

Vatican Embassy in Venezuela attacked with tear-gas bombs

CARACAS, Venezuela - The Vatican Embassy in Caracas was attacked with tear-gas bombs amid rising tensions over a vote to amend the constitution, Catholic officials said.

The six bombs, thrown at 5:30 a.m. Jan. 19, caused no injuries, but generated an angry protest from Archbishop Roberto Luckert Leon of Coro, vice president of the Venezuelan bishops' conference, who called the act "an abuse."

"They're trying to create a climate of violence and generate fear in everybody who dissents" from the government of President Hugo Chavez, Archbishop Luckert said.

He also said the government was not fulfilling its obligation to protect the embassy, or nunciature.

Those who threw the tear-gas bombs left leaflets from a pro-Chavez activist group accused of attacking a television station and the home of a journalist critical of the government.

On Feb. 15, Venezuelans will vote on a government-proposed constitutional amendment that would remove term limits for all elected officials. Catholic Church leaders, who have long accused Chavez of concentrating too much power in the presidency, have criticized the proposed amendment.

The nunciature is also housing an opposition student leader, Nixon Moreno, who is seeking political asylum overseas. Venezuelan officials want to try Moreno as a common criminal.

After the tear-gas bombing, Moreno's attorney, Tamara Suju, said that the canisters had come from CAVIM, the military's official arms supplier.

"How is it possible that armed paramilitary groups acting with impunity in the country have weapons issued by CAVIM?" she asked. "We demand answers from the Venezuelan state."