

## Land reforms averted food crisis in Venezuela: Chavez

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has said the 'agrarian revolution and land reforms' he has initiated helped the country face the global food crisis on its own strength, EFE news agency reported Sunday.

'The agrarian revolution in Venezuela has been a vital step in the process of socialist changes since 1999,' Chavez said Saturday at an official ceremony marking the recovery of idle land from private ownership.

'One element of that progress was the creation of a food bank, which never existed before in Venezuela,' Chavez said, adding that it has been stocked with both domestic produces and imports.

According to official data, the Venezuelan food bank contains one million tonnes of grains that would last for 'at least two months'.

In the first months of the current year, the country faced a food shortage and the government invested between January and April more than \$2 billion to import food items, 46 percent more than in the same period of 2007.

Business leaders have blamed the shortages on government's price controls on more than 110 products and currency controls that peg the 'strong bolivar' at 2.15 to a dollar.

Chavez said that 'in spite of the difficulties' in redistributing idle lands to poor peasants, his agrarian revolution has increased food production by 'almost 50 percent'.

'Between 1997 and 2007 national production rose from 14 million tonnes to some 20 million tonnes, almost 50 percent, despite the problems we have had, and despite the fact that we are only beginning' the process of reform in the countryside.

Chavez in January 2004 declared 'a war to the death against big estate owners', and requested governors and administrative officers across the country to identify idle lands, then seize them and hand them over to poor peasants.

The confiscation of land has been rejected by businessmen and other associations which called the measures 'illegal and unconstitutional'.

In April, the National Lands Institute, or INTI, ordered redistribution of 30 farm lands in the western state of Lara, after an inspection found that at least 80 percent of the 2,400 hectares of land was lying idle.

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