuela are getting better and he is hopeful that it would be normalized soon. He also said there were no efforts before to normalize relations and due to it the people of both countries are suffering the most.

Report Summary/Mexico

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Another mayor of a northern state of Mexico's town is shot dead when he was coming out of his house. He is the fourth mayor who has been killed in last two months and except the mayors one gubernatorial candidate is also killed by some gunmen when he was going in his car two months ago. It is said Mexico is turning towards drug state where there is no security especially in northern states. Cartels have their vast influence in the north. The mayor belonged to the leftist Democratic Revolution Party.

Almost 16 people are dead and some missing in Oaxaca that is a southern state of Mexico and a hillside rural area due to land slide. But in the early reports of Mexican government it was said that may be only few people are missing and it is said now that can not be sure that how many people are affected and how many have died yet but the government officials are saying that government is rescuing women and children first from the affected place and many are rescued in the safe place.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Report Summary/Venezuela

Political Issue

Venezuela's elections held on Sept. 26 in which about 17.5 million Venezuelans voted to choose 165 deputies to the National Assembly and 12 representatives to the Latin American Parliament. But in spite of getting majority votes by United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) of President Chavez couldn't get two third majority that he needs in the elections of 2012 to run

the government. In the meanwhile, President Chavez run his campaign fully by using his Twitter account while his opponent party also used the same platform against Chavez and alleged on Chavez government of bad governance who is riling in Venezuela since last 12 years continuously. Venezuela's opposition party boycotted previous congressional elections due to the fear of ragging by Chavez. Defense minister of Venezuela said that the security is assured in all polling centers and in the country to make the elections day peaceful.

President Chavez said his candidates won about 5.4 million votes, against 5.3 million for opposition candidates. On the other hand, election commission reported that Chavez's socialist party won 98 of the 165 seats in the National Assembly, while the opposition coalition won 65 seats and the remaining 2 seats went to a splinter left-leaning party. Chavez got mostly votes from the rural areas of Venezuela where he is more popular as compare to his opponents. Governments from Spain to Colombia offered congratulations for the largely peaceful vote and a high turnout of 66 percent. EU also praised Venezuelan local elections as it went in a peaceful ways and it also welcomed Venezuela's opposition parties which also got enough votes in the country.

Polls suggest Chavez remains the most popular politician in Venezuela, even if his popularity has slipped due to disenchantment over crime and an economy that has Latin America's slowest growth and highest inflation. In spite of all these president Chavez remained most popular leader in the country and he is very hopeful to win 2012 presidential elections while opposition party said it could not win enough seats in the local elections because it had boycotted the previous elections of 2008 so it could not prepare well but coalition of opposition is also very hopeful in winning presidential elections of 2012.

Economic Issue

According to the government sources the economy of Venezuela is shrinking continuously and in this year it is also contracted. Inflation has reached till 28 percent and there are still chances of stagnancy in it, also the GDP is declining from 1 to 2 percent. So continuously the country is going towards decline economically.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Chavez said Venezuela is working on nuclear energy program that is not for an atomic bomb but to create energy. He also said that Venezuela favors Iran's nuclear energy plan as it is also for peaceful purposes but United States, Israel and EU are suspicious of that. He was saying that no one can stop Venezuela to develop its nuclear energy.

Detailed Report/Argentina

Argentina president thanks Uruguay over Royal Navy snub

The President of Argentina has thanked Uruguay for denying a Portsmouth warship entry into its capital port.

Argentina's president Cristina Kirchner launched a video in which she thanks Uruguay's head of state José Mujica for 'having respected all Argentines' by not allowing HMS Gloucester in to Montevideo

Uruguay pulled the plug on a routine visit from Gloucester last week in a show of solidarity with Argentina in their ongoing claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands.

Uruguay's president has since called British Ambassador Patrick Mullee and the British Foreign Affairs ministry to explain the decision, saying it is a 'priority' his government aligns with Argentina over the 'very delicate' Falklands issue.

This led to Mrs Kirchner's video message, which included what sounded like a call to arms to Mr Mujica - suggesting their countries form a 'joint defence' against Britain.

Referring to Britain, she said: 'We know they are coming to exhaust our natural resources. They may come for the oil, they may come for the fish. They are after Argentina today, maybe they will be after Uruguay tomorrow if they feel they are lacking something up there.

'I appreciate the eternal solidarity Uruguay has showed towards the Malvinas (Falkland Islands). For this is a question that belongs to the whole of South America.'

Argentina has blocked British ships and planes from its ports ever since the 1982 Falklands war.

In 2006, protesting British oil exploration in waters around the Falklands, Argentina asked neighbouring countries not to allow their ports or airports be used by British ships or planes heading there.

The snub to HMS Gloucester is the second time in three years a Royal Navy ship has been denied access to stop at Uruguay.

HMS Nottingham was turned away from Montevideo in December 2007.

The Royal Navy and the Foreign Office said Britain respects Uruguay's right to turn away warships.

There was no immediate comment from the Foreign Office on Mrs Kirchner's video.

India, Argentina ink agreement on peaceful uses of N-energy

India and Argentina have signed an agreement for cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy, according to Department of Atomic Energy.

Agreement between the Government of India and the Argentine Republic for Cooperation in Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy was signed at Vienna by Dr. S. Banerjee, Chairman of Atomic Energy Commission and Dr. Norma Boero, President of the Atomic Energy Commission of Argentina (CNEA) yesterday.

The agreement was signed on the on the sidelines of the 54th general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency, a DAE release said.

“This is an inter-governmental agreement and the scope of cooperation is wide,” Mr. Banerjee told PTI from Vienna today.

“We have lot of commonality and therefore possibilities of exchange of information on operation and maintenance of reactors,” he said.

In addition there could be scope for service assistance to Argentina with the Indian expertise on en-masse coolant replacement of nuclear power reactors, Mr. Banerjee said adding, “We are also looking forward for cooperation in Research and Development (R&D) in various peaceful uses of nuclear energy.”

Detailed Report/Brazil

Lula Accused of Following on Chavez's Steps in Dealing with Brazilian Press

Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's comments on freedom of the press are "something dangerous" and put him on the tracks of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, said the president of the Inter-American Press Association (SIP), Alejandro Aguirre in an interview published in Brazilian newspaper O Globo.

After considering the comments as a direct attack on the media which criticizes Lula's administration, Aguirre told reporters that "the president's remarks are something dangerous."

Lula has repeated during public appearances that some sectors of the Brazilian media are acting "like political parties" and supporting opposition candidates. He has asked for more control over the press and stricter sentencing for "slander and the profusion of lies."

Aguirre warned that "freedom of the press is a right that belongs to the people and not to the government."

He went further and said that "it is obvious that we are before a government that's following the steps of other Latin American governments, like Chavez's in Venezuela, and Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner," by developing some tough attitudes against the independent media that does not stay on the government's course.

"Regretfully we have seen cases of democratic governments that at some moment begun to act in an authoritarian manner to control the media, particularly those that follow an independent line, independent criteria."

Aguirre anticipated that SIP, which brings together the newspapers of the Americas, will make an official declaration on its position regarding recent statements from the Brazilian president.

"We are very concerned with the situation in Brazil, In other statements we have expressed this, but we are hopeful that the person who succeeds Mr. Lula as president will be respectful of civil and human rights, and of freedom of expression as the cornerstone of democracy," added Aguirre.

SIP is always alert and concerned when a leader from the region considers he is "the owner of public opinion for having been elected."

A democratic election is something very important and significant "but the free flow of information and opinion is a right that belongs to the people not the government."

In the latest political rallies in support of the ruling Workers party candidate for the coming October 3 presidential election, Dilma Rousseff, Lula has repeated that victory will also mean "a defeat for the media that criticizes him and his administration."

Lula is furious with newspapers and magazines that have exposed a ring of alleged corruption involving the successor of Ms Rousseff as cabinet chief and which has forced the recent resignation of several top officials of his administration.

On Tuesday he toned down his criticism saying freedom of the press strengthens democracy "but can't be used to spread lies or invent things every day."

Lula's statements were harshly criticized by Brazil's Bar Association and the Printed Media Association.

Brazil's Rousseff still seen 1st round victor - poll

Brazil's ruling party presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff saw her lead shrink slightly in the latest election poll but she still appears headed for a first round victory.

Rousseff commands 49 percent support among voters against 28 percent for opposition candidate Jose Serra, the Datafolha poll broadcast by TV Globo on Wednesday showed.

If elections, scheduled for October 3, were held today, Rousseff would have more than half of the valid votes, which would give her a first round victory, the poll added.

In a similar poll last week, Rousseff had 51 percent against Serra's 27 percent.

It is the first time that Rousseff's advantage over her main opponent in a poll has shrunk since an ethics scandal involving her party and successor in the chief of staff's office under President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva surfaced last week.

Rousseff has so far benefited from the popularity of the outgoing Lula, one of Brazil's best-liked presidents ever.

Lula's chief of staff, Erenice Guerra, resigned over allegations she was involved in a kickback scheme for public works contracts. Guerra was Rousseff's deputy before Rousseff resigned as Lula's cabinet chief to run for president.

Former Sao Paulo state governor Serra, 68, has also been accusing Rousseff and her party of having illegally accessed the tax records of his daughter and opposition members to gather potentially damaging information against them.

Rousseff has denied wrongdoing in both cases.

Brazil's ethanol fuel production to reach 64 billion liters in a decade

Brazil's ethanol fuel production will reach 64 billion liters in the year 2019, more than twice the amount currently produced, the Mines and Energy Minister Marcio Zimmerman said on September 20.

“Brazil produces 26 billion liters today and the figure will reach 64 billion liters in 2019. With that, we will even have a surplus to export,” Zimmerman said in Sao Paulo.

Zimmerman explained that 47 per cent of Brazil's energy came from renewable sources, one of the highest rates in the world. According to him, that is due to sugarcane-based products, which are responsible for the production of 18 per cent of the country's energy.

The Minister defended a rise in the investments in the sector, in order to keep up with other countries which are trying to improve the efficiency of the ethanol fuel production. He pointed out, however, that he believed Brazil will keep on being one of the most efficient countries in the world in this sector.

Along with the U.S., Brazil is one of the leading ethanol fuel producers in the world. The country has a high domestic demand for the product, since the fuel used in automobiles must be blended with ethanol. In addition, most cars produced in Brazil in the last few years are 'flexi-fuelled', which means that consumers can choose which fuel to use.

Brazil offers Cuba help to develop small businesses

Brazil's foreign minister says his country has offered to help Cuba develop small and medium businesses as part of a drive for economic growth.

Celso Amorim was quoted as describing Cuban plans to lay off half a million public-sector workers in the next six months as "very courageous".

He said Cuba could learn from Brazil's successful experience in fostering entrepreneurship.

Mr Amorim met Cuban President Raul Castro in Havana on Saturday.

He was speaking to reporters in New York on Monday, ahead of the 65th UN General Assembly which opens on Thursday.

Last week Cuba announced plans to lose a million workers from the public-sector payroll - half of who will go by next March.

The government currently controls almost all aspects of the Cuba's economy and employs about 85% of the official workforce, an estimated 5.1 million people. There is also a burgeoning black economy.

The lay-offs are being seen as the latest - and one of the most dramatic - attempts to revive the island's struggling economy.

'Ready to co-operate'

Mr Amorim said Brazil had successfully developed small and medium businesses and reduced the informal economy, and could share this expertise with Cuba.

"It doesn't pay off for Cuba to move 500,000 workers out of the public sector if they fall into the informal economy," Mr Amorim said, according to news agency Reuters.

He said the lay-offs were "very courageous", adding: "I believe Cuba's evolution - and I use this word deliberately - is a process that will increase opportunities."

"We're ready to co-operate," he reportedly said.

Analysts say Cuba's move is being undertaken after long consultation with trade unions and other bodies.

They say many of the laid-off workers will not become unemployed but will become self-employed or be offered alternative employment in workers' co-operatives.

Brazil's Lula Says Country Can Cope With Oil Wealth

Sao Paulo - (Dow Jones) - Brazil's president on Friday said the country is prepared to cope with the influx of wealth from massive offshore oil discoveries, and defended the government's strong role in the economy.

"What we have in our hands is greater than all the opportunities that have been thrown up by our history," Lula said in a speech at the Sao Paulo stock exchange to mark the largest share issue ever by the government-run oil company, Petroleo Brasileiro SA (PBR, PETR4.BR).

The company, better known as Petrobras, has so far raised about BRL115 billion (\$67 billion) from the sale of nearly 4.1 billion new shares--a world-record offering--which could grow a bit further due to additional offerings. A large part of the shares were bought by the government in exchange for oil production rights, and the state's stake in the company will rise to about 48%, from 40% before.

The fresh cash will be used to finance a \$244 billion investment plan over the next four years, and will also be used to develop some of the enormous oil fields which have been discovered off the coast of Brazil. The investment plan and those new finds are expected to push Brazil up among the top 10 oil producers and exporters in the world.

Sudden discoveries of vast reserves of mineral wealth can often result in the so-called "resource curse," where money is squandered, economies are mismanaged and, in a phenomenon known as "Dutch disease," industrial development can be stunted.

The government rejects concerns Brazil may succumb to those afflictions. Lula said the country is in an exceptional position because the discoveries come at a time when its economy is strong and Brazil already has a solid industrial base. The injection of fresh capital is a "safeguard" for Brazil's oil wealth, and the proceeds will create long-term prosperity, helping to eradicate poverty and improve education, Lula said.

The Brazilian government requires oil companies, including Petrobras, to source as much of their needed equipment and services as they can from within Brazil. For the government, that will ensure the development of the Brazilian oil industry, creating jobs and expertise, although it could come at the expense of delays and cost overruns if sufficient capacity isn't built, and rules at some point might have to be eased.

The capitalization also raises the stakes at Petrobras, which is being asked to undertake one of the most ambitious investment programs ever attempted in the oil industry, while also facing increasing pressure from the government to drive social as well as economic development. Those two goals aren't mutually exclusive, but analysts say the company will be stretched to the limit.

Since the late 1990s, Brazil has opened up its oil industry to foreign competition, and the government took an arm's-length approach at Petrobras, allowing the firm more freedom to operate along professional and commercial lines. Petrobras was transformed and is often held up as an example of how government-controlled oil companies can be successful.

The new share sale has little practical impact on Petrobras, where seven out of the nine board directors already answer to the government. It's seen, however, as another sign of a tide that is turning, and that the government will be seeking to wield more of that influence than in coming years.

Term limits prevent the highly popular Lula from running for a third consecutive term in office, but his hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, has a commanding lead in polls and is expected to sweep into office, largely promising continuity in policy.

The president, who steps down at the end of 2010 after eight years in office, criticized those who'd in the past accused him of being anti-capitalist. "A weak state was never synonymous with strong private initiative," he said Friday.

"It is precisely that devourer of capitalism who leaves the presidency of the republic, after eight years, as the president who is honored...to have participated in the most auspicious moment in world capitalism," Lula said.

Dilma Rousseff Set to be the World's Most Powerful Woman

The world's most powerful woman will start coming into her own next weekend. Stocky and forceful at 63, this former leader of the resistance to a Western-backed military dictatorship (which tortured her) is preparing to take her place as President of Brazil.

As head of state, president Dilma Rousseff would outrank Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, and Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State: her enormous country of 200 million people is revelling in its new oil wealth. Brazil's growth rate, rivalling China's, is one that Europe and Washington can only envy.

Her widely predicted victory in next Sunday's presidential poll will be greeted with delight by millions. It marks the final demolition of the "national security state", an arrangement that conservative governments in the US and Europe once regarded as their best artifice for limiting democracy and reform. It maintained a rotten status quo that kept a vast majority in poverty in Latin America while favouring their rich friends.

Ms Rousseff, the daughter of a Bulgarian immigrant to Brazil and his schoolteacher wife, has benefited from being, in effect, the prime minister of the immensely popular President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the former union leader. But, with a record of determination and success (which includes appearing to have conquered lymphatic cancer), this wife, mother and grandmother will be her own woman. The polls say she has built up an unassailable lead – of more than 50 per cent compared with less than 30 per cent – over her nearest rival, an uninspiring man of the centre called Jose Serra. Few doubt that she will be installed in the Alvorada presidential palace in Brasilia in January.

Like President Jose Mujica of Uruguay, Brazil's neighbour, Ms Rousseff is unashamed of a past as an urban guerrilla which included battling the generals and spending time in jail as a political prisoner. As a little girl growing up in the provincial city of Belo Horizonte, she says she dreamed successively of becoming a ballerina, a firefighter and a trapeze artist. The nuns at her

school took her class to the city's poor area to show them the vast gaps between the middle-class minority and the vast majority of the poor. She remembers that when a young beggar with sad eyes came to her family's door she tore a currency note in half to share with him, not knowing that half a banknote had no value.

Her father, Pedro, died when she was 14, but by then he had introduced her to the novels of Zola and Dostoevski. After that, she and her siblings had to work hard with their mother to make ends meet. By 16 she was in POLOP (Workers' Politics), a group outside the traditional Brazilian Communist Party that sought to bring socialism to those who knew little about it.

The generals seized power in 1964 and decreed a reign of terror to defend what they called "national security". She joined secretive radical groups that saw nothing wrong with taking up arms against an illegitimate military regime. Besides cossetting the rich and crushing trade unions and the underclass, the generals censored the press, forbidding editors from leaving gaps in newspapers to show where news had been suppressed.

Ms Rousseff ended up in the clandestine VAR-Palmares (Palmares Armed Revolutionary Vanguard). In the 1960s and 1970s, members of such organisations seized foreign diplomats for ransom: a US ambassador was swapped for a dozen political prisoners; a German ambassador was exchanged for 40 militants; a Swiss envoy swapped for 70. They also shot foreign torture experts sent to train the generals' death squads. Though she says she never used weapons, she was eventually rounded up and tortured by the secret police in Brazil's equivalent to Abu Ghraib, the Tiradentes prison in Sao Paulo. She was given a 25-month sentence for "subversion" and freed after three years. Today she openly confesses to having "wanted to change the world".

In 1973 she moved to the prosperous southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, where her second husband, Carlos Araujo, a lawyer, was finishing a four-year term as a political prisoner (her first marriage with a young left-winger, Claudio Galeno, had not survived the strains of two people being on the run in different cities). She went back to university, started working for the state government in 1975, and had a daughter, Paula.

In 1986, she was named finance chief of Porto Alegre, the state capital, where her political talents began to blossom. Yet the 1990s were bitter-sweet years for her. In 1993 she was named secretary of energy for the state, and pulled off the coup of vastly increasing power production, ensuring the state was spared the power cuts that plagued the rest of the country.

She had 1,000km of new electric power lines, new dams and thermal power stations built while persuading citizens to switch off the lights whenever they could. Her political star started shining brightly. But in 1994, after 24 years together, she separated from Mr Araujo, though apparently on good terms. At the same time she was torn between academic life and politics, but her attempt to gain a doctorate in social sciences failed in 1998.

In 2000 she threw her lot in with Lula and his Partido dos Trabalhadores, or Workers' Party which set its sights successfully on combining economic growth with an attack on poverty. The two immediately hit it off and she became his first energy minister in 2003. Two years later he made her his chief of staff and has since backed her as his successor. She has been by his side as Brazil has found vast new offshore oil deposits, aiding a leader whom many in the European and US media were denouncing a decade ago as a extreme left-wing wrecker to pull 24 million Brazilians out of poverty. Lula stood by her in April last year as she was diagnosed with

lymphatic cancer, a condition that was declared under control a year ago. Recent reports of financial irregularities among her staff do not seem to have damaged her popularity.

Ms Rousseff is likely to invite President Mujica of Uruguay to her inauguration in the New Year. President Evo Morales of Bolivia, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and President Fernando Lugo of Paraguay – other successful South American leaders who have, like her, weathered merciless campaigns of denigration in the Western media – are also sure to be there. It will be a celebration of political decency – and feminism.

Female representation: A woman's place... is in the government

In recent years, female political representation has undergone significant growth, with dramatic changes occurring in unexpected corners of the globe. In some countries women are dominating cabinets and even parliamentary chambers. By comparison, the UK falls far behind, with only 22 per cent of seats in the Commons currently held by women.

Bolivia In the Bolivian cabinet, 10 men are now matched by 10 women. In 2009, women won 25 per cent of seats in the lower chamber, and 47 per cent in the upper chamber.

Costa Rica In 2010, women won 39 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Argentina In 2009, women won 39 per cent of seats in the lower chamber and 47 per cent in the upper chamber.

Cuba In 2009, women won 41 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Rwanda In 2009, women won 56 per cent of seats in the lower chamber and 35 per cent in the upper chamber.

Mozambique In 2009, women won 39 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Angola In 2009, women won 38 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Switzerland Has a female-dominated cabinet for the first time. In 2007, women won 29 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Germany In 2009, the cabinet had six women and 10 men. That year, women won 33 per cent of lower chamber seats.

Spain Nine women compared with eight men in cabinet. In 2008, women won 37 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Norway Equal numbers of men and women in the cabinet. Women won 40 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Denmark Nine women and 10 men in cabinet. In 2007, women won 23 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Netherlands Three women and nine men in cabinet. In 2010, women won 41 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Detailed Report/Chile

Chile to eradicate poverty by 2014, says president

Chilean President Sebastian Pinera said here Wednesday that Chile's goal is to eradicate poverty by 2014, a year ahead of the deadline, set out in 2000 in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"We are well aware that these are very bold and ambitious targets," Pinera said at the UN high-level meeting on MDGs, which entered its third day here Wednesday. "But they are also fully attainable for this generation."

For poverty reduction, although Chile has made "very important progress," achieving a reduction from almost 40 percent in 1990 to just over 13 percent in 2006, the trend was reversed over the last three years, Pinera said.

From 2006 and 2009, poverty in Chile increased, "affecting over two and a half million of my compatriots," Pinera said.

It's the best investment to strengthen democracy and to facilitate development, he said, adding that poor equality of education, lack of work and the weakness of the family are main contributing factors.

Chile is addressing the root causes through job creation, increasing public investment in school system, and an "ambitious agenda" to strengthen families by launching programs and extending coverage, for example, of daycare centers, Pinera said.

"By tackling poverty comprehensively, using two types of instrument, in the same way as the two blades of a pair of scissors cut through paper: instruments to attack its causes and instruments to mitigate its consequences," the president said.

Calif. governor signs pact with Chilean president

Los Angeles—California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger met with Chile President Sebastian Pinera Friday to discuss cooperation on education, the environment and energy technology.

In remarks following the signing of three memoranda of understanding by university officials from both countries, Schwarzenegger said Chile's relationship with California has been mutually beneficial.

The governor called for further trade, tourism exchanges and other cooperation between the two.

"I look forward to working with President Pinera to further strengthen our partnership," Schwarzenegger told an audience at a luncheon at University of California, Los Angeles.

The Chilean president reciprocated by praising California's educational institutions, scientific research and environmental policies as models for his country.

"There are so many things we have learned and we can keep learning from California, in terms of its spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship," he said.

The new agreements came two years after Schwarzenegger signed memoranda with then-Chile President Michelle Bachelet to collaborate on environmental, educational and agricultural projects.

The governor used his remarks Friday to advocate for further free trade agreements between the United States and foreign countries, such as the one that has existed with Chile since 2004.

Federal officials have negotiated a trade deal with Korea that has yet to be approved by lawmakers.

Schwarzenegger also used the occasion to defend himself against complaints that his trade mission to Asia this month produced few tangible results, while it drew him away from the state's budget negotiations.

He said California's lucrative trade relationship with Chile is the result of many meetings and overtures and did not spring up after one visit.

California exports some \$1 billion per year to Chile, with the South American country selling hundreds of millions of dollars worth of goods each year to California, Schwarzenegger said.

"You have to nurture relationships with foreign countries," he said. "You don't always come back right away with something."

Rescue cage arrives at Chile mine

Copiapo, Chile (CNN) -- Rescue workers in Chile took delivery Saturday of a 420-kilogram (924-pound) cage that is expected to haul 33 trapped miners back to the surface.

Authorities have dubbed the device the "Phoenix Capsule" because they say it will help the miners rise up again and give them a new life.

The first rescue capsule arrived at the San Jose gold and copper mine Saturday afternoon, draped in plastic sheeting. About a half-hour later, Chilean Mining Minister Laurence Golborne and Health Minister Jaime Manalich, accompanied by rescue engineers, unveiled the capsule. It was painted in the red, white and blue colors of the Chilean flag.

Relatives of the trapped miners saw the capsule for the first time and began applauding.

Golborne said the capsule weighed 420 kilograms (924 pounds) and its interior height was six feet, four inches (1.9 meters).

"We're taking one step after another. This is one more step but we have a long way still to go," he said.

Cristina Nunez, wife of trapped miner Claudio Yanez, was one of a handful of relatives permitted to try the capsule for size.

After emerging from the device she said: "I'm very happy. Claudio will fit inside perfectly because he's one of the skinnier ones. But all 33 will fit fine. This bring us a step closer to the rescue."

The hi-tech capsule will be equipped with an oxygen supply, communications equipment, retractable wheels to help it travel up the rescue shaft and an escape hatch in case anything goes wrong.

Its arrival Saturday, far ahead of the government's initial estimate that was around the end of next week, is the first hint rescuers could be accelerating the timeline for recovering the men from a cavern some 700 meters (2,300 feet) underground.

Asked about a media report citing Chilean government sources saying the rescue could come as early as October 15, Golborne replied: "This will be over when it's over. There's no use speculating."

He said the effort was still on schedule to rescue the men by the first week of November, but added workers would do everything possible to push that date up.

"Obviously we're going to try and speed up the process as much as possible but there's no sense trying to guess what it will be. We're dealing with hard rock and there could be technical difficulties. All these contingencies mean we are scheduling for the first days of November," Golborne said.

By 8 a.m. Saturday, the Strata 950 drill, dubbed Plan A, had bored a 15-inch (33 centimeter) diameter hole 442 meters (1,458 feet) into the rock. That drill must make two passes to carve out a 28-inch diameter hole wide enough to hoist the miners through.

The Plan B operation, using a Schramm T-130 drill, is deepest at 175 meters (577 feet) with the final diameter of 28 inches (70 centimeters). That drill has been hit by a series of technical problems in the last week and the drill hammer has fallen off at least three times. Early in the week, the drill bit fell right down into the mine workshop.

Plan C, a Rig 421 oil rig, looked to be the fastest option on paper but appears so far to have struggled with hard rock conditions. It was at 62 meters (204 feet) at 8 a.m. Saturday.

At an early afternoon press conference near the entrance to the San Jose mine, Health Minister Jaime Manalich outlined plans for the final phase of the rescue.

He said two rescuers -- a rescue expert and a skilled paramedic -- would make the first journey in the Phoenix Capsule and drop the 700 meters into the mine.

They would carry out a medical check of the miners and decide the order in which they would be extracted based on their physical and mental conditions. He said the ride from the cavern, where the miners have been holed up since August 5, back to the surface would take an estimated 15 minutes.

Manalich said there was no plan to sedate any of the miners for the journey.

"Compared to the 50 days the miners have so far spent down there, the 15-minute ride back will be like nothing," he said.

"It won't be a traumatic experience. Remember, we're talking about miners who are used to traveling up and down in a cage, perhaps a little bigger than this one. Probably it will not be a traumatic experience but we're taking all the precautions to make this trip as comfortable as possible for them," Golborne said.

Once on the surface, the miners will be taken to a field hospital set up near the extraction hole and be given antibiotics, intravenous fluids and an eye check. After initial examination and triage they will be transferred to an observation area within the mine complex, where they would have their first reunion with "one or two family members," Manalich said.

Once all the miners are extracted, Manalich said they would be flown by helicopter to Copiapo Regional Hospital, a 15-minute flight. He said each of the miners would be kept at the hospital "without exception" for a minimum of two days for stabilization and observation.

Manalich said the most immediate risk to the miners would be the possibility of damage to their retinas as they face bright sunlight after weeks underground. He also said medics would seek to immunize the miners against common germs on the surface, which they have not been exposed to recently.

He added the miners could face a drop in blood pressure as they are brought back to the surface and concluded by saying they would be monitored for months for possible signs of post-traumatic stress.

Detailed Report/Colombia

Colombia's FARC rebels want peace talks without conditions

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group said Wednesday they want a dialogue with the government without conditions, and won't stop their armed actions, Xinhua reported.

In a statement published by the Colombian news agency Anncol, the FARC said that they are ready "to talk with the current government and find a political solution to the social and armed conflict in the country and without any kind of conditions."

After taking power in August, President Juan Manuel Santos said that he would negotiate with the FARC rebels, but only if they accepted a series of conditions, including the release of hostages, stopping recruiting minors and ending the armed actions.

"What the president demanded should be the results of a peace agreement and not the conditions to have a dialogue," the FARC said.

The FARC said that "as long as there is war, there will be armed actions from both sides," referring to its attacks on the police and army, which have resulted in the killings of at least 40 people this month.

Colombia troops kill top FARC rebel leader 'Mono Jojoy'

Bogota, Colombia - Colombian government forces have killed the top military chief of the leftist FARC rebel group in what new President Juan Manuel Santos called the most "resounding blow" ever against the guerrilla army.

Jorge Briceño, better known as "Mono Jojoy" was killed along with another 20 guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Government forces conducted a bombing raid Wednesday on his camp in an area known as La Macarena in southern Colombia.

"The symbol of terror in Colombia has fallen," Mr. Santos said from New York, where he was attending the United Nations General Assembly. He added that 30 planes and 27 helicopters participated in the operation Wednesday. Jojoy's body was identified on Thursday.

"This is historic news for our country," said Santos, who took power last month. "This is our welcome to the FARC."

The United States, which has provided some \$6 billion in mostly military aid to Colombia, had offered a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to Jojoy's arrest or conviction. Santos is scheduled to meet with President Obama on Friday.

'Heart of Jojoy's lair'

Defense Minister Rodrigo Rivera said five soldiers were wounded in the operation which struck at the "heart of Jojoy's lair." He said the rebel camp was nearly 1,000-ft. long and included escape tunnels and a concrete building where Jojoy hid out.

The military located the site with information from FARC deserters. "The FARC are falling apart from within," Mr. Rivera said. "A message to the members of the FARC: Turn yourselves in, we will respect your lives."

Political analyst Ariel Avila calls Jojoy's death "devastating" for the FARC.

"Jojoy was a living legend in the FARC, and they respected him highly," says Mr. Avila. "This is a blow to the structure and culture of the guerrillas."

Jojoy's Eastern Bloc was the strongest FARC unit with an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 fighters.

Mr. Avila says there is no strong figure in line to replace Jojoy and predicts there would be a wave of demobilizations.

Second rebel leader killed this week

The blow against the FARC comes a few days after another guerrilla leader, Sixto Cabana, was shot dead along with 27 other rebels along the southern border with Ecuador. The FARC rebels have been fighting the Colombian authorities since the mid-1960s.

The rebels have lost several top commanders in the past several years, under a sustained campaign against them that pushed them back to remote jungles and mountains.

FARC founder, Manuel Marulanda, died of natural causes in 2008, and the same year, the organization's top "foreign minister" was killed in a bomb raid on his camp in Ecuador, while another was murdered by his own bodyguard.

Still, Avila says that a rebel surrender is not imminent. "This is a hard, hard blow," he says, "but there's a long way to go before they capitulate."

Santos: Relation with Venezuela flows despite differences

"We can think very differently," the Colombian President said in reference to his Venezuelan counterpart, "but if we respect our differences, [and] have good relations, our people will benefit"

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos said that his country needs to keep normal relations with Venezuela, no matter his differences with his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chávez.

The Colombian president told The Washington Post, about the development of the relationship with Venezuela once he took office. "When the problems with Chávez started and he shut down trade, it had a very dramatic cost to our economy. So when I came into power, I said there is nothing worse than what is happening at this moment: no diplomatic relations, no dialogue, no trade and the apparent presence of the Farc in Venezuela. Even though I have had deep differences with Mr. Chávez, I have a responsibility to try to achieve at least normal relations with Venezuela."

According to Santos, he and Chávez "can think very differently." However, "but if we respect our differences, [and] have good relations, our people will benefit."

The Colombian president is optimistic about relations with Venezuela. "Trade is starting to flow again. He (President Chávez) is starting to pay our exporters, which he had ceased to do. He is starting to help in terms of the security on the border."

Obama congratulates Colombian security forces after FARC leader's death in clash

New York (AP) — President Barack Obama praised Colombia's security forces on Friday, saying he hopes this week's death of a top rebel leader will lead to more stability in the embattled country.

"Yesterday was a big day for the people of Colombia and those who are seeking peace in the region," Obama said as he met with Colombian President Jan Manuel Santos in between U.N. meetings here.

On Thursday, officials announced that rebel leader Jorge Briceño had been killed in a two-day bombardment of his jungle military camp. Nicknamed "Mono Jojoy," Briceño was field marshal and second in command of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which has been battling the Bogotá government for a half-century.

Colombian officials hailed it as a major blow against an already reeling insurgency.

Obama lauded Colombia's U.S.-backed security forces for "outstanding work."

"The people of Colombia have been plagued by this terrorist insurgency for a very long time," he said. "We now have the chance to see continued stability for Colombia in the region."

Santos, 58, a U.S.-trained economist, was sworn in last month, replacing Alvaro Uribe, a longtime U.S. ally. Obama said Santos has already "shown remarkable leadership" and is off to "a great start."

The scion of one of Colombia's leading political families, Santos took office promising to cement military gains but also remain open to dialogue with FARC leaders in hopes of finally ending the Western Hemisphere's last remaining armed conflict. Under Uribe, rebel forces were rolled back, and kidnappings and bombings were sharply reduced.

As he met with Obama, Santos told reporters, "Now that the security problem is more or less solved, we can now turn to a more progressive agenda — social development, the prosperity of our people, climate change."

Educated at the University of Kansas, Santos often boasts about the exploits of the Jayhawks basketball team, Obama said. This spring, in the NCAA playoffs, Obama noted, "I bet on them winning it all and they lost. He's already apologized to me for that."

Colombian senator ousted for links to FARC

(CNN) -- Colombia's attorney general removed and disqualified Sen. Piedad Córdoba from the Congress for 18 years for having "promoted and collaborated" with the FARC guerrillas, the attorney general's office said in a statement.

Attorney General Alejandro Ordóñez Maldonado made the announcement Monday.

Córdoba is a controversial political figure in Colombia.

She heads Colombians for Peace, a group trying to end to the decades-old war between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC.

Cordoba has had a hand in freeing prisoners held by the FARC, including two soldiers released in March, one of them who were a captive of the rebels for 12 years.

Cordoba has had a hand in the release of at least 19 hostages.

The high-profile releases have earned Cordoba praise and a rumors of being a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. Critics say that her ties to the FARC are too close for comfort, however.

Ordonez said that the investigation against Cordoba originated from computers seized in a 2008 operation against a top FARC leader, Raul Reyes. Reyes was killed in a Colombian military raid.

The evidence showed communications between the FARC and the senator, who was identified under the aliases "Teodora," "Teodora de Bolivar," "La Negra" and "La Negrita," the statement said.

In these communications with the FARC, a designated terrorist group, Cordoba overreached her functions and authority to negotiate hostage releases, the statement said.

The links found on the computers were corroborated through other channels, including legal phone taps, the attorney general's office said.

On her Twitter account, Cordoba wrote Thursday that she was meeting with her attorneys about the attorney general's decision. "Be calm," she wrote.

Investigators "established with certainty that the senator sent advice to the FARC," the statement said.

In particular, the investigation found that she advised the rebel group not to send videos of hostages and instead voice recordings, with the goal of helping meet the group's agenda, the statement said.

The attorney general's office said that Cordoba instructed the FARC to release proof of life videos from the hostages with the goal of making other countries look favorable. She also made public statements aimed at promoting the rebel group and helping their interests, the statement said.

While Cordoba lost her senatorial post, she was not charged with treason, the attorney general pointed out.

Death of FARC military commander increases Colombian president's approval rating

The approval rating of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos increased to 88 percent after the military commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) Jorge Briceno, or "Mono Jojoy", was killed in a military raid, local reports said Sunday.

About 88 percent of 300 people interviewed in five cities were positive about Santos, while 7 percent said they were negative and 5 percent said they did not know or did not answer, according to an opinion poll conducted by the National Center of Consultant published Sunday on the local daily "El Tiempo".

The poll also showed 85.7 percent of the interviewees approved the Santos administration. The highest rate was in Medellin, northwest of the country, where 92 percent of the people expressed their acceptance of the president.

Some 55.3 percent of the respondents said that after Mono Jojoy was killed, the war against the FARC was going to end soon.

Mono Jojoy was killed on Wednesday by Colombian troops during a raid in southern Colombia. His death was considered by the Colombian government as "the strongest hit" against the FARC in more than 45 years.

Detailed Report/Mexico

Mexican mayor slain in drug-plagued northern state

Julio Cesar Godoy Toscano, center, raises his hand as he is sworn in as federal congressman at the National Congress in Mexico City, Thursday Sept. 23, 2010. Godoy, who is wanted by federal authorities for alleged links to drug cartels, evaded a police operation to try to prevent him from being sworn in and gain congressional immunity.

Gunmen killed a town mayor near the drug-plagued industrial city of Monterrey, authorities said Friday, the fourth mayor in northern Mexico to be murdered in little more than a month.

Prisciliano Rodriguez Salinas was gunned down late Thursday as he was leaving his house with a personal employee in the town of Doctor Gonzalez, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) east of Monterrey, the Nuevo Leon state Attorney General's Office said.

The employee, Eliseo Lopez Riojas, who was picking up equipment from the mayor's house, was also killed when gunmen in a white car waiting outside started firing. Investigators found 19 shells from two different weapons at the scene. The mayor was shot seven times.

Drug gangs warring for territory and smuggling routes in northern Mexico have increasingly targeted political figures in the region, though the attorney general said aspects of Rodriguez's killing were uncharacteristic of gangs.

"The act, in terms of waiting for the mayor outside his house ... is not a very common tactic for organized crime," state Attorney General Alejandro Garza y Garza said. "So we're not ruling out any line of investigation."

Garza y Garza said he was unaware of any threats against the mayor. Town clerk Reinaldo Campos also told The Associated Press that he knew of no threats.

Police officers from the town were taken to Monterrey for questioning about the killings, though Garza y Garza said none were under arrest.

Hermenegildo Linares Robledo, assistant to the town clerk, said normal activities at the town hall had been suspended and confirmed that state police were patrolling the streets, though there were no soldiers in view.

"There are very few people in the streets," he told the AP. "Right now the mood is tense and quiet."

Nuevo Leon Gov. Rodrigo Medina said that his administration "will not be intimidated, that we do not give in."

President Felipe Calderon condemned the attack and sent his condolences to the family as his government reiterated its commitment to the security of all Mexicans. The government has attributed the spike in violence in the border states of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas to a breakup between the Gulf and Zetas cartels.

Monterrey-area mayor Edelmiro Cavazos was kidnapped in August and his body dumped three days later. Seven police officers who authorities said were paid monthly salaries by the Zetas were arrested in connection with that killing.

It was followed two weeks later by a fatal attack on Mayor Marco Antonio Leal Garcia in Hidalgo, Tamaulipas.

Hooded gunmen shot to death Mayor Alexander Lopez Garcia in the town of El Naranjo in San Luis Potosi state on Sept. 8. The methods used in all three slayings were similar to those used by Mexico's drug cartels.

In June, gunmen killed the leading gubernatorial candidate in Tamaulipas.

Meanwhile, a congressman-elect sought by federal authorities for alleged drug ties slipped into the Chamber of Deputies on Thursday and took his oath of office -- making him immune from apprehension and prosecution for the duration of his term.

Julio Godoy was elected to congress in July 2009 and went into hiding after he was charged days later with protecting La Familia cartel in the western state of Michoacan.

The congressman called himself the innocent victim of an attack by the federal government, saying, "I am not a criminal."

The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Jorge Carlos Marin, said a judge ruled that Godoy maintains his political rights despite the warrant for his arrest.

Godoy was elected as a candidate for the leftist Democratic Revolution Party, which governs Michoacan and has been one of the biggest critics of President Felipe Calderon's strategy against organized crime.

More than 28,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence since Calderon launched his attack on drug cartels in late 2006.

Mexico: 11 missing in landslide

Oaxaca, Mexico — A hillside collapsed early Tuesday on homes in a rural community in the southern state of Oaxaca, but authorities said there were no confirmed deaths and only 11 missing — backing off earlier estimates of possibly hundreds buried or dead.

Interior Minister Francisco Blake and Oaxaca Gov. Ulises Ruiz said three adults and eight children were missing. The officials spoke to Mexico's Televisa television network, The Associated Press reported.

The first soldiers from a relief convoy reached the remote hillside town of Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec, and their reports indicate far fewer casualties than initially feared.

Shortly after the early-morning slide, officials said hundreds were feared dead or missing. Later, they said the slide killed at least four people but officials then backed off that figure.

Most of the relief convoy, as well as dozens of vehicles and digging equipment, were slow to reach the town in Oaxaca state due to a road cut off by a raging river. Helicopters were grounded by the bad weather as well.

The first soldiers who arrived "found serious damage but possibly not of the magnitude initially estimated," Mexican President Felipe Calderon said.

"We are very saddened by this tragedy, very sad but very determined to do everything in God's power to save the victims who are alive in this landslide and to help the people of Santa Maria," Calderon told reporters.

Donato Vargas, an official in Santa Maria de Tlahuitoltepec reached by a satellite telephone, said earlier as many as 300 homes were believed to be buried, and residents who made it out early in the morning said they had no success digging out their neighbors.

"We have been using a backhoe but there is a lot of mud. We can't even see the homes, we can't hear shouts, we can't hear anything," he said.

Ruiz said the major landslide followed days of rain in the Sierra de Juarez region.

The town saw a small landslide on Sept. 13 that damaged several homes.

The town is about four hours' drive from the capital of Oaxaca, a city famous for its colonial buildings and nearby archeological sites.

Heavy rains have fallen on Central America and parts of Mexico for days as two storm systems moved across the western Caribbean.

Parts of Mexico are enduring their worst rainy season on record, which has triggered heavy flooding and forced thousands of people from their homes in vulnerable parts.

Detailed Report/Venezuela

Venezuelan Economy May Shrink 2 Percent in 2010, Government Official Says

Venezuela's economy will contract for a second year in 2010, missing the official forecast of near-zero growth, before rebounding next year, a government official said in an interview.

Gross domestic product will shrink 1 percent to 2 percent this year and may expand 2 percent to 3 percent in 2011, the official, who isn't authorized to speak publicly, said today in Caracas. Inflation will accelerate to 28 percent by the end of the year from 20 percent through August, he said.

Venezuela, the largest oil producer in South America, has remained in recession as the rest of the region expands. A drop in oil production and a decline in imports as a result of tighter foreign exchange restrictions have stifled manufacturing, while President Hugo Chavez's nationalizations of companies chase away foreign investors.

The median forecast of 10 banks surveyed by Bloomberg, including Barclays Plc and Morgan Stanley, is for the economy to shrink 4 percent this year and grow 1.55 percent in 2011.

Venezuela's economy will be the only one to contract in the Western Hemisphere this year, according to the International Monetary Fund.

The government, which last month sold \$3 billion of 12-year bonds, "probably" won't sell more dollar-denominated debt securities this year, the official said. Petroleos de Venezuela SA, the state oil company, will sell \$3 billion of bonds next month, he said, without providing more details.

International reserves, which have fallen 18 percent this year to \$28.7 billion, will remain at about \$28 billion through the rest of the year, the official said. The central bank transferred \$6 billion to an off-budget development fund earlier this year to finance government infrastructure projects.

The economy should grow next year as the government sells more dollars to large corporations for imports through the foreign exchange board, known as Cadivi, the official said.

Chavez shuttered the unregulated currency market in May that provided dollars at a weaker exchange rate than the official rates of 2.6 and 4.3 per dollar.

Small- and medium-size companies, including small individual dollar requests, can turn to the central bank's currency market, known as Sitme, where dollars can be purchased at 5.3 bolivars, he said.

Sitme has traded \$2.2 billion of government and PDVSA bonds since opening on June 9.

Venezuela ready for legislative elections

Vice President of the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (CNE) Humberto Castillo said Friday that all electoral tables had been set in the country for the legislative elections to be held on Sept. 26.

"This process is very dynamic and all the voting tables have been established. On Sept. 26, the electors can vote conveniently," Castillo told reporters.

Earlier at a press conference, CNE President Tibisay Lucena said more than 600,000 people would be in charge of 36,563 voting tables in 12,433 electoral centers across the country.

Meanwhile, the country will deploy 110,000 troops to safeguard the elections, and 30,000 militias will also be deployed.

"The Venezuelan National Armed Forces guarantee the safety of the people during the whole electoral process and invites the Venezuelan people to exercise their right to vote, as it is the maximum expression of the people's will," Defense Minister Carlos Mata said at the press conference.

On Sept. 26, about 17.5 million Venezuelans will vote to choose 165 deputies to the National Assembly and 12 representatives to the Latin American Parliament.

The voting will start at 6:00 a.m. local time (1030 GMT) and finish at 6:00 p.m. local time (2230 GMT).

Chavez leads Internet attack for Venezuela vote

Caracas (AFP) – President Hugo Chavez led Internet battles for influence during Venezuela's key legislative elections Sunday, using his Twitter account to urge voters to the polls.

One day after officials said the president's @chavezcandanga Twitter account had been hacked, Chavez -- a former soldier who has won a string of popular votes in almost 12 years in power -- used the popular social network to call for "maximum mobilization" of his supporters and for "a strong push on the entire battle frontline."

He also urged voters to mount a "sustained attack!" at the ballot box.

Meanwhile, the opposition coalition's Twitteraccount @unidadvenezuela also urged voters to come out in force, with leaders posting updates as they voted.

"It's time to choose better security for Venezuelans and a better quality of life," wrote Caracas mayor Antonio Ledezma, echoing the opposition campaign against Venezuela's murder rate, one of the highest in the world.

Opposition parties, who have united to take on Chavez's dominant leftist party after boycotting the last congressional elections five years ago, also hammered out messages throughout the day.

Twitter use is widespread in this highly polarized and politicized nation, and its bombastic president is its most high-profile user, with more than 850,000 followers.

More than 17 million Venezuelans were eligible to vote for 165 lawmakers in what was expected to be a tight race which would influence Chavez's "socialist revolution," two years before presidential polls.

Minister of Defense: Security is guaranteed all over Venezuela

Gen. Carlos Mata Figueroa said that a woman who collapsed in a polling center died before arriving at a hospital. Minister of Defense Gen. Carlos Mata Figueroa reported a few minutes ago that security is guaranteed to all the Venezuelan people during this election day. He added that 110,000 troops have been deployed in more than 12,000 polling centers.

The minister acknowledged that he is not aware of reports of a voter arrested for destroying electoral material and of the death of a person at a polling center in the area of Las Clavellinas. However, he said that a woman who collapsed in another polling center died before arriving at a hospital. He would not disclose the cause of death and would not provide further details.

Gen. Mata said that he had no reports of any problem in the border region. "There are no problems on the borders, the troops of the Armed Forces are deployed to provide security as expected," he said.

Opposition hopes to rein in Chavez after election

Caracas, Venezuela (AP) -- Opponents of Hugo Chavez won new clout to try to rein in a socialist leader who has ruled largely unchecked, making gains in congressional elections that weaken the president ahead of his next re-election bid and could force him to deal with rivals.

Both sides claimed the results released Monday as a victory, but Chavez lost the two-thirds majority that has allowed his allies to ignore opponents in rewriting fundamental laws, appointing key officials such as Supreme Court justices and letting Chavez pass laws by decree.

Opposition leaders said they intend to start imposing some checks on Chavez in the National Assembly, and hope the president is receptive to dialogue.

While his opponents celebrated the results of Sunday's vote, Chavez dismissed their claims that it was significant setback for him.

"Keep beating me like that," Chavez said with a laugh at a news conference. "The revolutionary forces obtained a very important victory."

Chavez said his candidates won about 5.4 million votes, against 5.3 million for opposition candidates. The opposition had claimed early Monday that according to their tally they garnered a majority of votes - suspicions fed by the fact that electoral officials had not released total popular vote tallies.

Chavez accused the opposition of lying about the results, and suggested they were "local elections" with results that wouldn't necessarily mirror a presidential vote.

Still, the opposition's strong showing suggests it could mount a serious challenge to Chavez as he seeks re-election in 2012.

Chavez dared his adversaries to try to oust him through a recall referendum if they think they have so much support. "Why are you going to wait two years?" he said.

Electoral officials said Chavez's socialist party won 98 of the 165 seats in the National Assembly, while the opposition coalition won 65 seats. The remaining 2 seats went to a splinter left-leaning party.

Opposition politicians have complained they would have won more seats if it weren't for a new system of congressional districts stacked in Chavez's favor. They say the recent electoral changes drawn up by the Chavista-controlled National Assembly gerrymandered some districts by redrawing boundaries and gave heavier representation to rural areas where the president is most popular.

Chavez's party had dominated the outgoing legislature because rivals boycotted the past election in 2005. The only opposition came from about a dozen congressmen who broke away from the Chavez bloc.

While the opposition fell short of its hopes of a congressional majority, newly elected lawmakers promised to bring a plurality of voices to the legislature to examine Chavez's policies as he campaigns to transform Venezuela into a socialist state.

Maria Corina Machado, one of the anti-Chavez candidates who will take office early next year, told The Associated Press it is important to exercise "control on the president so that he becomes the president of all Venezuelans." Machado, who used to lead the vote monitoring group Sumate, said priorities will include insisting on the separation of powers for independent branches of government, decentralizing power and fighting corruption.

In Venezuela's unicameral legislature, a simple majority can approve many laws. But a two-thirds majority is needed to pass or change laws dealing with some areas, including laws relating to fundamental personal rights and freedoms, or to the structure of government.

A three-fifths vote is required to grant the president decree powers, as the outgoing National Assembly did during part of its five-year tenure.

Opposition leaders celebrated at the coalition's headquarters in Caracas, where they hugged and kissed.

Meanwhile, early street celebrations by Chavez supporters grew muted when the results were announced about 2 a.m. Monday. Some backers showed disappointment by holding their heads in their hands while others thrust their fists in the air, declaring a triumph.

Chavez called it positive that the opposition "accepted the rules of the game" and participated in the elections - a contrast with 2002 and 2003, when opponents tried to oust him in a coup and a subsequent strike that damaged the economy.

Some critics expressed doubt that Chavez or his allies would actually cross the deep political divide to consult with rivals after long ignoring and vilifying them as stooges of the U.S. government.

"It remains to be seen if President Chavez will respect that result in terms of not changing the rules of the game," said Moises Naim, former Venezuelan trade minister, told the AP during a visit to Singapore.

"We don't know if these elections will force Chavez to start behaving in a more democratic way and respecting checks and balances, or if he will interpret this as a need to clamp down on any remaining checks and balances and concentrate power even more," he said.

Naim noted that Chavez in the past changed laws to take away power from opponents who won elections.

After an opposition candidate won the mayoral election in Caracas in 2008, the Chavez-controlled National Assembly stripped the elected mayor, Antonio Ledezma, of most of his budget and subordinated him to another official in a newly created position appointed by Chavez. Opposition governors say Chavez has used similar tactics against them.

Naim suggested Chavez might look for ways to bypass the National Assembly. "He has never treated the opposition as a political rival but rather a mortal enemy," Naim said.

Miguel Tinker Salas, a professor at Pomona College in Claremont, California, said the outcome could prompt Chavez to concentrate on resolving domestic problems.

"It might force him to be more pragmatic and increasingly more focused on internal matters, especially now that he's got his eye looking toward 2012," when he faces re-election, Tinker Salas said.

Still, the opposition lacks a strong presence in many rural states where Chavez remains most popular, making it more difficult for government foes to win strong backing for a presidential candidate within two years, Tinker Salas said.

Polls suggest Chavez remains the most popular politician in Venezuela, even if his popularity has slipped due to disenchantment over crime and an economy that has Latin America's slowest growth and highest inflation.

The opposition, a coalition of multiple parties, smoothed over past divisions and fielded a unified slate of candidates for the elections. It remains unclear which opposition leader, or leaders, could emerge as top presidential contenders in the 2012 vote.

Governments from Spain to Colombia offered congratulations for the largely peaceful vote and a high turnout of 66 percent.

While some leaders expressed hope the result would facilitate greater dialogue, Chavez's close ally and mentor Fidel Castro wrote in a column that it was a "victory for the Bolivarian Revolution."

In Washington, U.S. State Department spokesman Charles Luoma-Overstreet said, "All Venezuelans can now deepen their dialogue and demonstrate their respect for the diversity of views that is essential in a democracy."

Opponents hope to rein in Chavez after election

Results of congressional elections could force Venezuela president to deal with rivals

Caracas, Venezuela — Opponents of Hugo Chavez have won new clout to try to rein in a socialist leader who has ruled virtually unopposed, making gains in congressional elections that weaken the president ahead of his next re-election bid and could force him to deal with rivals.

Both sides claimed the results released Monday as a victory, but Chavez lost the two-thirds majority that has allowed his allies to ignore opponents in rewriting fundamental laws, appointing key officials such as Supreme Court justices and letting Chavez pass laws by decree.

Opposition leaders said they intend to start imposing some checks on Chavez, and hope the president is receptive to dialogue.

Potentially just as significant in the long run were opposition claims they actually got more votes than Chavez-backed candidates did and were deprived of a majority in congress only because the system of districts is rigged in Chavez's favor.

That could pose a challenge for the president's hopes of winning re-election in 2012 — a contest based on the popular vote rather than electoral districts.

Suspicious that the popular vote ran against the president were fed by the fact that a day after the election, electoral officials still had not released total counts.

While his opponents celebrated the results, Chavez dismissed their claims of victory.

"Keep beating me like that," Chavez said with a laugh at a news conference. "The revolutionary forces obtained a very important victory."

With the vast majority of votes from Sunday's election counted, results showed that Chavez's socialist party won at least 96 of the 165 seats in the National Assembly, while the opposition coalition won at least 62 seats.

Chavez's party had dominated the outgoing legislature because rivals boycotted the past election. The only opposition came from about a dozen congressmen who broke away from the Chavez bloc.

The remaining seats in Sunday's voting went either to a small splinter party or had not yet been determined.

Ramon Guillermo Avelo, leader of the opposition coalition, said its own tally showed anti-Chavez candidates garnered about 52 percent of the total popular vote.

Opposition parties complain that recent electoral changes drawn up by the Chavista-controlled National Assembly gave heavier representation to rural areas where the president is most popular.

The opposition also expressed suspicion about the fact initial results were delayed seven hours even though Venezuela has an automated ballot system. Electoral officials cited close races as having caused the delays in declaring winners.

While the opposition fell short of its hopes of a congressional majority, newly elected lawmakers promised to bring a plurality of voices to the legislature to examine Chavez's policies as he campaigns to transform Venezuela into a socialist state.

Maria Corina Machado, a victorious anti-Chavez candidate, told The Associated Press it is important to exercise "control on the president so that he becomes the president of all Venezuelans." Machado, who used to lead the vote monitoring group Sumate, said priorities will include insisting on the separation of powers for independent branches of government, decentralizing power and fighting corruption.

Opposition leaders celebrated at the coalition's headquarters in Caracas, where they hugged and kissed.

Meanwhile, early street celebrations by Chavez supporters grew muted when the results were announced at about 2 a.m. Monday. Some backers showed disappointment by holding their heads in their hands while others thrust their fists in the air, declaring a triumph.

Some analysts expressed doubt, however, that Chavez or his allies would actually cross the deep political divide to consult with rivals after five years of ignoring and vilifying them as stooges of the U.S. government.

"It remains to be seen if President Chavez will respect that result in terms of not changing the rules of the game," said Moises Naim, former Venezuelan trade minister, told the AP in Singapore, where he was making a speech during a visit.

"We don't know if these elections will force Chavez to start behaving in a more democratic way and respecting checks and balances, or if he will interpret this as a need to clamp down on any remaining checks and balances and concentrate power even more," he said.

Naim noted that Chavez in the past changed laws to take away power from opponents who won elections.

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Analysis: Both sides winners in Venezuelan election

Caracas - It would appear that both sides won Sunday's Venezuelan legislative election: the party of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez got the most seats, the opposition got the most votes.

'(The opposition) say they won. Well, let them keep 'winning' like that!' Chavez said on his Twitter site Monday.

Every election in Venezuela is actually about the left-wing populist Chavez, who has been in power since 1999 and is seeking re-election in 2012.

His United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) celebrated the win: after all, they got 95 of the 165 parliamentary seats to the opposition's 64, with four seats still undecided according to the latest data.

The opposition, in turn, was glad to have deprived Chavez of the two-thirds majority he needed to be able to press on further substantive legislative changes in Venezuela without seeking any form of consensus.

And according to Venezuelan media, the country's democracy won too. With a turnout of 66.5 per cent and only minor incidents on election day, there were no immediate calls for revotes or fraud allegations. Not bad for a deeply divided country.

During the campaign, the always outspoken, always controversial Chavez had called the opposition 'lackeys' of imperial forces, a 'fifth column.' He had said he wanted a KO win. And in the end he attained a significant win, albeit one that was less resounding than he had hoped.

The opposition learned from its mistakes of the past. In 2005, they boycotted the National Assembly election, claiming they mistrusted the new electronic voting system. Their absence allowed the leftist populist president and his supporters complete control of the legislature, and deprived government critics of a key platform to voice their views since then.

This time around, more than 10 parties were part of the coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, the Table for Democratic Union, and the opposition appeared more focused than ever, fielding consensus candidates.

The opposition did not seek direct confrontation with Chavez as in the past, but focused instead on issues. The high crime rate, the rampant inflation and the scandal over rotting foodstuffs were some of the issues. And many Venezuelans expressed their disappointment at the polls.

There has been no shortage of elections in Venezuela since Chavez got to power. Voters have been called upon to make decisions at the polls more than 10 times, with frequent referendums.

But everything is about Chavez. This time around, as usual, he put the election in terms of 'all or nothing.' The future of the homeland and that of his revolution were at stake, he stressed.

He was greatly involved in the campaign. He travelled the country to support his candidates, and television showed him time and again surrounded by a sea of red-shirted comrades.

That is where he thrives. He addressed crowds, greeted people, laughed a lot and attacked the opposition. He remains very popular among many Venezuelans, even if the number is probably shrinking and if many other Venezuelans dislike him with a passion.

Chavez used the campaign to warm up for the 2012 presidential election, and he is not yet done with his 21st century socialism.

However, the result of Sunday's election is bound to make it significantly harder for Chavez to govern, and the opposition feels strong. Opposition spokesman Ramon Guillermo Aveledo sees 'a chance to offer an alternative to the country.'

In only two years' time Venezuelans will again have the opportunity to decide between Chavez and something else.

Spanish government praises Venezuela's commitment to democracy

The Spanish Foreign Ministry believes that the results of legislative elections "are a good basis for a more intense and fruitful dialogue in the National Assembly and other institutions"

The Spanish government congratulated on Monday President Hugo Chávez and the opposition parties on the electoral results, and encouraged them to use the legislative elections held on Sunday "as a basis for a more intense and fruitful dialogue."

In a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Spanish government highly valued "the Venezuelan people's commitment to democratic values." Chávez won the parliament vote, but failed to obtain the qualified majority needed to control the National Assembly.

The statement added said that the Spanish government is pleased by the fact that the polls were carried out in "a peaceful climate and with a very high turnout," Efe reported.

EU welcomes opposition parties' return to Venezuelan parliament

Brussels - The European Union hailed Venezuela's parliamentary elections on Tuesday, welcoming the return to parliament of opposition groups.

Opponents of President Hugo Chavez's authoritarian rule had boycotted the previous election in 2005, claiming that a new electronic voting system could facilitate fraud.

In a statement, the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton welcomed 'the return of multiparty representation to the National Assembly,' as the opposition decided to take part in Sunday's vote.

Ashton said this provided 'a good basis for renewed and fruitful political dialogue for the benefit of all Venezuelan people.'

The elections were won by Chavez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela. But it did not get the two-thirds majority it was hoping for, allowing the opposition to also claim some share of success.

'The EU notes with satisfaction that the elections took place in a peaceful manner,' Ashton indicated, stressing that the bloc was ready to support Venezuela's 'democratic institutions, social inclusion and sustainable development.'

Chavez: Venezuela Studying Nuclear Energy Program

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said Monday that his government is carrying out initial studies into starting a nuclear energy program.

Chavez brought up the issue during a news conference, saying the South American country needs an atomic energy program.

"We're taking on the project of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and they aren't going to stop us," Chavez said. "We need it and we're carrying out the first studies."

Chavez is a close ally of Iran and has defended the Iranian nuclear program, saying he is sure Iran is not making atomic weapons in spite of U.S. and European suspicions.

He has mentioned plans for an atomic energy program previously. It remains unclear how quickly he intends to pursue the program.

Chavez brought up the issue while referring to the case of a physicist and his wife in New Mexico who are accused by U.S. authorities of offering to help develop a nuclear weapon in contacts with an undercover U.S. agent posing as a representative of the Venezuelan government.

"They detained some scientist professors, I think Argentines, and then I was ready to respond when I saw that a government spokesman came out there saying that no, no, there is no evidence," Chavez said.

The U.S. government is not alleging Venezuela or anyone working for it sought U.S. secrets in the case.

Chavez brought up the case as an example of some of the claims his leftist government has to contend with.

"They invent so many things," he said. "The fact they say there is no evidence doesn't mean they aren't going to find it tomorrow, or fabricate it ... that Venezuela is making an atomic bomb."

He called that idea preposterous, saying: "Who in Venezuela could take on a project of that type? Who? We aren't going to take it on."

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