

From Venezuela, A Counterplot

by Martin Arostegui

As Washington prepares a high-stakes military venture in the Persian Gulf, a growing physical threat is being posed by Iraq, Libya and Iran to the soft underbelly of the United States. Hundreds and possibly thousands of agents from rogue Arab nations are working hard to help President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela take control of South America's largest oil industry and create al-Qaeda-friendly terrorist bases just two hours' flying time from Miami.

Arab advisers now are reinforcing a sizable contingent of Cubans in efforts to reorganize Venezuela's security services, assimilate its industries based on totalitarian models and repress a popular opposition movement. "What happens in Venezuela may affect how you fight a war in Iraq," Gen. James Hill of U.S. Southern Command is reported recently to have told his colleague at U.S. Central Command, Gen. Tommy Franks.

"Chavez is planning to coordinate an anti-American strategy with terrorist states," says Venezuela's former ambassador to Libya, Julio Cesar Pineda, who reveals correspondence between the Venezuelan president and Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi about the need to "solidify" ties between liberation movements in the Middle East and Latin America and use oil as an economic weapon.

Exhorting his countrymen to return to their "Arab roots," Chavez has paid state visits to Libya, Iraq and Iran and signed a series of mutual-cooperation treaties with the rogue governments whose operatives now are flooding into Venezuela. There they can blend into an ethnic Arab community estimated at half-a-million.

Last January 10th, eighteen Libyan technicians flying in from Tripoli via Frankfurt, Germany, were received at the Caracas airport by Ali Ahmed, head of Libya's "Commission" in Venezuela. He was accompanied by the parliamentary whip of the ruling Venezuelan Revolutionary Movement (MVR), Cilia Flores. Nicolas Maduro and Juan Baruto, two other bosses of the MVR party militias (the Circulos Bolivarianos) who had paid an extended visit to Tripoli in 2000, also were on hand to smooth the way for the Libyans coming off Lufthansa Flight 534.

The Libyan agents were identified as: Alsudik Alghariy, Elmabruk Najjar, Koaled Adun, Zeguera Adel, Sherif Nagib, Abubaker Benelfgh, Nabel Bentahir, Abdulfat

Enbia, Waldi Majrab, Amhamed Elkum, Abdulgha Nashnush, Mohamed Romia, Abdurao Shwich, Abdalnass Elghanud, Ezzedin Barhmi, Abdulssa Seleni, Hassan Gwile and Mhemmed Besha.

The high level of security provided for the Libyans' arrival was intended to avoid the havoc of previous days when the entry of Iraqi and Iranian groups touched off a riot. As word of the landing of 20 Iranians had spread through Simón Bolívar International Airport on Jan. 8, crowds of infuriated travelers banged counters and cigarette urns and chanted "Get out! Get out!" to protest what many Venezuelans perceive as foreign interference in their country's affairs.

The uproar became such that one delegation had to be ushered through the presidential ramp to avoid immigration or customs checks, sources in Venezuela's military-intelligence department, DIM, tell Insight. Some of the Iranians, now holed up at a Caracas hotel, are reported to be hesitant about conducting their mission of reactivating installations of Venezuela's recently nationalized oil company, PDVSA.

Meanwhile, Iraqi VIPs, moving under the protection of Chavez's secret police -- the Department of Intelligence Security and Prevention (DISIP) -- came to the attention of Venezuela's regular military when government agents tried to use air-force planes to fly five of Saddam Hussein's agents into the interior of the country. Military pilots requested special clearances before allowing the Iraqis onto the C-130s.

Military sources also report that the recently arrived group of Libyans is billeted at the Macuto Sheraton Hotel in La Guaira, which they share with Cuban commandos who have been conducting strike-breaking operations around the nation's oil ports. Local units of the National Guard, the branch of the Venezuelan armed forces responsible for internal security, were reported to be refusing government orders to repress strikers.

According to Capt. Jose Ballabes of the merchant marine union, the Cubans improvised floating concentration camps on board oil tankers, threatening officers and crews to get them to move the paralyzed vessels. When the Venezuelans still resisted, "such methods as sleep deprivation, often used against political dissidents in Cuba, are being systematically employed against our people," says Ballabes.

Sources in Venezuela's merchant navy name two of the Cuban agents on the tankers as Arturo Escobar and Carlos Valdez, who were presented as "presidential advisers" operating with DISIP. Venezuela's internal-security organization now is reported to be controlled by a command cell of undercover officers from Fidel Castro's military-intelligence service. Venezuelan sources say the Cuban operatives also run a computerized war room inside Chavez's presidential palace, Miraflores. It is in this war room that the repressive policies now afflicting the country have been planned, according to serving officers in the Venezuelan army, navy and national guard consulted by Insight.

The Libyans, like the Cubans, are specialists in military intelligence and security, but are described as computer specialists brought in to operate and reprogram crashed systems at the oil refineries, according to industry sources.

"The West must expect deepening relations between Venezuela and Islamic states," says professor Elie Habalian, a specialist in petroleum economics and a consultant to PDVSA President Ali Rodriguez Araque, who is identified by Venezuelan military sources as a one-time communist guerrilla chief. Aided by Cuban intelligence and Islamic workers, the government has managed to get oil production back up to 34 percent, a level sufficient to supply basic domestic needs. "It's a war between two models," continues Habalian, "one seeking total control over oil policy and the liberal international policy represented by PDVSA's previous management" effectively eliminated by the government, which has ordered the mass dismissal of 7,000 oil-company employees.

Interfacing of Venezuela's oil industry with the radical state systems also facilitates plans for a possible oil embargo against the United States in the event the military assault on Iraq is prolonged. While international oil experts consider such a scenario unlikely due to Venezuela's desperate need for export earnings, Venezuelan opposition leaders fear that Chavez could take advantage of a conflagration in the gulf to consolidate his dictatorship with the support of Cuban and Arab agents already in place.

"Chavez has violated the constitution on 34 counts and is moving to nationalize banking," says a leading member of Venezuela's business community. "He has packed the high courts with his judges, neutralized the army and turned the national assembly into a rubber-stamp parliament. All that's left to do is shut down the independent media and decapitate the opposition."

According to this source, Chavez is most likely to move when world attention is fixed on Iraq.

If the strike temporarily has undercut Venezuela's capacity to use the oil weapon, Chavez can pay back his radical Arab allies by supporting terrorist attacks against the United States. In the wake of claims by former presidential pilot Maj. Juan Diaz Castillo that Chavez contributed \$1 million to al-Qaeda, police sources in Caracas tell Insight that a highly fanatical cell of Islamic activists already is operating from a sports complex in the old downtown section of the capital protected by armed units of the Circulos Bolivarianos.

Undercover police officers report that the group has ties to a Hezbollah financial network operating from the Caribbean island of Margarita under Mohammed al Din, an important Chavez backer and a close friend of hard-line MVR deputy Adel el Zabayar Samara, a key link between Islam and Latin America's radical left.

The Caracas cell is involved in recruiting Venezuelan Arabs for terrorist indoctrination and military training at isolated camps in the country's interior and on islands off the coast, according to intelligence officers who claim that members of al-Qaeda are hiding out in Margarita. They say these members include Diab Fattah, who was deported from the United States for his possible connections with the Sept. 11 hijackers. Four Venezuelan officers investigating terrorist activities on the resort island were killed in 2001 when Chavez moved to dissolve DISIP Section 11, which had targeted radical Arabs.

A 40-hectare estate on the sparsely populated peninsula of La Guajira near the border with Colombia is another suspected training base for Islamic terrorists. Equipped with highly modern communications systems, including satellite dishes and parabolic antennae, the complex belongs to an Arab-owned company called Jihad, which is registered as a home-appliance dealership.

Chavez's international plans may have suffered a diplomatic setback recently when he failed in an effort to include any of his rogue allies in a "Group of Friends of Venezuela." He wanted Cuba, Algeria and China to form part of the U.S.-backed watchdog committee of governments designed to support efforts by the Organization of American States to guarantee democratic liberties and future elections. But as war in the gulf absorbs U.S. attention, the group may come under the decisive influence of its other senior partner, Brazil. While that country's elected president, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, appears to have put himself in the

center-left and to be aligning his policies with the West, some of his key advisers object.

Chief among them is Marco Aurelio Garcia, a hard-line Marxist with close ties to Cuba and Colombian narco-guerrilla organizations, who is slotted for a top job in the foreign ministry. He already has used his influence to secure delivery of more than 500,000 barrels of oil to Venezuela to help Chavez get through the most critical moments of the strike. One of Aurelio Garcia's closest contacts is Mohammed Latifi, a powerful figure in Tehran's ruling circles who proposes an international oil boycott of the United States and is connected with terrorist networks.

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Story Source: Insight on the News

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