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Venezuela Promises Cheap Oil to Poor Chicagoans

By Oscar Avila
Tribune staff reporter

Venezuelan officials today promised to offer discounted oil to benefit poor Americans, with Chicago one of four U.S. cities to be included in the initial energy offer.

The pledge came at the start of a two-day series of events in Chicago by Venezuelan government officials to promote better relations between Americans and the controversial regime of leftist President Hugo Chavez.

"Venezuela Matters" is unusual public diplomacy by Chavez to mix his anti-American rhetoric with generosity toward the American people.

While Venezuela had offered the cheap oil after Hurricane Katrina struck, today's announcement provided new details, including word Chicago would be among the first cities to benefit from the South Americans' generosity.

Officials with the government and Citgo Petroleum Corp., now a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, said schools and medical facilities would have top priority.

"We will have differences. It is a part of life. On the other hand, we have a lot of common interests," Bernardo Alvarez, the Venezuelan ambassador to the U.S., told dozens of Chicago community leaders at the River East Art Center.

Alvarez said government officials were still working out details about how Americans could apply for the energy assistance.

Officials initially considered offering discounted heating oil to Chicagoans. But because most local residents use natural gas to heat their homes, officials said they may expand the program to offer discounted diesel fuel for school buses and for vehicles of not-for-profit organizations.

Rafael Gomez, a Citgo vice president, said company officials and Venezuelan diplomats hoped to meet with Illinois elected officials to get them on board.

"We feel the political will exists. The need, of course, exists," Gomez said. "Now the question is how we launch this project."

Venezuelan officials also publicized an offer from their government to provide free eye surgery

in their country for poor Americans. Participants would receive free transportation, housing and surgery in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas.

Potential patients can apply with the Venezuelan consulate in Chicago by calling 312-236-9655.

Chicago is the first U.S. city to host Venezuela Matters, which will include music performances, business roundtables, policy forums and art exhibitions.

Some Venezuelans here also are using the event to protest their home country's policies.

A former paratrooper, Chavez took power in 1998 and has channeled the nation's oil revenue to social programs that benefit poor Venezuelans. But the American government considers Chavez a destabilizing force in Latin America because of his hostile stance toward the U.S. and close ties to Cuba.

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