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THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Chávez using Bolivia to his advantage

MONTERREY, Mexico -- Venezuela's leftist President Hugo Chávez has found a new cause, which won him big headlines at the summit of President Bush and 33 other hemispheric leaders that ended here Tuesday: championing land-locked Bolivia's demand that Chile grant it an outlet to the sea.

"I'm very sorry for Chile, but I keep dreaming about bathing in a Bolivian beach," a feisty Chávez said upon arriving at the Summit of the Americas on Monday. The statement fueled a fierce public debate between the presidents of Chile and Bolivia -- two of Latin America's sharpest leaders -- in Bush's presence at the summit's closing session Tuesday.

Chávez was referring to Bolivia's demand that neighboring Chile cede part of the territory it won in an 1879-1883 war between the two countries. The territory was awarded to Chile in a 1904 treaty signed between Bolivia and Chile, but the dispute revived later and the two countries broke diplomatic relations in 1978.

To outsiders, reviving this age-old conflict sounds like just another extravagant cause-du-jour by Venezuela's populist leader.

But in South America, a region with a long history of wars over unresolved border disputes, the Bolivian-Chile problem is a serious matter: It could split the region politically, hurt plans for economic integration, and allow Bolivia's radical Indian leftist and coca-growers movements to take the lead on an issue that has the support of virtually all Bolivians.

WHY OPEN OLD WOUND?

Why is Chávez -- who made similar comments at the Ibero-American summit in November -- reopening an old South American wound and taking it to an international summit?

Judging from what I heard in private conversations with two Latin American presidents and several foreign ministers here, I could come up with four powerful reasons:

First, Chávez is in trouble at home, where opposition leaders gathered an as yet unverified 3.4 million signatures for a constitutionally sanctioned referendum on whether he should be allowed to finish his term. Whether Chávez decides to allow the referendum or break the rule of law and become a full-fledged dictator, it is clearly in his interest to divert attention away from his domestic problems.

"He wants to be seen as a continental figure, rather than as a cornered would-be dictator," one Latin American foreign minister said. `` And to some degree, it's working for him."

Second, Chávez has long tried to find new partners for his "Bolivarian revolution" in Latin America, and no country is more fertile ground for a pro-Venezuela and pro-Cuban revolution than Bolivia. More than 65 percent of Bolivia's population is made up of Indians, who have lived in a near-apartheid situation for hundreds of years.

U.S. and Bolivian officials suspect Chávez of aiding leftist coca-growers' leader Evo Morales, one of the leaders of the labor union and coca-growers movement that toppled Bolivia's previous constitutional government last year.

"This is a win-win situation for Chávez," another senior Latin American official said. `` From the wealthiest businessman to the last peasant, you can't find a Bolivian who doesn't feel very strongly about this issue."

Third, Chávez, who almost daily praises "the Cuban model" and lashes out against free-market "neoliberalism," has found a convenient political weapon against Chile, the most successful economy in Latin America.

FOCUSING ON NEGATIVES

While Venezuela's economy has plummeted in the past two years and the number of Venezuelan poor has soared, Chile has cut its number of poor in half in the past 13 years, from 41 percent of the population to 20 percent. For Chávez, it's better that fellow Latin American countries talk about Chile's refusal to grant Bolivia an outlet to the sea, than about its economic successes.

Fourth, Chávez likes the limelight, and this is an issue that turns him into a media star at inter-American summits.

My conclusion: Chile and Bolivia should find a way to fine-tune a plan that Chilean President Ricardo Lagos proposed Tuesday that would grant Bolivia access to the sea for 50 years, renewable on expiration. Bolivia so far has declined, demanding sovereignty over whatever land it gets.

Whoever is right, Bolivia should get some kind of passage to the sea. But it's ironic that Chávez, who complains almost daily about U.S. meddling in Venezuela's affairs, is proudly going around demanding that Chile give away part of its territory. If that's not meddling, I wonder what it is.