

US condemns Bolivia and Venezuela ambassador expulsions as 'grave error'

The US has condemned the decision by Venezuela and Bolivia to expell its ambassadors as a "grave error", saying the move reflected their own "weakness and desperation" in the face of internal strife.

By Jeremy McDermott, Latin America Correspondent
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America has also announced sanctions against three members of Chavez's inner circle, who it accused of arming Colombian rebel group FARC and facilitating its drug trafficking operations.

It comes after Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez expelled the US ambassador in solidarity with his friend and ally, Bolivian President Evo Morales.

Mr Morales ejected the US ambassador the day before, accusing him of fomenting civil unrest.



"The Yankee ambassador to Caracas Philip Goldberg arrived as US ambassador in Bolivia in 2006 Photo: AFP has 72 hours to leave Venezuela, in solidarity with Bolivia, with the Bolivian people, and with the Bolivian government," Mr Chavez said, adding "here are people with dignity, Yankee shits."

Mr Chavez, who has accused Washington of being behind a plot to assassinate him, also announced the withdrawal of the Venezuelan ambassador to Washington until "there's a new government in the United States". He again raised the spectre that he could halt his country's significant oil supplies to the US.

"If there was an aggression against Venezuela there would be no oil for the people or for the government of the United States," he said.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said he "regretted" the decisions, which he classed as a "grave error".

"This reflects the weakness and desperation of these leaders as they face internal challenges," he said.

He insisted that the US ambassador in La Paz, Philip Goldberg, was innocent of the charge levied against him of "conspiring against democracy".

"Charges levelled against our fine ambassadors by the leaders Bolivia and Venezuela are false and the leaders of those countries know it," he said. "The only overthrow we seek is that of poverty."

The expulsion of Mr Goldberg has done nothing to calm increasingly violent protests against President Morales by northern and eastern provinces determined to secure greater autonomy.

President Morales has sent troops into the areas, allegedly to protect vital oil and gas infrastructure after a pipeline was bombed, and Mr Chavez is threatening to sent reinforcements if Mr Morales is overthrown.

Eight people have already been killed and 20 wounded after government supporters fought with protesters demanding autonomy in the northern region of Pando.

Honduras' president has now announced that he has postponed the accreditation of the US ambassador in solidarity with Bolivia.

President Manuel Zelaya insisted that Honduras was not breaking relations with the United States, but the move will raise fears in the US that other countries in Latin America could follow suit.

"We only are (doing this) in solidarity with Morales, who has denounced the meddling of the United States in Bolivia's internal affairs."

He added that small nations needed to stick together, saying: "The world powers must treat us fairly and with respect."

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, a close ally of Mr Morales, has also expressed his support for Bolivia's action, but has not announced yet whether he will take similar action.

"Dark forces of the empire are conspiring against the government of Morales," he said on Thursday, in a clear reference to the United States.

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