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OFFICE OF CONGRESSMAN ELIOT ENGEL SEVENTEENTH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

2161 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

CONTACT: Eric Jacobstein TEL: (202) 226-9980

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STATEMENT BY CHAIRMAN ELIOT ENGEL ON RECENT EVENTS IN BOLIVIA AND VENEZUELA

(Washington, D.C.) – Today, Congressman Eliot L. Engel, the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, made the following statement regarding Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s announcement that he will expel U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Patrick Duddy. Engel also commented on his concerns about the degradation of U.S. relations with both Venezuela and Bolivia, and the need to move forward on a positive agenda in the hemisphere.

“I strongly condemn President Chavez’s decision to expel U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Patrick Duddy. Just like the expulsion of Ambassador Goldberg from Bolivia, this provocative action is completely uncalled for and unjustified.

“I believe that now is the time for cooler heads to prevail in both countries and throughout the region. It is important that all of us in the hemisphere work together as partners in promoting social justice and tackling economic inequality. If President Chavez is really serious about helping the poor, then he should stop this nonsense and provocation towards the U.S. and work in partnership with nations throughout the region to tackle real problems head on. We ultimately all want the same thing: economic prosperity and a better future for the poor.

“Rather than succumbing to this distraction, the United States must continue to extend a helping hand to all of the citizens of the Americas through our aid and trade partnerships – even in trying circumstances like those we face in Bolivia and Venezuela.”

“In the past, I have been a firm proponent of long term extension of the trade preference package for Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. I have stated over and over that it is the people that we are helping with these preferences by creating jobs and creating profitable alternatives to illegal activities. However, I must say today that, due to the Bolivian President Evo Morales’ decision to declare the United States Ambassador to Bolivia, Philip Goldberg, persona non grata, I can no longer support the extension of trade preferences for Bolivia.

“Through its recent actions, the Government of Bolivia has shown its lack of desire to have a constructive relationship with the United States, and I can no longer support providing it with preferential treatment.

“In June of this year, a mob of 20,000 marched to the gates of our American Embassy in La Paz; the protestors threatened to burn the building down while police tried to maintain order. This event prompted the State Department to temporarily recall Ambassador Goldberg in protest. Bolivian President Morales was on record praising these demonstrators. Later that same month, USAID workers were expelled from the coca-growing Chapare region. That particular USAID program was developed to wean farmers off the crop from which cocaine is produced. Meanwhile, increased Bolivian drug cultivation is causing an escalation of drugs flowing into Brazil and Europe, and Brazil is now estimated to consume half of the drugs that transit through the country on the way to Europe.

“Unfortunately, due to the obscure chance that trade preferences will now be approved for Bolivia, President Morales has directly hampered the progress and success of his own people - it is the Bolivians who will regrettably suffer the most as the result of President Morales’ confrontational approach toward the United States.