

# Chavez rallies support as he faces the fight of his political life

By Girish Gupta in Caracas

HUNDREDS of thousands of supporters were descending on Caracas last night, for a mass rally called by Hugo Chávez ahead of the toughest election of his 14-year rule.

The former soldier, who recovered from cancer this year and wants a new six-year term to consolidate his Bolivarian revolution, is in a fight.

His opponent is 40-year-old Henrique Capriles Radonski, an energetic state governor who offers the opposition its best hope yet of overcoming the man who has been South America's rabble-rouser-in-chief for more than a decade.

Polls in Venezuela are notoriously unreliable, but while one of the more respected puts Mr Chávez 10 points ahead, another has the candidates neck and neck.

The 58-year-old president has led Venezuela under a banner of 21st century socialism, with help from Fidel Castro in Cuba.

He inspires a quasi-religious fervour among supporters, who know him as *El Comandante*. Last night in Caracas they were expected to sing with him, walk

alongside his motorcade for miles and scream at his every word.

"I believe in the revolution; I believe in Chávez," shouted Haydee Nabarro, 51, a teacher, at a recent rally, echoing many of the thousands who turned up.

Mr Capriles's rallies have also been impressive, bringing in a large part of Venezuela's electorate that has had enough of Mr Chávez.

They have not always gone smoothly though. On Saturday, three opposition activists were killed by gunmen reportedly firing from a government vehicle.

The shootings provoked only limited comment in a country with one of the world's highest murder rates. More than 10,000 people were killed in the first six months of this year. Law and order is the main election theme and many are worried that the president will not go quietly should he lose on Sunday. Much of his support comes from the poor in the barrios, many of whom are armed.

Despite a wealthy background, Mr Capriles has also gained strong support in the slums. He has worked tirelessly, much as Mr Chávez did before his election in 1998, travelling the country, meeting as many people as possible. So far, it

seems, Mr Chávez's use of state resources, including compulsory airtime across television networks, has tipped the balance in the government's favour in what critics describe as an unfair fight.

The president rarely calls Mr Capriles by name, referring to him as the "candidate of the Right" or simply "the loser".

Mr Capriles has also suffered attacks by state media. The government television network has repeated accusations about his sex life and a government website attacked his Jewish roots in an essay titled "The Enemy is Zionism".

With the world's biggest oil reserves, Mr Chávez's government can afford to be combative. The country has floated on high oil prices for the past few years, the money funding social projects that critics decry as government vote-buying.

Those who have been pulled from poverty and given free housing see things differently. "My life has changed," said Miguel Calanon, 42, who lives just outside Caracas in a house given to him by the government. "No other government has ever helped me." There are many more waiting, however.

"Everyone has a friend of a friend who's been helped by the government,"



Hugo Chavez meets supporters at a rally in the Venezuelan city of Valencia yesterday. Larger numbers were expected in Caracas

said Yesman Utrera, 24, speaking in his own barrio in the west of Caracas.

Those who receive government aid, shopping at subsidised supermarkets, are insulated from near 25 per cent annual inflation, the highest in the Americas.

As well as a runaway economy and regular blackouts, Venezuelans must also

consider whether Mr Chávez will survive another six years. He announced that he had cancer last June and has spent a number of months shuttling between Caracas and Havana for treatment.

While the topic has fallen off the radar in recent months, thanks in part to the public relation skills of the Chávez regime, it is still on the minds of inves-

tors who have helped bond prices to rally in recent months, hoping for a change of government either in elections or a downturn in Mr Chávez's health.

"The candidate of the government reached office with good intentions, but he's no longer interested in change, he's sick with power," Mr Capriles said this week. "This government's time is up."

## Landslide buries 18 at China primary school

By Malcolm Moore in Beijing

A LANDSLIDE engulfed a primary school in a remote part of south-west China yesterday, burying 18 children.

Pupils at the Youfang Primary School, in Zhenhe village, Yunnan province, would not normally have been in school on Thursday because China is on a week-long holiday.

They were taking extra classes to catch up on lessons they missed when an earthquake struck the same region last month, killing 81 people and destroying several villages.

State television confirmed the deaths of five of the children, with the remainder still underground.

A rescue operation was under way with about 2,000 people at the site, including 400 soldiers from the local People's Liberation Army base. Liu Chaowen, the head of the local fire brigade, said: "We

have found five children so far. The major obstacle to the rescue is that there are a number of large rocks, and although we have three diggers working on the site, progress is quite slow."

The schoolhouse, a single-storey building, collapsed under the force of the landslide.

Two farmhouses near the school were also submerged and a villager was buried.

The landslide occurred after recent torrential rain.

The school was built precariously at the foot of a steep mountain.

The landslide struck at 8am as students were arriving for classes.

An official, who gave only his surname, Yang, said: "More than 30 students were supposed to attend classes today and there were 18 pupils at school before the class started this morning."

## Dubai's Taj Mahal: four times bigger, and a shopping centre

By Alex Spillius

DUBAI has unveiled plans for a £665 million reproduction of the Taj Mahal that will not only be four times bigger than the 17th century original but contain a shopping centre, a 300-room five-star hotel, serviced apartments and bridal-wear stores.

Not content with constructing the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa, the sail-shaped Burj al Arab hotel, and a palm tree-shaped archipelago of luxury properties, developers in the Gulf city want to use the Taj Arabia project to attract wedding



Developers in Dubai hope their replica Taj Mahal, will appeal to the wedding market

business. The aim is to complete the project in two years, compared with the 22 years it took to build the marble mausoleum at Agra dedicated by the Indian emperor Shah Jahan to his third wife Mumtaz. Indians living in the UAE and nearby countries are the main target market.

## World Bulletin

### Briton's Hong Kong ferry crash ordeal

A British survivor of the Hong Kong ferry disaster that killed 38 people has spoken for the first time about his escape.

David MacFarlane, a magazine editor from Bearsden in Scotland, was on the ferry that collided with a cruiser with his wife and children, aged nine and three. He said it was "like a bad dream". "I was on the bottom deck with my family and the ceiling started to come in and water started to get through from the floor," he said, adding that the crew were "far from helpful". The ferry managed to dock, but the cruiser sank.

### Tehran's bazaar closes in protest

Traders in Tehran's Grand Bazaar intensified pressure on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by shutting shops for a second day yesterday in protest against economic disarray triggered by a currency collapse.

Protesters had clashed violently with security forces after a strike in the bazaar on Wednesday.

The Iranian president has been blamed for a crisis that has seen the rial, the national currency, plunge to record lows against the US dollar. The regime yesterday arrested 16 people in relation to the crisis.

### Anything to declare? Well...

Two hundred poisonous tarantulas, as well as crickets, grasshoppers and millipedes, have been confiscated by customs officials at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport after they were discovered hidden in a suitcase. "The animals were collected by a German couple on a trip to Peru and were put in plastic containers and tubes hidden in their clothing and shoes," said a customs spokesman, adding that some of the tarantulas were of a type little known to science. They have been handed to animal welfare authorities.

### Blue honey puzzle for beekeepers

Bees at a cluster of apiaries in north-eastern France have been producing honey in shades of blue and green, making it unsellable.

Beekeepers around the town of Ribeauville in Alsace have seen bees covered in colourful substances and believe that residue from containers of M&M's, the colourful sweets, processed at a nearby biogas plant is the cause.

When told of the problem Agrivator, the plant operator, said incoming waste would now be stored in a covered hall.

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