

# Venezuela eyes privatization to clean up lawless, overcrowded prisons

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CARACAS, Venezuela: For all his populist rhetoric and baiting of the rich, President Hugo Chavez is showing again that he'll happily take the capitalist route when it suits him — this time to tame Venezuela's unruly prisons.

This month his government intends to seek bids to build and manage six new prisons. If all goes according to plan, Venezuela could become the first country in Latin America to experiment with prison privatization. 'We urgently need to construct six or seven prisons, and the government doesn't have the money in the short term,' Director of Prisons Flavio Figueredo said in an interview. Venezuela envisages retaining government control of its 32 existing prisons, while leaving the six new ones in private hands. Elsewhere in Latin America, Chile plans to have private companies build 12 new prisons by 2005, but they will remain under government management. Brazil, whose prisons recently were wracked by large-scale riots, has no such plans. Reforming Venezuela's 32 prisons with their 15,500 prison-

ers is a daunting challenge. Gang violence and drug and weapons dealing are rampant. Last year 276 prisoners were killed in riots or gang clashes. The U.S. figure was 59 in a prison population of more than 2 million in 1998, says Human Rights Watch, citing the most recent figures available. To stay alive, many Venezuelan inmates don't leave their cells even to eat or seek medical attention. As many as 40 people share a cell, often without bedding, change of clothes or water. Pickpockets are lumped in with murderers. In some prisons, inmates have torn down walls separating women and men and have produced children who grow up behind bars. Guarding the prisoners are just 340 officers — one per 45 inmates, a ratio far higher than in the United States. They earn little more than the minimum wage of dls 230 a month. Poorly trained and underpaid, guards routinely ignore criminal behavior and often boost their salaries by participating in the drug and weapons trade. Chavez himself knows Venezuela's prisons well.

The former paratrooper spent two years behind bars after leading a failed coup in 1992. A law passed before Chavez took office in 1999 halved the prison population by releasing people jailed for more than two years without trial. More than 10,000 inmates were freed. But Venezuela's prisons are bulging again, largely because of a nationwide crime wave, Figueredo said. The populist Chavez has been wary of giving the private sector a role in providing social services, and on occasion he has denounced business as part of a decades-old 'oligarchy' that he vows to dismantle. Yet his government has been receptive to private investment where state services are overwhelmed. A new plan to save Venezuela's nearly bankrupt public employee pension system features privately managed funds as well as a state-run program. Chavez's government is looking for a company, probably American or European, that can build six 1,500-bed prisons within two years, housing no more than three people per cell, each with a bath-

room. Inmates will be separated according to the severity of their crimes. The private company would also provide a rehabilitation program. No company has been mentioned yet, but some are interested. Cornell Corrections, a New York company that operates prisons housing 14,000 people in the United States, is studying Venezuela. 'If it looks like a match for our focus, we'd be delighted to submit a bid,' said spokesman Paul Doucette. While 6 percent of U.S. state inmates and 3 percent of federal inmates live in privately run prisons, human rights groups are wary of the concept. 'There is no reason to think a private company would be willing to improve resources. If anything, they have incentives to do things on the cheap,' argues Joanne Mariner of the Latin American division of New York-based Human Rights Watch. 'It's an indication of the severity of prison problems in Latin America that some governments are throwing up their hands and want to get rid of an embarrassing problem,' Mariner said. —AP