

Last honours given to Hugo Chávez in Caracas, attended by President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko



Dozens thousands of people gather to bid farewell to President of Venezuela in Caracas' streets, where funeral procession takes place

On March 8th, Mr. Lukashenko attended the public memorial service for the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, in Caracas. Before the ceremony began, many wreaths were brought to the hall, including one from the Republic of Belarus and from the Head of the Belarusian State. Hugo Chávez and Alexander Lukashenko were very close friends, their active friendship inspiring relations between Belarus and Venezuela to reach a level of strategic partnership. Turnover increased many times and the peoples and cultures of our two geographically distant countries drew closer.

At the funeral ceremony, Mr. Lu-

kashenko was among the most distinguished guests. Despite the large number of heads of states, the President of Belarus held a place of honour in the front row, among the closest relatives and friends of Hugo Chávez and the Venezuelan leadership. Mr. Lukashenko was the first president from among the non-Latin-American states to give the last honour in the guard of honour at the hearse.

During his stay in Caracas, the President of Belarus held brief talks with the Executive Vice President of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, and the Chairman of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello. Both parties confirmed their willingness to continue

active co-operation. "All agreements reached by Hugo Chávez will be continued," stressed Mr. Maduro. Mr. Lukashenko also spoke with Chávez's family, including his brother, the Governor of Barinas state, Adán Chávez.

In addition, Mr. Lukashenko met the President of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Evo Morales, who had also arrived in the capital of Venezuela to attend the funeral; an agreement to develop Belarusian-Bolivian relations has been signed, using the Venezuelan partnership as the example.

"I never thought that we would meet here under such circumstances.

We talked much with Mr. Chávez about your country and even developed a joint action plan; now we must continue this deal with you," said the Head of the Belarusian State. "I hope and am sure that Venezuela will elect a president able to implement the ideas of Hugo Chávez with us."

"I want to assure you that Belarus will do everything possible to establish with Bolivia the same relationship as with Venezuela," said Mr. Lukashenko. In turn, Mr. Morales noted his readiness to develop bilateral relations with Belarus. "Thank you for our meeting and I hope that it will contribute to future liaisons," he noted. "Unfortunately, we have gathered

here for a tragic reason: the death of our mutual friend. Now, more than ever, we should join forces. I thank you on behalf of all Latin American people for your support at this tragic time," said Mr. Morales.

The Bolivian President has asked for assistance in developing agriculture, in constructing agro-towns and housing, natural resources extraction, and personnel training. The heads of state have agreed to do everything possible to strengthen bilateral relations and to analyse obstacles. Mr. Lukashenko has invited Mr. Morales to visit Belarus to see firsthand the potential opportunities.

The presidents have also agreed to discuss several tripartite joint projects (worth \$3.2bn) with the new leadership of Venezuela. It is planned that, in the first half of 2013, a special working group will be created at the Belarusian Embassy to Venezuela, co-ordinated by the Head of the President's Property Management Directorate and the Co-chairman of the Joint Belarusian-Venezuelan High Level Commission, Victor Sheiman.

Mr. Lukashenko also held a meeting with the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa Delgado, at which they reaffirmed the importance of agreements reached during the recent official visit of Mr. Lukashenko to Ecuador. Mr. Correa Delgado has promised to make a return visit to Belarus. He notes that, in the near future, Ecuador will host a meeting of the Council of Ministers, at which a report will be read on the implementation of Belarusian-Ecuadorian projects.

In addition, Mr. Lukashenko spoke with the Chairman of the State Council and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba, Raul Castro. The President of Haiti, Michel Joseph Martelly, also expressed a desire to co-operate with Belarus, noting that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez spoke warmly of Belarus on many occasions.

Open book of memory

Guards at the Venezuelan Embassy usually greet visitors with the words: 'Have you switched off your phone? Place your keys and metal objects here, please'.

However, at present, they simply nod and open the door silently. A continuous stream of people is visiting to sign the book of condolence. Inside, everyone speaks in lowered voices. Among the flowers and lamps hang portraits of Hugo Chávez and, by 2pm on March 6th, the book is already almost half full. Messages appear in various languages — not just Russian — expressing grief as well as admiration for the great man's courage and achievements. Many comments are in Spanish: the native language in Venezuela. I write my own words of sympathy and then emerge

into the street, where more people await entrance.

People of all ages are eager to show their sympathy for the Venezuelan president's passing, bearing flowers and portraits. The First Secretary of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union NGO, Igor Buzovsky, recalls his visit to Venezuela, saying, "Belarus has lost a friend in the highest sense of the word; accordingly, Belarusian young people are here, mourning with the young people of Venezuela."

The First Secretary of the Venezuelan Embassy, Gerardo Estrada,

tells us that young people should not lose heart, but must continue to strive towards their goals, no matter what occurs. He thanked them for their show of feeling and attendance and then remained on the porch of the Embassy, welcoming visitors personally and giving brotherly hugs.

A long queue was evident at the book of condolence, with people travelling especially to pay their respects — many on public transport. Boris Dvoskin, Chief Engineer at Belgorkhimprom, tells me simply that he works on a mineral extrac-



Venezuelan Embassy in Minsk

tion project in Venezuela and recalls warmly his meeting with Mr. Chávez. He is deeply saddened by his death.

The Embassy began an hour of silence, with the number of those wishing to express condolence continuing steadily.