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## Chavez's First Meeting with Fidel Paved the Way to ALBA

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The growth of Latin American and Caribbean integration took off on a day like today 24 years ago, with the first meeting in Havana between Commander Fidel Castro and then Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez.

On the night of December 13, 1994, the Jose Marti International Airport landing strip in Havana became the first stage of revolutionary agreement between Venezuela and Cuba, and a decade later it became a reality with the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA).

Invited by the Simon Bolivar Cultural House and Havana Historian Eusebio Leal, the young Venezuelan military man, who then headed the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200, which would take him to power five years later, arrived for the first time in Cuba and to his surprise, he was welcomed by the leader of the Cuban Revolution.

The book *El Encuentro* (The Meeting), by the Cuban authors Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Luis Baez, says that before landing a passenger asked Chavez about the possibility of meeting with Fidel, and his answer was accurate, 'Well, I would love to talk to him, to have the opportunity to exchange how the Venezuelan process is going' - He says with enthusiasm, but supposing it is something so remote, he chooses not to have illusions.

At the same time Chavez thought it is a very short stay, from the night of that Tuesday until early Thursday, and imagined that Fidel must be very busy.

'If I am not received by the Uruguayan leaders, who are not yet a government, and the Venezuelan Communist Party rejected me and does not even give me the word in their events, why should Fidel dedicate his precious time to me?', the text notes.

This visit was only the starting point of a great friendship, which led among other things to the signing on December 14, 2004, in Havana of the founding act of ALBA, an initiative that has been vital to foster the new geopolitics of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The consultation mechanism achieved true unity and integration standards, with solidarity and complementarity as the fundamental pillars supporting the new vision of humanism that, with the two great men's leadership, emerged in the twenty-first century.

The initiative in its 14 years, with the purpose of building, in diversity, a multipolar world without hegemonies has reaped fruits with the formation of such important bodies as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and Petrocaribe as an alliance in energy matters, among others.

The story of that short trip to Havana ends in the same place where it began, the Jose Marti airport, and in Chavez's farewell with Fidel, the Venezuelan soldier puts on the red beret that crowns his gallant image and before boarding the plane he gives a military salute to the Cuban Commander in Chief, who reciprocated, to which the Bolivarian leader replied, 'Someday I will receive you in Venezuela as a friend, just as you did with me.'

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