

Chavez hikes Venezuela's minimum wage before vote

Reuters

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CARACAS, April 8 — President Hugo Chavez hiked Venezuela's minimum wage by almost a third today as the ailing socialist leader aimed to solidify his political base among the poor and win re-election in October.

Chavez is flying back and forth for cancer treatment in Cuba, fuelling doubts about his future and removing himself from the daily political debate as his rival, state Governor Henrique Capriles, pushes ahead with a national campaign tour.

But the 57-year-old president has managed to maintain a strong lead over the opposition candidate in most recent opinion polls, based on his enduring emotional connection with Venezuela's poor majority — and heavy state spending.

"In the 1980s and 90s, the minimum wage was basically frozen, then inflation went through the roof ... we've been working on this for several weeks," Chavez said, unveiling the pay hike during a televised cabinet meeting hours before leaving for Havana and a third round of radiation therapy.

Ahead of the October 7 presidential election, his government has launched many projects, or "missions," including one that aims to build hundreds of thousands of homes, and others that provide cash handouts to the elderly and to poor families with children.

The 32.25 per cent pay increase will take effect in two stages, on May 1 and September 1, and will bring the minimum monthly wage to about US\$475 (RM1,615) at the official exchange rate.

Looking reasonably well and speaking with a strong voice, Chavez said almost 4 million workers would benefit.

Very little is known about Chavez's condition, including what type of cancer he is suffering. He has undergone three operations in less than a year and says he is recovering well, but rumours persist that he is more ill than has been admitted.

During an emotional speech at a pre-Easter Mass on Thursday with his family looking on from the congregation, the president wept and called on God to spare his life.

Given that Chavez is out of the Venezuela for several days each week at the moment, he appears to be at pains to show that he remains in full control of the government and is working hard ahead of the vote on October 7.

Ahead of last night's cabinet meeting, details were published of three phone calls he held with two fellow leftist leaders, Bolivian President Evo Morales and Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, and his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad.

It said Chavez and Assad discussed what was happening in Syria, "especially the successful way the Syrian government had contained armed terrorist gangs ... which were seeking in

vain to impede the advance of political reforms pushed forward by the Assad government.”

Capriles has said that if he wins the election he will prioritize relationships with countries in the Americas and “democratic” nations, as opposed to Chavez’s ties with politically-allied governments that are often far away and have questionable human rights records, such as Iran or Belarus.

Venezuela’s opposition sees the 39-year-old Miranda state governor as its best hope of ending Chavez’s 13 years in power. Surveys show that millions of Venezuelans remain undecided.

Chavez joked with his ministers on Saturday that some in the opposition ranks were talking excitedly about a tied race ahead of the ballot, after one poll last month gave the president just a single percentage point lead over Capriles.

“Dead heat?” he laughed. “We’re delivering a knockout blow!” — Reuters

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