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Venezuela's Jews fear more attacks

By *FABIOLA SANCHEZ, Associated Press Writer*

CARACAS, Venezuela — As President Hugo Chavez intensifies his anti-Israel campaign, some Venezuelans have taken action, threatening Jews in the street and vandalizing the largest synagogue in Caracas — where they stole a database of names and addresses.

Now many in Venezuela's Jewish community fear the worst is yet to come.

Chavez has personally taken care not to criticize Israelis or Jews while accusing Israel's government of genocide against the Palestinians. He vehemently denies inciting religious intolerance, let alone violence.

But Venezuela's Jewish leaders, the Organization of American States and the U.S. State Department say Chavez's harsh criticism has inspired a growing list of hate crimes, including a Jan. 30 invasion of Caracas' largest synagogue.

About 15 people overpowered two security guards at the Tiferet Israel Synagogue, shattering religious objects and spray-painting "Jews, get out" on the walls. Most worrisome, according to Elias Farache, president of the Venezuelan-Israelite Association, was their theft of a computer database containing many names and addresses of Jews in Venezuela.

Police are now posted outside the synagogue, and prosecutors said Friday that the security guards "could be involved." Venezuela's attorney general ordered them to court on Feb. 13 — two days before Venezuelans vote in a referendum that could enable Chavez to extend his rule indefinitely.

One week before the invasion, a Chavista columnist named Emilio Silva posted a call to action on Aporeea, a pro-government Web site, describing Jews as "squalid" — a term Chavez often uses to describe his opponents as weak — and exhorting Venezuelans to confront them as anti-government conspirators.

"Publicly challenge every Jew that you find in the street, shopping center or park," he wrote, "shouting slogans in favor of Palestine and against that abortion: Israel."

Silva called for protests at the synagogue, a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, seizures of Jewish-owned property, the closure of Jewish schools and a nationwide effort "to denounce publicly, with names and last names the members of powerful Jewish groups present in Venezuela."

Aporeea later replaced the column with an apology that describes Silva's posting as anti-Semitic and exhorts Chavistas to show more discipline by criticizing the Israeli government rather than its people or Jews in general.

Silva, a 35-year-old mathematics professor at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, got the message. He told The Associated Press Friday that he couldn't comment on the "controversial subject," and that his "position is to condemn any act that goes against the integrity of any faith or conviction."

But other anti-Semitic writings by Silva remained on the site Friday, including one posted on Jan. 19, a week before the synagogue attack. That posting also crudely criticized a Venezuelan archbishop for failing to condemn Israel's Gaza offensive; offices of the Vatican have been tear gassed twice since then.

With criticism mounting, Chavez phoned Farache Thursday night in a conversation broadcast live on state television, and vowed to guarantee the safety of Venezuela's 15,000 Jews. He condemned the synagogue attack. But he also suggested that it might have been an inside job, and demanded that Jewish leaders publicly recant accusations against his government.

Farache responded saying "we have acted in good faith and with the best intentions to guarantee the tranquility of our community." He also said that Jews hoped to avoid being exploited by the opposition or by Chavez supporters in their

erendum campaigns. "Our community is apolitical," he said.

Hate crimes have escalated despite Chavez's declaration that his government "rejects any type of aggression against any temple, be it Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, or any other." And the attorney general's statement Friday gave no details about any progress investigating a list of more than a dozen threats against Jews that the Venezuelan Confederation of Israelite Associations gave her office a week before the synagogue attack.

The group said one threat involved a rabbi who was leaving a Jewish school in Caracas when two men, one wielding a broken bottle, shouted: "Jew, we are coming for you!" A nearby taxi driver offered refuge and sped him away.

Other Jews have stopped wearing yarmulkes while walking to temple on Friday evenings. Simon Galante said he and his brother now fear for their safety after being accosted by men on motorcycles yelling "Murderers!"

"Thank God, nothing more occurred ... we continued walking and ignored the comments, but it's very sad," said Galante, who joined a demonstration against the attacks this week.

For some, fear turned to outrage when Chavez suggested his adversaries could be trying to give ammunition to those who accuse him of anti-Semitism.

Venezuela's Jews include many survivors of World War II, as well as families that have been Venezuelan for two centuries. In the past, Chavez's enthusiastic support of Iran and other enemies of Israel has done little to threaten their coexistence in an overwhelmingly Catholic country.

Now many Jews fear more trouble ahead.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Los Angeles, California-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, believes Chavez's rhetoric "has encouraged this atmosphere of hatred which is now being directed against Jews."

"His hostility against the state of Israel has a ripple effect," Hier told the AP in a telephone interview. "Those who support him, and listen to his words, are disposed to dislike Jews."

Associated Press writers Christopher Toothaker and Rachel Jones contributed to this report.

Source