

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

Senior Executive Intelligence Brief

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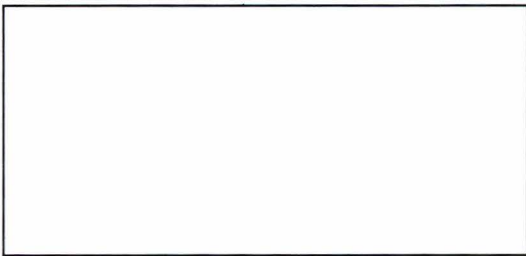
Saturday, 6 April 2002

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Venezuela:

Conditions Ripening for Coup Attempt

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Dissident military factions, including some disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical junior officers, are stepping up efforts to organize a coup against President Chavez, possibly as early as this month,

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The level of detail in the reported plans—one report targets Chavez and 10 other senior officials for arrest—lends credence to the information, but military and civilian contacts note that neither group appears ready to lead a successful coup and may bungle the attempt by moving too quickly.

- Civilian groups opposed to Chavez's policies, including the Catholic Church, business groups, and labor, are backing away from efforts to involve them in the plotting, probably to avoid being tainted by an extraconstitutional move and fear that a failed attempt could strengthen Chavez's hand.

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Prospects for a successful coup at this point are limited. The plotters still lack the political cover to stage a coup, Chavez's core support base among poor Venezuelans remains intact, and repeated warnings that the US will not support any extraconstitutional moves to oust Chavez probably have given pause to the plotters.

- Chavez is monitoring opponents inside and outside the military, and might use a coup attempt to justify clamping down on the struggling opposition and tightening his grip on the country's institutions.

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To provoke military action, the plotters may try to exploit unrest stemming from opposition demonstrations slated for later this month or ongoing strikes at the state-owned oil company PDVSA. White-collar oil workers began striking on Thursday at facilities in 11 of 23 states as part of an escalating protest against Chavez's efforts to politicize PDVSA.

- Protracted strikes, particularly if they have the support of the blue-collar oil workers' union, could trigger a confrontation.

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