

# Chavez threatens to take over schools

By SANDRA SIERRA, Associated Press Writer 3 minutes ago

President Hugo Chavez threatened on Monday to take over any private schools refusing to submit to the oversight of his socialist government, a move some Venezuelans fear will impose leftist ideology in the classroom.

All Venezuelan schools, both public and private, must submit to state inspectors enforcing the new educational system. Those that refuse will be closed and nationalized, Chavez said.

A new curriculum will be phased in during this school year, and new textbooks are being developed to help educate "the new citizen," added Chavez's brother and education minister Adan Chavez in their televised ceremony on the first day of classes.

Just what the curriculum will include and how it will be applied to all Venezuelan schools and universities remains unclear.

But one college-level syllabus obtained by The Associated Press shows some premedical students already have a recommended reading list including Karl Marx's "Das Kapital" and Fidel Castro's speeches, alongside traditional subjects like biology and chemistry.

The syllabus also includes quotations from Chavez and urges students to learn about slain revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Colombian rebel chief Manuel Marulanda, whose leftist guerrillas are considered a terrorist group by Colombia, the U.S. and European Union.

Venezuelan officials defend the program at the Latin American Medical School — one in a handful of state-run colleges and universities that emphasize socialist ideology — as the new direction of Venezuelan higher education.

"We must train socially minded people to help the community, and that's why the revolution's socialist program is being implemented," said Zulay Campos, a member of a Bolivarian State Academic Commission that evaluates compliance with academic guidelines.

"If they attack us because we're indoctrinating, well yes, we're doing it, because those capitalist ideas that our young people have — and that have done so much damage to our people — must be eliminated," Campos said.

Now some critics worry that primary and secondary schoolchildren will be indoctrinated as well.

Chavez's efforts to spread ideology throughout society is "typical of communist regimes at the beginning" in Russia, China and Cuba — and is aimed at "imposing a sole, singular vision," sociologist Antonio Cova said.

But Adan Chavez said the goal is to develop "critical thinking," not to impose a single philosophy.

More than eight years after President Chavez was first elected, the curriculum at most Venezuelan schools remains largely unchanged, particularly in private schools commonly attended by middle- and upper-class children.

Anticipating criticism, Chavez noted that a state role in regulating education is internationally accepted in countries from Germany to the United States.

Every such system has its heroes, and in Venezuela, Chavez supporters and opponents celebrate Simon Bolivar, the independence fighter whose armies liberated much of South America from colonial Spanish rule.

Many Venezuelans disagree that Bolivar was a leftist. But when Chavez says all schools must comply with the "new Bolivarian educational system," he means they must submit to oversight of a socialist government making revolutionary changes.

Chavez said previous Venezuelan educational systems carried their own ideology. Leafing through old texts from the 1970s during his speech, he pointed out how they referred to Venezuela's "discovery" by Europeans.

"They taught us to admire Christopher Columbus and Superman," Chavez said.

Education based on capitalist ideology has corrupted children's values, he said. "We want to create our own ideology collectively — creative, diverse." Chavez said Venezuelans — not Cubans as opponents suggest — have been drawing up the new curriculum, but added that Venezuela could always accept Cuban help in the future.

Venezuela has more than 160 universities and colleges, most of which maintain their independence. Leftist ideology is already part of the curriculum at seven different state universities. But encouraging students nationwide to read up on Guevara, Castro and Friedrich Engels' speech before Marx's tomb would be something new entirely.

About 20 of the 400 students have dropped out of the Latin American Medical School near Caracas. Among them was Gabriel Gomez Guerrero, 22, of Colombia, who was shocked that the syllabus counts Marulanda among "important Latin American thinkers" to be studied. The head of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia is his government's public enemy No. 1.

"They aren't going to introduce that man to me as a 'Latin American thinker,'" Gomez said. "They may brainwash other people, but not me."

School director Sandra Moreno said nobody is being brainwashed — the idea is simply to provide a foundation in Latin American affairs. And Ana Montenegro, a program coordinator who helped create the syllabus, said it was a mistake to describe Marulanda that way, but that the course program will continue to evolve and improve.

Many of the remaining students describe themselves as socialists and say no one is pressuring them.

"They don't impose what we have to learn," said Roberto Leal, a 30-year-old Brazilian. "If we don't agree with something, we express our opinion."