

## **Venezuela shifts control of border**

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### **Body**

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Amid allegations that the Venezuelan government has given identity documents to foreign terrorists, President Hugo Chavez has put the country's immigration service in the hands of two young radicals, one of whom is close to the ousted Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein.

Hugo Cabezas and Tareck el-Aissami were appointed in the past two months as director and deputy director, respectively, of the Identification and Immigration Directorate, known as the DIEX after its initials in Spanish.

Their responsibilities include passports, voter identity cards and **border** security. Both men are former student leaders of groups accused of links to clandestine armed organizations.

"These appointments raise suspicions," said former Minister for **Border** Issues Pompeyo Marquez. "The risk is that they can play tricks both as regards elections and identity cards."

The DIEX appointments come at a sensitive moment in **Venezuela**'s 2-year-old political crisis. Opposition leaders are to begin collecting signatures today to call for a national referendum to oust Chavez, with both sides fighting over the electoral process.

**Venezuela** is also facing mounting allegations by U.S. officials, and regional security analysts, over ties to terrorism. Middle Eastern terrorist groups operate "support cells" in **Venezuela**, according to U.S. military and intelligence officials. Left-wing guerrillas in neighboring Colombia also have training bases inside Venezuelan territory, they say.

The most serious claim, made recently in the pages of the news magazine, U.S. News & World Report, involves allegations that Venezuelan identity documents have been issued to foreigners, including some from "Middle Eastern nations that play host to foreign terrorist organizations."

While the Chavez government makes no secret of its left-wing revolutionary goals, officials strongly deny any terrorist connections.

Responding to the U.S. News & World Report article, Chavez accused the "extreme right" in the United States of "trying to justify anything: an assassination, a coup d'etat, an invasion" to remove him from power.

U.S. officials appear to be torn over how to handle relations with Chavez. The State Department prefers a cautious approach, anxious not to cause a greater rift with **Venezuela**, which supplies the United States with about 13 percent of total oil imports.

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But some U.S. military officials are so concerned by developments in Venezuela that they would like to see the Bush administration take a tougher approach.

Some analysts say allegations against the Chavez government need to be considered with care. "It's become so politically divided you don't know who to believe," said John Shields, Americas editor of Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, a leading global risk analysis firm based in London.

"There is gradually a picture building up here," he said, "but it's still a long way from being able to say that this guy (Chavez) is actually backing terrorists."

Since his election in December 1998, Chavez has refused to allow U.S. counter-drug surveillance over Venezuelan airspace, adopted a critical posture to free trade negotiations and embraced Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

In 2000, Chavez became the first - and only - foreign head of state to visit Saddam Hussein in Baghdad during the period between the Gulf War and the allied invasion. Deeply critical of the U.S. action, he sought to have the post-invasion government excluded from meetings of the oil exporters cartel, OPEC, of which Venezuela is a founding member. He bitterly opposed the bombing campaign to remove the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Cabezas, 30, and el-Aissami, 28, are both radical "Chavistas" who emerged as student leaders at the University of the Andes in the city of Merida, about 300 miles southwest of the capital, Caracas.

The university city of Merida has for decades been a haven for guerrilla groups, both domestic and foreign. Venezuelan and Colombian guerrilla groups continue to maintain an armed presence at the university, with the alleged complicity of Merida state government officials, according to students and university officials.

Merida's governor is a former army officer close to Chavez, Florencio Porras. Cabezas was his private secretary until last year.

State officials deny the allegations. Even so, students and academics point to a dramatic upsurge in radical student activity during el-Aissami's two-year tenure as president of the student union. Prior to his departure in July, armed groups consolidated their presence in student residences, they say.

A report by the vice rectorate of academic affairs recently found that of 1,122 people living in a student housing complex, only 387 were active students. More than 600 are completely unconnected to the university.

While the university provides essential services at the residences, students have a say in room allocation and building security. Under el-Aissami's rule political control over the residences fell into the hands of extremists with criminal ties, according to students and university officials.

The current director of Student Affairs, professor Oswando Alcala, accused students under el-Aissami's leadership of turning the residences into a base for criminal activity.

"They use the residences to hide stolen cars. There's drug trafficking, prostitution," he said. "There are always weapons there. . . . They leave the residences, put on ski masks and do hold-ups in the street."

He added that the students appeared to have political backing. "All this is done with the full knowledge of the university and (Merida) state authorities," he said.

University directors had tried to intervene, but local judicial and law enforcement authorities declined to act, he said.

When Alcala voiced objections in May, students in ski masks surrounded his office armed with gasoline and tires, threatening to burn it down. A former guerrilla himself, Alcala scared them off, saying he wasn't afraid of a violent confrontation.

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El-Aissami was soundly defeated when he sought re-election in July, with opponents winning more than 70 percent of the vote. After the election, the new student council found the union offices ransacked, with phones, fax machines, computers and files all missing.

The windows of the student union offices are still full of holes made by rocks and bullets during election campaign violence.

Cabezas and el-Aissami belonged to a radical group called Utopia, of which Cabezas was a founding member. It is suspected of links with a clandestine armed paramilitary group, the Bolivarian Liberation Forces, or FBL, which professes allegiance to Chavez.

No links between the FBL and Middle Eastern groups have been established, although some FBL communiques call for "popular war" against "imperialism and Zionism."

El-Aissami is of Syrian origin, although born in Venezuela. His father, Carlos el-Aissami, heads the Venezuelan branch of the Iraqi Baath Party, while his great-uncle, Shibli el-Aissami was a leading ideologue and assistant secretary-general of the Baath Party in Baghdad, under Saddam Hussein.

Tareck el-Aissami declined to be interviewed for this article, saying he was not authorized to speak publicly. He promised to arrange an interview with Cabezas, the DLEX director. However, subsequent phone calls, both to el-Aissami and to the information ministry, failed to elicit an official response.

Carlos el-Aissami, father of Tareck, did agree to an interview, in which he defended his son as an outstanding student and denied the presence of Arab terrorist groups such as al-Qaida in Venezuela.

Both men attended a joint press conference with the Iraqi ambassador in Caracas March 27, to express their opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and their "solidarity" with "the defenseless Iraqi people."

Regarding the links between the Baath Party and President Chavez's political movement, he said the two were "united by the common cause of nationalism and the anti-imperialist struggle."

He produced an article he had written, entitled "Proud to be a Taliban," in which he refers to George W. Bush as, "genocidal, mentally deranged, a liar and a racist," and to the leader of al-Qaida as "the great Mujahedeen, Sheik Osama bin Laden."

He also questioned whether bin Laden was really responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks, asking, "Couldn't it be that they (the U.S. government) invented that themselves so as to have an excuse (to invade Afghanistan)?"

Critics accuse Cabezas and el-Aissami of carrying out a government plan to politicize the control over the country's institutions, to thwart opposition efforts to remove Chavez.

"Chavez goes from phase to phase," said Alberto Garrido, a leading political analyst. "He changes the heads of the DLEX because a tougher phase is coming. In the crucial jobs only the toughest individuals are left."

- Phil Gunson is a Times freelance reporter based in Caracas. David Adams is the Times' Latin America correspondent.

## Graphic

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PHOTO, Photo by PHIL GUNSON; PHOTO; Activists under the direction of Tareck el-Aissami are said to have established armed guerilla compounds in these student residences at the University of the Andes in Merida, Venezuela.; Carlos el-Aissami

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