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SPOT COMMENTARY

14 April 2002
02:00 EDT
Spot Com 4

CIADI - - - - SPOT COMM 020414-0200

Venezuela: Counter-Coup Paves Way for Chavez's Return

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Escalating public protests and signs that his military support was flagging prompted interim President Pedro Carmona to resign late Saturday night. Chavez's vice president, Diosdado Cabello, was sworn in as the new interim president, and plans are currently being made to bring Chavez back to Caracas to resume office.

- Media reports indicate that tens of thousands of protestors began surrounding the presidential palace late Saturday demanding Chavez's return. Chavez's exact whereabouts are unknown at this time, but some reports indicate he is being ushered back from his residence in Orchila—a small island 100 kilometers off the coast of Venezuela—to Caracas.
- Chavez's supporters have taken over the government-owned television station and claim that they have full-control of military headquarters at Fort Tiuna, and that Chavez will return before dawn.

Carmona's support unraveled quickly yesterday as political parties, labor unions, and the military sensed he was moving too quickly and without their consultation. Disbanding Congress and scrapping the constitution left Carmona operating without a legal framework and ruling by decree—a move condemned by many regional leaders and the international community.

- Chavez's political and military allies have begun to reclaim their positions in the Cabello-led government. Former Commander of the Armed Services General Rincon and former Defense Minister Rangel reportedly have been reinstated.

The military—an institution that in general cherishes its apolitical status—will likely be forced to play a greater role in this new transition government. Acting President Cabello and other hard-line Chavez supporters may have the legal pretext to govern that Carmona lacked, but they lack broad popular support and almost certainly will not be able to unite the now sharply polarized society.

Bringing Chavez back into the scene will only deepen the current political crisis. If the ousted leader does return to office as is rumored, anti-Chavez protestors—a group that has dwarfed his supporters in previous protests, but is less likely to instigate a confrontation—might take to the streets again, escalating the potential for sustained violence.