

Bolivian President Evo Morales Visits Washington, Talks of Fresh Start With U.S. Under Obama

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Evo Morales, the charismatic but controversial president of Bolivia, this week came to Washington for the first time, saying he hoped for a fresh start with President-elect Barack Obama while defiantly reiterating the policies that have led to the near-collapse of his relations with the Bush administration.

Morales, who did not meet with any administration officials here, recently ordered all U.S. Drug Enforcement agents to leave Bolivia, a major grower of coca plants that produce cocaine. He also expelled the U.S. ambassador, accusing the envoy of conspiring with his opponents. The Bush administration, in turn, expelled Bolivia's ambassador, suspended trade preferences and withdrew all Peace Corps volunteers from the poor Andean country.

Given that acrimonious official backdrop, and the deep antagonism Morales's presidency has stirred among the large Bolivian immigrant community here, his two-day visit to the capital was an odd combination of symbolic goodwill gestures and harsh rhetoric, cheering students and angry demonstrators.

In speeches at the Organization of American States and American University, as well as in meetings with the news media, Morales stated adamantly that he would not allow U.S. drug agents back into Bolivia, saying they had been used for "political vengeance" against him. On the other hand, he said he had made serious efforts to curb drug trafficking while protecting small coca farmers as the longtime head of the Bolivian coca growers' association.

"We are all obliged to fight against narco-trafficking. We know that cocaine hurts humanity, but coca leaf is not poison," he told the gathering of Latin American diplomats yesterday at OAS headquarters. "Even a superpower," he added, does not have the right to punish or spy on another government "on the pretext of fighting narco-trafficking."

Morales also dismissed critics who portray him as a stooge of leftist Latin American leaders, such as Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and described himself as a strong believer in democracy. He noted that his 2005 election as Bolivia's first indigenous president had been ratified in a referendum in August, and he touted his proposed new constitution as an effort to create an egalitarian state where private property would be respected but public services would be a "human right."

Morales, 48, was cheered by an overflow crowd at American University on Tuesday night when, in a rambling and often emotional talk, he recounted his rise from a childhood of rural poverty to the leadership of an indigenous majority that had long been "hated, humiliated and

discriminated against." He vowed to eradicate illiteracy, improve health care and guarantee services such as water to all Bolivians.

But yesterday, he was jeered by a crowd of protesters outside the OAS, whose chants and placards called him a communist dictator, drug trafficker and puppet of Chávez. Most participants were middle-class Bolivian immigrants, including some originally from Santa Cruz, the wealthy lowland city that has been a focal point of opposition to Morales.

The increasingly ugly conflict between the Bolivian government and its domestic adversaries has led to a series of violent confrontations and dozens of deaths. The split has pitted Morales and his ardent supporters among indigenous peasants and laborers against some provincial governors, large landowners and most major private newspapers and TV stations.

"We are here to denounce what Evo is doing to our democracy, to our freedom of the press, to our constitution, to our human rights," Elena Abolnik, a Bolivian immigrant and activist from Northern Virginia, shouted into a bullhorn as Morales's limousine, flanked by Secret Service vehicles, arrived at the ornate OAS building.

Administration officials had no public comment on Morales's visit. One official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said Washington accepts that Morales is a popular elected leader but fears he is falling prey to the temptations of power and sees all critics as traitors. The official said Morales's charges against U.S. officials in Bolivia were unfounded.

The Bolivian president said he did not meet with any advisers to Obama, but he did visit several U.S. lawmakers, who reportedly quizzed him on his expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Philip S. Goldberg and the U.S. drug agency. However, several prominent lawmakers also sought to publicly mend fences with Morales, who came to Washington after giving a speech Monday at the United Nations.

Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) said in a statement that the United States "regrets any perception that it has been disrespectful, insensitive or engaged in any improper activities" in Bolivia. "We hope to renew our relationship . . . and develop a rapport," he said. Lugar also suggested that ending the suspension of U.S. trade preferences would "strengthen the growing political and economic relationship" and prevent a major loss of export-sector jobs in Bolivia.

For his part, Morales seemed to place great hopes in Obama's election, saying on several occasions that the two men had much in common as emerging leaders of long-oppressed groups in their respective countries. His first stop in Washington on Tuesday was the Lincoln Memorial, where he placed a wreath and spoke briefly of the struggle for justice and dignity.

"Who would have believed 10 or 15 years ago that I could become president of Bolivia? Who would have believed 20 or 30 years ago that a black man could become president of the United States?" he said to the OAS special session, speaking in Spanish.

"The world is changing. The struggles of Tupac Amaru were not in vain," he said, referring to the last emperor of the Incas. "The struggles of Lincoln were not in vain. The struggles of Martin Luther King were not in vain."