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SUBJECT: (C) VATICAN HOPES FOR BETTER U.S.-CUBA TIES, IN PART TO REIN
IN CHAVEZ AND HIS ACOLYTES

REF: A. A) CARACAS 486 B. B) CARACAS 443 C. C) VATICAN 36 D. D) VATICAN 12

CLASSIFIED BY: Julieta Valls Noyes, CDA, EXEC, State. REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Holy See welcomes President Obama's new outreach to Cuba and hopes for further steps soon, perhaps to include prison visits for the wives of the Cuban Five. Better U.S.-Cuba ties would deprive Hugo Chavez of one of his favorite screeds and could help restrain him in the region, according to a Vatican official. This is highly desirable for the Vatican, which is very concerned about the deterioration of Church-state relations in Venezuela. To avoid similar downward spirals elsewhere, the Vatican said Church leaders elsewhere in Latin America are reaching out to leftist governments. The recent attack on a Cardinal's home in Bolivia may have been intended to derail such quiet rapprochement. End Summary.

Cuba: Great News. What Will You Do Next?

¶2. (C) CDA and Acting DCM on April 22 called on the Holy See's official in charge of relations with Caribbean and Andean countries, Msgr. Angelo Accattino, to review recent developments in the region. As he had done previously (ref c), Accattino warmly welcomed recent White House policy decisions on Cuba and reviewed with interest the White House Fact Sheet on "Reaching Out to the Cuban People" which CDA gave him. Accattino also noted favorably Raul Castro's comments that Cuba was prepared to talk to the U.S. about all topics - although "after all, he has no other options anymore." CDA said Castro would need to reciprocate the moves from Washington with more than words - he needed to take

action on political prisoners or reduce the cost of receiving remittances in Cuba.

¶3. (C) Accattino said the Vatican considered intriguing the possibility of a swap of political prisoners in Cuba for the "Cuban Five" in jail in the U.S. ADCM protested that their circumstances were not parallel, as the Cuban Five were convicted spies and the prisoners in Cuba were dissidents. Accattino quickly agreed but said discussions that led to the release of the dissidents were worth pursuing regardless. The Holy See was also following the Supreme Court appeal by the Cuban Five, to see how that might affect relations between the U.S. and Cuba. As an interim measure, Accattino suggested that the U.S. allow a jail visit by the wives of two of the five Cuban spies. CDA again noted that the U.S. had taken the first step, now the Cuban government needed to reciprocate in a concrete way.

Venezuela: Chavez is Worried. So is the Church.

¶4. (C) The Cuba debate, Accattino said, had cast a long shadow at the recent Summit of the Americas. Venezuela's Hugo Chavez was clearly rattled by the thought that the U.S. and Cuba could enter into a dialogue that excluded him, and this motivated his "little scene" at the Summit. "Chavez is not dumb," and he was playing to the other hemispheric leaders with his bombastic approach to President Obama. The Holy See believes that the U.S. and Cuba should pursue a dialogue both for its own sake and/or in order to reduce the influence of Chavez and break up his cabal in Latin America, Accattino said.

¶5. (C) The situation for civil society in Venezuela is getting worse every day, according to Accattino. The asylum request by Maracaibo Mayor Manuel Rosales in Peru was only the latest sign of the narrowing political space in Venezuela. (Asked for updates on the whereabouts or situation of the Venezuelan asylum seeker Nixon Moreno from the Nunciature in Caracas, however, Accattino answered a bit evasively.) The real concern, Accattino said, is that Venezuela is turning into Cuba, while Cuba may be ready to open up.

¶6. (C) Church-state relations are also deteriorating daily in Venezuela, Accattino said. The Venezuelan Catholic Conference of Bishops (CEV) did not check in with Rome before taking actions or making statements like its highly critical April 6 communique (ref A). The Holy See agreed with the CEV conclusions, and would defend them -- even when it believed "a less confrontational approach would be more effective."

Bolivia: No More Venezuelas, Let's Talk. But Who Attacked Our Cardinal?

¶7. (C) Turning to the recent dynamite attack against the residence of Cardinal Terrazas on April 15 in Bolivia, Accattino said it had worried the Holy See greatly. There was property damage, but thankfully no-one was hurt. It could easily have been worse. The Vatican is reserving judgment, pending the government's investigation, on who was behind the attack. It could have been radicals inside the government who want to derail the recent rapprochement between the Church and the state. The extreme right also could have been responsible - trying to make it seem like the government did it - for the same reason. Accattino said the Holy See considers either explanation equally plausible at this point. Meanwhile, it will keep talking to the government, because it has no choice.

Comment: Looking Out for the Church First

¶8. (C) The Holy See has consistently maintained that improving U.S.-Cuba ties would greatly reduce the appeal of Hugo Chavez. It is so alarmed by the continued downward spiral in its own relations with Chavez, in fact, that Accattino said Church leaders in Latin American countries with leftist

governments are rethinking their approach. Many episcopal (bishops) conferences in the region had in the past been willing to criticize excesses of these governments in an effort to protect civil society. They may be pulling back from that activism and advocacy in the short term, in order to protect their longer-term ability to minister to the Catholic faithful without interference. That attitude is what is behind the Church's moves to improve relations with the Morales government in Bolivia. It may also explain Accattino's ever-so-mild tone of criticism when discussing CEV decisions in Caracas. As for Accattino's polite unwillingness to discuss the Nixon Moreno case, that may also be telling, given his considerable interest in the topic last time we spoke (ref c). End Comment.

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