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Venezuela's Jews Defend Leftist President in Flap Over Remarks

- Les Cousins - Venezuela -

Date de mise en ligne : vendredi 13 janvier 2006

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By MARC PERELMAN

[Forward](#). January 13, 2006

The Venezuelan Jewish community leadership and several major American Jewish groups are accusing the Simon Wiesenthal Center of rushing to judgment by charging Venezuela's leftist president, Hugo Chavez, with making antisemitic remarks.

Officials of the leading organization of Venezuelan Jewry were preparing a letter this week to the center, complaining that it had misinterpreted Chavez's words and had failed to consult with them before attacking the Venezuelan president.

"You have interfered in the political status, in the security, and in the well-being of our community. You have acted on your own, without consulting us, on issues that you don't know or understand," states a draft of the letter obtained by the Forward. Copies of the letter are also to be sent to the heads of the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, among other Jewish groups.

"We believe the president was not talking about Jews and that the Jewish world must learn to work together," said Fred Pressner, president of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela. The confederation is known by its Spanish acronym, CAIV. He added that this was the third time in recent years that the Wiesenthal center had publicly criticized Chavez without first consulting the local community.

Last week the Wiesenthal Center wrote to Chavez, demanding that he apologize for what the center said was a negative reference to Jews during a Christmas Eve speech. The center also asked the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay to "freeze the process" of incorporating Venezuela into Mercosur, a regional trade bloc, unless the Venezuelan president publicly apologizes.

In his speech, Chavez lamented that while the world had enough resources for all, "some minorities, the descendants of the same ones who crucified Christ, the descendants of the same ones who threw out [South American liberator Simon] Bolivar from here and also crucified him in a way in Santa Marta, over there in Colombia - a minority took possession of all the planet's gold, of the silver, the minerals, the waters, the good land, the oil, the riches, and they have concentrated the riches in a few hands. Less than 10% of the world's population possesses over half of the world's riches, and more than half of the planet's population is poor, and every day there are more poor in the world."

Both the AJCommittee and the American Jewish Congress seconded the Venezuelan community's view that Chavez's comments were not aimed at Jews. All three groups said he was aiming his barbs at the white oligarchy that has dominated the region since the colonial era, pointing to his reference to Bolivar as the clearest evidence of his intent.

One official noted that Latin America's so-called Liberation Theology has long depicted Jesus as a socialist and consequently speaks of gentile business elites as "Christ-killers."

Sergio Widder, the Wiesenthal center's representative in Latin America, countered that Chavez's mention of Christ-killers and wealth was ambiguous at best and in need of clarification. He said that the decision to criticize Chavez had been taken after careful consideration.

The Venezuelan government did not react publicly, and its embassy in Washington declined to comment. However,

senior government officials met with Israeli diplomats in Caracas this week and said that the president's remarks had no antisemitic intent or meaning, according to Livia Link, deputy chief of the Israeli Embassy. She declined to be more specific or to provide the embassy's views on the affair, saying that it was a Venezuelan issue.

Complaints of American Jewish high-handedness have been aired by Jewish organizations in other countries, most notably in France. French Jews complained in 2003 that American groups were too vocal in criticizing the French government for not responding aggressively to incidents of antisemitism. Such frictions illustrate the difficulty of finding a balance between American-style aggressive advocacy and the built-in cautiousness of local Jewish communities.

Pressner said that the Venezuelan Jewish confederation was not caving in to the government. He cited several protests by the confederation against antisemitic remarks broadcast on radio and television in recent months. "We are not afraid, but we need to be fair," he said.

In the Venezuelan situation, American Jewish groups might be reflecting the Bush administration's displeasure with Chavez's anti-American pronouncements. But while Chavez's politics may not appeal to mainstream American Jewish groups, several spokesmen warned that labeling him antisemitic for no obvious reason is likely to prove self-fulfilling by provoking a backlash against Jews.

"It appears to us that Chavez did not intentionally speak about Jews," said David Twersky, director of the AJCongress's Council on World Jewry. "I don't think we should raise the flag of antisemitism when it doesn't belong."

The Wiesenthal center previously criticized Chavez publicly and urged his exclusion from Mercosur after he compared Spain's then-Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to Hitler and again when he quipped that his political opposition resembled the wandering Jew.

The Wiesenthal center is not the only international Jewish group entangled in Venezuela. Speaking to the media two months ago, Rabbi Henri Sobel of Brazil, a longtime World Jewish Congress leader, accused Chavez of antisemitism.

Pressner said that the CAIV sent letters both to Sobel and to the Wiesenthal center urging prior consultation but failed to get a response.

The Wiesenthal center's Widder confirmed that the center was making its decisions on its own and did not consult with the CAIV. "We don't speak on behalf of the Jewish community there," he said.

By contrast, other American Jewish groups that spoke out on the latest incident asked the CAIV for guidance.

"Having served in a Jewish community in Latin America that always welcomed cooperation with international and American Jewish organizations, I understand the urge to help a community," said Dina Siegel Vann, director of the AJCommittee's Institute on Latino and Latin American Affairs and a former political adviser to the Mexican Jewish community leadership. "But it has to be tempered by the realization that many times, those organizations do not have the full picture of the local dynamics. And the basic courtesy is to call the local Jewish community and ask what they can do to help."