



VENEZUELA: The Headlines You Missed in 2008

Throughout 2008, there were a number of stories you may not have read in the media about Venezuela. Whether high rankings on the United Nations Human Development index or the decreasing poverty rate, these are the stories that are vital to understanding the changes taking place in contemporary Venezuela. Here we include some of the most important and overlooked stories of 2008.

Success for Democracy: Vote most accurate and advanced in world

Electoral fraud in Venezuela is virtually obsolete. In the regional elections of November 2008, as in past electoral processes, the National Electoral Council of Venezuela (CNE) relied on automatic voting machines to calculate the vote.

During an electoral drill these touch-screen voting machines proved to be 99 percent effective. With security measures such as a 128 bit security code and printed receipts, which voters can use to verify their choices and are later used in audits, the voting process in Venezuela has been deemed the most accurate and advanced in the world.¹

Preparation and transparency on behalf of the CNE resulted in free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections with a high voter turnout rate of 65% in regional elections and turnout of nearly 75% in the last presidential elections.

CITGO and Venezuela Promote Energy Efficiency

CITGO, a wholly owned subsidiary of Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), and Boston-based nonprofit Citizen's Energy Corporation launched a national pilot program to provide low-income households with energy efficient, environmentally friendly compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs). The initiative provided almost half a million CFLs to low-income households in Washington D.C. and ten other cities, as well as educational materials and workshops to inform people about efficient energy use.

CITGO invests more than \$100 million annually on "social programs to improve the lives of those in need," stated CITGO Chairman, President and CEO, Alejandro Granado. "The CITGO-Venezuela Energy Efficient Lighting Program will save money for recipients who struggle to make ends meet while also helping these communities learn more about energy efficiency and environmental conservation."² The inspiration for the program came from a similar Venezuelan Government initiative called *Misión Revolución Energética*, which has replaced over 79 million conventional light bulbs in Venezuela.³

2008 TOP NEWS

▪ **UN: Venezuela "Highly Developed"**: For the first time the United Nations labeled Venezuela as a "highly developed" nation according to its Human Development Index report for 2008 based on achievements in education, life expectancy, and literacy.

▪ **Unprecedented Primary Elections Held**: 2.5 million members of the PSUV voted in the first ever primary election in Venezuelan history, leading up to the November regional elections.

▪ **First Satellite Launched**: Venezuela successfully launched its first satellite, named Simón Bolívar, on October 30th. The satellite is designed to function for 15 years, and will be used primarily for social and governmental services, such as telemedicine and tele-education. "Simón Bolívar will benefit the development and the integration of our people," stated President Chávez.

▪ **Joint Declaration Against Anti-Semitism and Racism**: President Hugo Chávez, along with Presidents Lula da Silva and Fernández de Kirchner of Brazil and Argentina, signed a declaration condemning racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination, thereby reaffirming Venezuela's commitment to equality and human rights.



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MetroCable Nearly Complete

The San Agustín MetroCable, a mass transit cable car system that will help transport thousands of Caracas residents to and from work, underwent a successful test period in December.

MetroCable will have stations where commuters can transfer to the Caracas underground Metro, which has been undergoing significant expansions in recent years. San Agustín MetroCable will primarily benefit residents of several of Caracas' hillier neighborhoods, some of whom have to climb as many as 1,400 steps or walk 45 minutes to access mass transit. The system's 5 stations are designed to become commercial, cultural and recreational focal points for the communities they serve.



Other significant progress toward the Millennium Development Goals in 2008 includes the reduction of poverty by 2.5% to 26%, and a drop in extreme poverty to 7%. In its Social Panorama of Latin America 2008, the United

Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) noted that Venezuela has reached around 80% of the goal with several years left to go.

Furthermore, the government announced the Comprehensive Attention Plan for HIV-AIDS designed to prevent, diagnose and treat people with the disease, which will help the country meet the sixth MDG of combating HIV-

AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Progress in the Fight Against Drugs

In 2008 Venezuela intensified its efforts to prevent illegal drug trafficking, including seizures of 54 tons of drugs. This year alone, 230 illicit landing strips used for trafficking have been destroyed and over 9,000 people have been arrested and charged with drug trafficking, including one of the U.S. most-wanted.⁴ Having signed cooperation agreements with 37 countries, Venezuela's efforts have been applauded by the OAS and even Interpol.⁵

Venezuela Praised For MDG Progress

The Secretary General of the Latin Union recognized the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for having reached a schooling rate of 95%, the highest rate in South America, which represents significant progress towards achievement of the educational component of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established by the UN.

Integration and Cooperation Efforts Advance

In 2008, Venezuela continued its foreign policy of integration and cooperation with the region and the world. Along with Unasur, which emerged as a strengthened regional organization following the crisis in Bolivia, initiatives such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) were furthered. Venezuela hosted an ALBA forum in November which established a commission to investigate the possibility a common currency for its members. Venezuela is also awaiting approval for membership in the Common Market of the South (Mercosur).

Venezuela has signed cooperative accords and established diplomatic relations with countries as diverse as Spain, Vietnam, Switzerland, the Republic of the Congo and Portugal. Increasing the number of embassies in Africa by 130%, Venezuela now has direct or indirect representation with all 54 countries in that continent.

Economy Protected from Financial Crisis

The Venezuelan economy registered growth for the 20th consecutive quarter despite the global financial crisis. 2008 economic growth stood at



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4.9%. As of late December the Venezuelan Central Bank reserves totaled over \$37 billion.

A report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research concluded that Venezuela is in a solid position despite the crisis and falling oil prices, noting that the country “should be fully able to pursue an expansionary fiscal policy in order to make up for any slowdown in consumer or capital spending, and keep the economy growing at a healthy pace.”⁶

Harvard Awards Q Prize to Abreu and Dudamel

The Harvard School of Public Health awarded the second-annual Q Prize to Maestros José Antonio Abreu and Gustavo Dudamel of Venezuela. The prestigious award, named after music legend Quincy Jones, recognizes those who transform the lives of children through music.

Maestros Abreu and Dudamel are recognized for their leadership of the National System of youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, *El Sistema*. Maestro Abreu is the founder of *El*

Sistema and Dudamel has been the director of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra since 1999.

El Sistema is a music education program funded by the Venezuelan government that teaches and trains children in classical music to promote their health and well-being. Inspired by this program, the Los Angeles Philharmonic has launched its own version called Youth Orchestra L.A.

In May 2008, Dudamel released a critically acclaimed classical music CD titled *Fiesta* in which he directs the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. In early 2009 he became the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

For more information and news about Venezuela, please visit the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela website: www.venezuela-us.org
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¹ “Boletín sobre la observación electoral de las elecciones regionales y locales del 23 de noviembre,” *Ojo Electoral*, November 24, 2008, <http://www.ojoelectoral.org/noticias.php> ; Ernesto Villegas and Antonio Mujica, “How it Works: Venezuela's New Voting Machines,” *VenezuelaAnalysis*, June 15, 2004, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/545>; “99% effectiveness during Venezuelan Electoral Drill,” *Smartmatic Press Release*, October 28, 2008, <http://www.smartmatic.com/pressroom/article/article/99-effectiveness-during-venezuelan-electoral-drill/>

² Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Press Release, “CITGO, the Embassy of Venezuela and Citizens Energy Launch New Energy Efficient Lighting Program at Home of Washington, D.C. Resident”, July 16, 2008, <http://venezuela-us.org/?s=CITGO%2C+the+Embassy+of+Venezuela+and+Citizens+Energy+Launch+New+Energy+Efficient+Lighting+Program+at+Home+of+Washington%2C+D.C.+Resident+>

³ “Energy Revolution Mission has installed 79 million energy efficient lightbulbs in two years,” November 1, 2008, <http://venezuela-us.org/?s=Energy+Revolution+Mission+has+installed+79+million+energy+efficient+lightbulbs+in+two+years+>

⁴ Hermagoras Gonzalez Polanco-Capture, *U.S. Department of State*, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/narc/rewards/77255.htm>

⁵ Venezuela: Evaluation of Progress in Drug Control 2005-2006, <http://www.cicad.oas.org/MEM/ENG/Reports/Fourth%20Round%20Full/Venezuela%20-%20Fourth%20Round%20-%20ENG.pdf>; “INTERPOL lauds Venezuelan capture of suspected Colombian drug lord and accomplice,” September 8, 2008, <http://www.interpol.int/Public/ICPO/PressReleases/PR2008/PR200845.asp>

⁶ Mark Weisbrot and Rebecca Ray, “Oil Prices and Venezuela's Economy”, *Center for Economic and Policy Research*, November 2008.