Chavez Backs Oil Minister after Refinery Blast

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez defended his oil minister Wednesday, saying he has a solid record leading the industry for a decade despite a recent refinery explosion that killed at least 42 people.

Expressing full support for Rafael Ramirez, Chavez said that if he wins re-election in October he will pick him again to head the Oil and Mining Ministry and the state-run company Petroleos de Venezuela SA, known as PDVSA.

Chavez backed Ramirez when asked by a reporter if he would consider dismissing his oil minister over the matter.

"How can someone suggest, if they still haven't completed the investigations, that I dismiss someone like Minister Rafael Ramirez," Chavez said at a news conference in a Caracas park.

"I'm forced to go out in his defense because he's a great Venezuelan, an honest man, a tireless worker who has held the post at the ministry for 10 years," Chavez said.

The cause of the Aug. 25 blast, which also injured more than 150 people, is under investigation.

Some experts have said that insufficient maintenance by Venezuela's oil company has probably made such disasters likelier. They note that PDVSA's revenues are used to finance social programs started by Chavez's government.

Ramirez and other government officials say they've spent billions of dollars maintaining the country's refineries.

The Amuay refinery, where the blast occurred, is one of the largest in the world and

is part of PDVSA's Paraguana Refining Center, which includes the adjacent Cardon refinery.

Chavez flew to the explosion site after the disaster and has pledged aid for families whose homes were destroyed.

Opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, who is challenging Chavez in the Oct. 7 vote, has demanded a thorough investigation.

"When an accident happens in an industry or a refinery ... the government always wants the problems to blow up lower down, over the innocent ones, and not assume its responsibility," Capriles said last week.

During the nearly four-hour news conference, Chavez broke into song at one point, and also joked when a stray dog walked in front of him and briefly stole his spotlight. "Why, welcome, sir! What an elegant guy you are," Chavez said.

As for the presidential race, Chavez likened it to a boxing match and boasted that he expects to "knock down" Capriles like Muhammad Ali would an opponent. Chavez said he thinks Capriles could leave the elections ring "in a stretcher."

After a year of battling cancer, Chavez has said he's now better and has assured Venezuelans that physical limitations stemming from his recovery will not affect his re-election campaign. On Wednesday, he said his last medical exam in June found him in good shape.

"I feel very good, even better. Because there are some who are throwing dirt and saying Chavez can't make it — he's falling, he's dying," the president said. "They're playing with this, but it's not going to happen. We're going to have a massive victory."

Turning to another issue that has stirred controversy, Chavez said his government still hasn't found evidence of any killings in Yanomami Indian communities in the Amazon. Last week, an indigenous organization said it had received reports of a mass killing in a remote jungle village.

Nicia Maldonado, the minister for indigenous peoples, said later on state radio that

officials who traveled to the area last week had on Wednesday reached the community of Irotatheri where the massacre reportedly happened. She said the team didn't find any signs of bloodshed.

Leaders of the Horonami Yanomami Organization, a community group that released the original report, couldn't be reached for comment.

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