

Chavez says US suffered 'great defeat' in move to condemn Venezuela over TV case

By CHRISTOPHER TOOTHAKER, Associated Press Writer

June 6, 2007 Wednesday 9:54 PM GMT

President Hugo Chavez said Wednesday that the United States suffered a humiliating defeat in its move to condemn Venezuela internationally for forcing an opposition-aligned TV station off the air.

Chavez warned that U.S.-backed interests, including the Boston-based Albert Einstein Institution, were trying to stage a "soft coup" against his government, claiming they were behind student protests over his refusal to renew the channel's license. The institution, however, said it had no presence in Venezuela.

Chavez began his news conference by playing a video of a heated debate between his foreign minister and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at an Organization of American States meeting in Panama on Monday. The OAS declined to adopt a U.S. request to investigate his government's removal of Radio Caracas Television from the air.

"A great defeat for the empire ... a moral defeat, a political defeat," said Chavez, who said OAS member countries had refused "to play (Washington's) game." Chavez maintains the refusal to renew RCTV's license was a proper, legal decision.

In the video of the OAS meeting, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro demanded the OAS investigate rights violations at the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and on the U.S.-Mexico. Rice then walked out of the meeting.

"The secretary was upset, she got up like a lightening bolt and left. Those are the signs of the imperial decadence," Chavez said. "They couldn't find anyone to do their work, their dirty work, and she had to leave."

RCTV, the country's oldest and most-watched private channel, went off the air May 27, and its license was turned over to a state-funded channel. Chavez says he is democratizing the airwaves and that freedom of speech will be respected.

In a second week of protests, thousands of demonstrators filled the streets Wednesday chanting "We want freedom!" Led by university students, the group presented the attorney general with a letter insisting their demonstrations are not intended to destabilize the government but rather to stand up for free speech.

During a brief 2002 coup, RCTV and other private channels broadcast opposition calls for protests to overthrow Chavez while giving little coverage to his return to power amid protests by his supporters. RCTV denies wrongdoing.

Chavez accuses the channel of seeking his ouster and violating broadcast laws. He says the student protesters are being manipulated by his foes and by Washington.

Chavez said the U.S. government "has its representatives here, and I'm hunting them down."

He singled out followers of Gene Sharp, founder of the Albert Einstein Institution, which says it promotes the use of nonviolent action in conflicts and has influenced resistance movements in places like Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Ukraine.

"They are the ideologues of the soft coup and it seems like they're here," Chavez said. "They are laying out the slow fuse ... they'll continue laying it out (with) marches, events, trying to create an explosion."

But Chavez said that strategy will fail in Venezuela: "In almost every country where that strategy worked, Mr. Sharp, there were governments with little popular support."

"We've just won an election with 60 percent of the vote ... they won't be able to create an explosion," he said.

Sharp told The Associated Press by telephone, "We have no presence in Venezuela. We do not interfere in other countries, we do not tell people in other countries what to do."

He said the institute gave workshops in the past including one in 2005 to a group from Venezuela and Serbia that involved a general discussion of democracy and dictatorship. Sharp said the group does not label particular governments as authoritarian.

Sharp denied recent allegations made by Chavez supporters that the institute has received funding from the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy or the U.S. government.

"We receive no government funding and have no connection with the CIA, and never have," he said.

Most of the Venezuelan news media are in private hands, including many newspapers and radio stations that remain critical of Chavez. The only other major opposition-sided TV channel is Globovision, and it is not seen in all parts of the country.