

Opposition strike convulses Venezuela

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

For over two months the South American country of Venezuela has been convulsed by a general strike which has, at times, resulted in the violent deaths of strikers and the drying up of food and fuel supplies.

Led by a consortium of business leaders, the strike began in early December to protest what government opponents call the dictatorial and erratic leadership provided by the country's elected president, Hugo Chavez.

Opposition to the president has been centered in the upper and middle class eastern parts of the capital, Caracas, as well as throughout the country. Stores have been closed, gasoline supplies have dwindled to a trickle as the country's government-owned oil company has joined the strikers, and daily marches have been a part of the activity.

Meanwhile, Chavez supporters, primarily found in the poorer sections of the city and throughout the nation, have continued to do business as much as possible, proclaiming their support for the embattled president.

Two major consequences of the strike have been the trickle of petroleum exports which have combined with tensions over a possible war with Iraq to raise gasoline prices in the United States and throughout the world and the increasing exodus of Venezuelans and their banking accounts, particularly to Miami.

Observers have expressed surprise at Chavez's tenacity and his ability to continue governing despite what amounts to a virtual shutdown of the country. In mid-January, several South American governments, led by Brazil, formed a "Friends of Venezuela" working group to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

With a scarcity of gasoline and the fear of increasing violence and perhaps civil war, some missions, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, have pulled their missionaries out of the country. Others, such as LAM, has continued with ministries there but cautioned their missionaries to take particular care.

Two of LAM's short-term missionaries who teach at an English-language school in Caracas left the country for a period of time over the Christmas holiday after the school closed early. The school has reopened and they are back at work.

Meanwhile, LAM missionary Dan Rambow, who pastors and English-language church in Valencia, reports that he has to walk to most appointments, but he has found that the crisis has offered him extraordinary opportunities to minister and to share the Gospel.

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