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Chavez Offers Support to Abkhazia, South Ossetia

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Chavez, center, speaking to Bagapsh, left, and Kokoity, right, during a meeting at his palace in Caracas on Friday. **Fernando Llano**

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez promised to call on his Latin American allies to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separatist Georgian regions considered autonomous states by just four countries around the world.

Chavez met with Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh and South Ossetia's Eduard Kokoity in Caracas on Friday and agreed to back their fight for international support of their independence from Georgia.

"I'm sure we, together with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, will be able to build strong relations with Latin American nations such as Paraguay, Uruguay, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina," Venezuela's leftist leader said.

Chavez called Abkhazia and South Ossetia "new republics that are working hard for their development."

Venezuela is one of only four countries — including Russia, Nicaragua and the small South Pacific island nation of Nauru — that have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics.

Russia recognized the two territories as independent after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and has stationed troops there. Georgia and many Western countries say the military presence amounts to Russian occupation.

Venezuelan officials signed a series of agreements with the visiting delegations to establish formal diplomatic relations and evaluate proposals for cooperation in areas ranging from energy to trade and agriculture.

Bagapsh said in an interview that he was seeking closer ties with Venezuela and help from its state oil company in looking for crude in Abkhazia.

Bagapsh said he sought Venezuela's help persuading more Latin American governments to recognize Abkhazia, but acknowledged that those efforts could be difficult because the United States does not consider his region a separate country and has allies in Latin America.

"We understand that recognition is a long and difficult process, and we understand that the United States has much influence in the region," Bagapsh said.

Bagapsh played down the Russian presence in Abkhazia, saying there are 1,800 Russian soldiers in Abkhazia who help with border security and that their numbers are relatively insignificant.

He took issue with suggestions by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that Russia is occupying Abkhazia.

"She's too important of a politician not to know what occupation means," he said.

Chavez said he intended to visit Abkhazia in “the nearest future,” Interfax reported Sunday.

“In the near future, Venezuelan ships will arrive in Abkhazia. I also promise that soon I will make a visit to Sukhumi,” he told Bagapsh.

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