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Obama meets Venezuela's president on sidelines of summit

By BY JOSHUA GOODMAN and JOSH LEDERMAN

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President Barack Obama met privately with his Venezuelan counterpart Saturday amid a bitter dispute between the two nations over recent U.S. sanctions on seven senior Venezuelan officials.

The meeting between Obama and President Nicolas Maduro took place on the sidelines of the Summit of Americas and lasted only a few minutes, according to a White House official, who wasn't authorized to comment by name.

The encounter comes after the Obama administration declared the economic and political crisis in Venezuela a national security threat for the U.S. and froze the U.S. assets of seven officials accused of human rights abuses tied to anti-government protests last year in Venezuela.

Maduro and much of Latin America have condemned the action as an aggressive throwback to Cold War era that will only add to tensions in Venezuela at a time of deep divisions and calls by the opposition for Maduro to resign.

"President Obama indicated our strong support for a peaceful dialogue between the parties within Venezuela," said Bernadette Meehan, a spokeswoman for the White House's National Security Council. "He reiterated that our interest is not in threatening Venezuela, but in supporting democracy, stability and prosperity in Venezuela and the region."

Maduro later described the meeting as frank and cordial, saying the 10-minute exchange could lead the way to a meaningful dialogue between the two nations in the coming days.



President Barack Obama smiles while standing next to fellow heads of state; Uruguay's President ...

"I told him we're not an enemy of the United States," Maduro said. "We told each other the truth."

Obama did not mention the encounter in remarks at the conclusion of the summit.

But during a speech at the summit, Obama defended his administration's right to criticize policies it doesn't agree with.

"When we speak out on something like human rights, it's not because we think we are perfect but it's because we think the ideal of not jailing people if they disagree with you is the right idea," he told regional leaders, without mentioning Venezuela by name.