



EU Sends Observers for Venezuelan Presidential Vote (Update1)

By Theresa Bradley

Nov. 15 (Bloomberg) -- The European Union agreed to send observers to monitor Venezuela's Dec. 3 presidential election after the South American country gave in to EU demands that the head of its delegation be allowed to speak to the press and release his report to the public.

An accord signed today by Venezuela's National Electoral Council and the EU allows the Europeans to skirt speech limitations that the council can place on observers, said Denis Daniilidis, head secretary of the EU's delegation in Caracas. Tibusay Lucena, head of the electoral council, didn't return telephone calls seeking comment.

"The conditions to be applied to this international observation are standard and don't present any problems," Daniilidis said in a telephone interview from Caracas. "It will give us ample freedom to do our job as we do everywhere in the world."

President Hugo Chavez agreed to the EU's terms as part of an effort to win support abroad after his failed bid to win Venezuela a seat on the United Nations Security Council last month, said Riordan Roett, a professor at Johns Hopkins University.

The vote's validity is "critical to renewing his political mandate," said Roett, the director of Latin American Studies at Johns Hopkins's School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C.. If Chavez "can compromise with Brussels to ensure they come out with a clean bill of health on the elections, it goes a long way."

Latest Poll

The EU team will join several hundred international observers scheduled to monitor next month's vote, which pits Chavez against former Zulia-state Governor Manuel Rosales. Chavez's lead over Rosales narrowed to 6 percentage points in a poll taken last week by U.S. pollster Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates.

Support for Chavez fell to 48 percent from 50 percent in September while backing for Rosales rose to 42 percent from 37 percent, according to the poll. Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, which has advised Rosales's campaign in the past, surveyed 1,000 people from Nov. 6 to Nov. 10. The poll had a margin of error of between 3 and 3.5 percentage points. Third-place candidate Benjamin Rausseo withdrew today from the race.

The agreement between the EU and Venezuela paves the way for 130 experts contracted by the EU to join representatives of the Organization of American States, the Atlanta-based Carter Center and other Latin American electoral groups in monitoring next month's vote, Venezuela's election authority said.

Too Late

Monica Frassoni, an Italian representative to the European Parliament who will lead the EU's team, is scheduled to arrive in Caracas at the end of the week. A core group of 10 experts landed last night to coordinate communication with candidates, officials and press through December 18, European officials said. European observers monitored Venezuelan voting once before, during the congressional elections of 2005.

Susan Purcell, director of the Center for Hemispheric Policy at the University of Miami, said the EU observers' arrival may be too late.

Voter registration ended in September, forcing observers to now comb through voter lists in order to verify names, rather than simply monitoring inscription, Purcell said. The EU observers also missed the opportunity to watch the installation of the electronic voting machines to be used, she said.

``Observers who come in just to see lines on election day can lead to very few conclusions," said Purcell, who has supervised presidential ballots in Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico. ``They prevent blatant intimidation because you've got someone from the outside watching. But the risk you take is that you legitimize a tainted election."

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