

Bolivia's Morales Diplomatic, Defiant in Visit to D.C.

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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 Administration 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 a 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." 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 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. The split has pitted Morales 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 comment on Morales's visit. 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.

Morales said he and Obama had much in common as emerging leaders of long-oppressed groups in their respective countries. "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.