

Alleged Drug Trafficking in Venezuela: Government Rejects Attacks against Cabello, Launches Campaign

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Venezuelan members of parliament and spokespeople for state institutions have come together to vehemently reject a Wall Street Journal report which claimed that National Assembly President, Diosdado Cabello, is being probed by US federal authorities for alleged links to international drug trafficking.

Featured on Monday, the Wall Street Journal article echoes recent reports in the Spanish newspaper ABC that allege that Cabello is implicated in an international drug ring, citing the top legislator's ex-bodyguard Leamsy Salazar, who has defected to the United States.

The article also alleges that federal prosecutors in New York and Miami and an "elite" Drug Enforcement Agency Unit have opened up an official investigation into the claims, based on interviews with renegade Bolivarian officials as well as Venezuelan and Colombian drugs traffickers under arrest in the US.

On Monday evening, the government hit back at the report, entitled "Venezuelan Officials Suspected of Turning Country into Global Cocaine Hub," branding rumours of the US investigation as yet another international rightwing campaign aimed at smearing the Revolution's standing on the global stage.

"We will activate a national and international campaign in defence of Diosdado Cabello... just as we defend our country from rightwing attacks," announced the president on his weekly TV show, "In Contact with Maduro".

"Whoever goes after Diosdado Cabello is going after me. We cannot accept these slanders against him... He is one of the loyal cadres (to the revolution)".

So far, the rumours hinge on the testimony of Cabello's ex-bodyguard, yet the veracity of his claims has been widely questioned due to reports that the statement was offered in exchange for a U.S. visa and asylum.

The accusations have caused huge controversy at home and abroad, having targeted one of the most powerful and steadfast loyalist to the Bolivarian Revolution.

As former socialist leader Hugo Chavez's righthand man, ex-soldier Cabello participated in Chavez's underground Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR-200) and participated in the attempted 1992 coup against the repressive government of Carlos Andres Perez that

launched Chavez into the public spotlight. Cabello also briefly assumed the presidency of the country during the April 2002 US-sponsored coup which ousted Chavez for a period of 47 hours.

“I am unyielding in the face of any media aggression... I will not surrender... not today or tomorrow,” confirmed Cabello on his weekly television programme.

“I want to express my love and gratitude, up until my last breath, to our people. Thank you for so many messages of support and solidarity in the face of these attacks, which are not against Diosdado Cabello, but against the country’s institutions”.

ABC and the Venezuelan press which republished the reports are all currently being sued for defamation by Cabello, who re-issued a previous challenge to his detractors on Wednesday to “publicly show proof” against him.

The Venezuelan Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) also echoed Cabello’s sentiments that the press reports constitute an attempt to undermine Venezuela’s state institutions internationally, and are linked to ongoing efforts to unseat the government.

“They claim to reflect situations that aren’t based on any plausible or possible foundations,” replied the head of the TSJ, Judge Gladys Gutiérrez.

The accusations against Cabello are just the latest of many that have been levelled at Venezuelan government officials by US authorities in recent years. Others accused of being involved in international drugs trafficking ops include Venezuelan army general and diplomat Hugo Carvajal and former Minister of the Interior and Justice, Tarek El-Aissami.

Carvajal was controversially arrested last year by Aruba authorities during a visit to the island on the petition of the US, who quickly moved to request his extradition. He was eventually released after an Aruba judge finally overruled the arrest and declared it illegal under international treaties.

The latest reports are likely to further isolate the US and its increasingly discredited Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in the region, which is banned from operating within Venezuela and Bolivia. Both countries severed ties with the DEA in recent years on the basis that the agency was spying on their progressive governments and paradoxically allied with international drug smuggling networks in the region.

The DEA courted further controversy earlier in March this year when the release of secret files revealed that DEA agents working in Colombia had engaged in illicit sex parties with prostitutes, including children, paid for by Colombian drugs cartels.

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