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Caracas cardinal asks Venezuelans to pray for ailing president

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Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino asked Venezuelans to pray for President Hugo Chavez as he battles cancer.

"In the first place, we all are going to pray for the health of President Chavez, who, as the vice president has said, is in a delicate condition," Urosa told news channel Globovision on Tuesday. "We are going to ask God that he strengthens him in these moments and, on the other hand, that the uncertainly is going to dissipate Jan. 10."

Chavez is battling complications after operations in Cuba to treat cancer, and Venezuela confronts a possible constitutional crisis over who will lead the South American country should the president not return in time for his Jan. 10 inauguration.

Chavez won re-election Oct. 7, but the cancer he had been battling before the election returned, forcing him to seek treatment again in Cuba.

Vice President Nicolas Maduro told Venezuelans in a Dec. 30 message that Chavez had suffered complications from a respiratory infection after his fourth surgery.

Information Minister Ernesto Villegas canceled New Year's celebrations in the capital, Caracas, and called on Venezuelans to pray instead.

In his New Year's message, Urosa asked for a blessing for "all those who are suffering," including, "political prisoners," and, "of course, the president of the republic, that the Lord grants him health."

Chavez became personally popular among Venezuela's poor, but also polarizing for his anti-American posturing and persecution of political opponents. Crime, corruption and inflation have exploded during his 13 years in office, opposition politicians allege. His relations with church leaders have been marked by verbal sparring.

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