

Bush in Colombia, Chavez in Bolivia

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay, March 11--US President George W. Bush wrapped up his visit to Uruguay and headed to war-torn Colombia early Sunday in a display of continued US support for that country's efforts to combat a leftist insurgency and illegal drug trafficking.

But his stay there will be limited to only six hours amid concerns the rebels might try to disrupt the summit with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe by launching new attacks, AFP said.

To stave off the threat, Colombian authorities have deployed 21,000 troops in addition to 7,000 police, who will be responsible for security in areas of Bogotá, where the US president will stay.

But these concerns notwithstanding, US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said Saturday that Bush looked forward to meeting with Uribe "to demonstrate US support for Colombia, highlight positive security and economic developments that have taken place there, and discuss the mutual commitment to the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement."



Hugo Chavez

Meanwhile, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez visited flood-ravaged Bolivia on Saturday to show off the fact that his country has pledged 10 times more aid than the Bush administration.

Bolivia was the latest stop on a Chavez tour intended to upstage President Bush's own trip through Latin America. While Bush visited Brazil on Friday, Chavez packed a soccer stadium in neighboring Argentina, telling a crowd of 20,000 leftist supporters that Bush's tour was a cynical attempt to divide the



George W. Bush

region, AP reported. Thousands of Bolivians, joined by Venezuelan aid workers, greeted Chavez at the airport in Trinidad, a city in Bolivia's eastern lowlands where a rainy season supercharged by El Nino has killed 51 people, driven thousands from their homes and triggered an outbreak of dengue fever.

Chavez has pledged \$15 million in aid for flood victims, including a squadron of helicopters to deliver food to remote villages, dwarfing the \$1.5 million sent by the US.

VIENNA, Austria, March 11--UN atomic energy chief Mohamed ElBaradei heads Sunday towards North Korea to discuss how to implement a landmark agreement on dismantling the communist state's nuclear weapons program.

ElBaradei Visiting N. Korea

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has described the two-day visit to Pyongyang beginning Tuesday as "very much a step in the right direction toward implementation of the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

ElBaradei will be leaving Vienna for Beijing, from where he is to depart Tuesday

for North Korea, IAEA officials said.

According to AFP, the visit follows the deal China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia and the United States struck February 13 for Pyongyang to shut its nuclear facilities in exchange for energy aid.

The current North Korean nuclear crisis began in

December 2002, when Pyongyang expelled IAEA inspectors and then in January 2003 withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

North Korea, where the population is reported to be impoverished and stricken by famine, announced in February 2005 that it had nuclear weapons.

Chirac Bringing The Curtain Down

PARIS, March 11--French President Jacques Chirac is expected to confirm on Sunday he will not seek reelection, bringing the curtain down on more than 40 years of frontline politics.

He leaves behind a legacy of strong, symbolic gestures but meager concrete results, Reuters reported.

Chirac is due to make a televised address to the nation at 8 p.m. to say he will not seek a record third mand-

ate at next month's presidential elections, officials and commentators say.

Campaigning for the April and May vote has been raging for months with conservative candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, Socialist Segolene Royal and centrist Francois Bayrou locked in a tight three-way race.

Chirac, 74, has clung on to the notion that he might run again so as not to become a lame-duck president, but a string of setbacks and a

bout of ill health have left little doubt in most people's minds that he would not try to hold on to power. The president is likely to defend his record on Sunday, pointing to the way he has protected French interests on the world stage, stood up to the United States over the Iraq war and promoted tolerance at home.

But critics say he has little meaningful economic or social reform to show for his time in charge.

Abbas, Olmert Confer 8 Afghan Police Killed In Taliban Ambush

BEIT-UL-MOQADDAS, March 11--Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas hold talks on Sunday that are only likely to highlight their divisions over a Palestinian unity government whose formation appears imminent.

"We don't expect any results," a senior Abbas aide said of the 5 p.m. 1500 GMT meeting at Olmert's Jerusalem residence, Reuters reported.

Olmert has vowed to boycott the unity government that Abbas is forming with Hamas Islamists unless it recognizes Israel, renounces violence and accepts interim peace deals as demanded by the Quartet of Middle East mediators.

But the Israeli leader has promised publicly to keep a channel of communication open with Abbas, a policy promoted by the United States, which plans to send Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice back to the region in the next few weeks.

Olmert and Abbas last met on February 19 in trilateral talks with Rice that ended with no sign of progress toward resuming peace negotiations on Palestinian statehood broken off six years ago.

The Saudi-brokered Palestinian coalition agreement, which ended weeks of warfare between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah faction, contains a vague promise to "respect" previous Israeli-Palestinian interim peace accords.

But it does not commit the incoming government to abide by those pacts, nor to recognize Israel and renounce violence, conditions key to resumption of aid to the Palestinian Authority cut off by the West after Hamas came to power a year ago.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, a Hamas leader, said the new administration could be announced as early as Monday.

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, March 11--Taliban insurgents ambushed a police patrol in southern Afghanistan killing eight officers, a police commander told AFP Sunday, in one of the bloodiest such attacks in weeks.

The patrol was ambushed in the southern province of Kandahar late Saturday, the commander of border police in the province, General Raziq, told AFP, adding "eight policemen were killed."

The rebels were able to flee following a "brief" gun battle after the attack in Arghistan district, said the commander, who uses only one name. They appeared not to have suffered any casualties, he said.

"We've launched an operation against the Taliban, who were behind this attack. So far we have had no success," he said.

Two British ISAF soldiers have been killed in the offensive, called "Operation Achilles."

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