

'VENEZUELA MATTERS'

By: Lorenzo Martin
Chicago Standard Newspapers

CHICAGO (NNPA)—Venezuela officials recently met to announce help with energy resources and to forge a new relationship with the Latino and other impoverished communities in the city.

The meeting, themed "Venezuela Matters," was held at the River East Art Center on east Illinois Street, where breakfast and an impressive multimedia exposition of Venezuelan Culture, Social Development, Baseball, Oil, Tourism, Trade and Investment was displayed in living color and sounds.

Because of the devastation created by Hurricane Katrina, the Venezuelan Government, under the leadership of its Ambassador to the United States, Bernard Alvarez, and CITGO CEO Felix Rodriguez, went into action by providing relief and help as a good corporate partner.

"We choose Chicago because of its strong Hispanic and Latino communities that needed help," Mr. Rodriguez said.

Chicago Consul General Martin Sanchez said CITGO will also provide eye care and other health-related needs by flying individuals to Venezuela for needed operations and returning them to Chicago, all free of charge.

He also stressed working with organizations and developing initiatives for improving community organizations and neighborhoods. "We are working out a way to provide cheap gas to bus companies who are serving our neighborhoods and other nonprofit organizations." "We are trying to help the poor in Venezuela and the U.S.," Mr. Sanchez added.

The Consulate General talked about a CITGO refinery located 30 miles south of Chicago, which is owned by the Venezuelan National Oil Company, "Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)." CITGO is one of the largest refiners of gasoline in the U.S. and is the fourth leading exporter of oil to the U.S.

Venezuela is one of the most important suppliers of crude oil and gasoline for American consumers and industry, accounting for about 15 percent of its petroleum imports.

As CEO of CITGO, Mr. Rodriguez said, "The best way to help is through our markets and providing business and opportunities through our 2,000-plus stations throughout the U.S. It is what Standard News Director David Johnson called being a corporate partner."

Going back to the theme of the program, "Venezuela Matters," Mr. Alvarez said, "This is no propaganda or a media happening. This is for real and we are here to make a difference in our poorer communities."

The ambassador stressed the need to expand opportunity for all, and pointed out that in Venezuela, 1.2 million illiterate adults have been taught to read and write because secondary education has been made available to 250,000 children whose social status excluded them from this privilege in the past.

This has all been made possible by increasing oil revenue spending on social programs from \$40 million to \$1.7 billion, he further noted, where millions of Venezuelans have access, not only to education, but also to essentials such as food, housing and health care.

In fact, 12.5 percent of the GDP has been destined for the financing of social programs. Three distinct funds have been created to finance infrastructure, agriculture and the various social missions (education, health, micro-financing, etc.). These programs are not seen as handouts, but alienable rights of all citizens, while PDVSA still makes oil profits, he added.

The conference also concentrated on addressing poverty and health care in Venezuela, civil rights and the Afro-Venezuela-U.S. strategic relations and investment opportunities.

One of the hidden gems of Venezuela is a proud heritage of its African, Spanish, Indian and Mestizos-attested to by President Hugo Chavez, Felix Rodriguez and Chicago Consul General Martin Sanchez

Mr. Sanchez admitted that it wasn't always that way, but after a delegation of African Americans met in Venezuela, subsequent dialogue was able to begin the process of improving the conditions of the Afro-Venezuelans are nearly 30 percent of the population.

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