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Last Updated: Tuesday, 22 May 2007, 11:28 GMT 12:28 UK

## Protests mount over Venezuela TV

**Staff and supporters of a Venezuelan TV station that is due to be taken off air have unveiled a kilometre-long banner in Caracas in support of press freedom.**



Protests for and against the end of RCTV's licence are likely all week

Protesters carried the banner, which read "S-O-S, freedom of expression" in 10 languages through the streets.

Opposition-allied RCTV is due to have its licence revoked on 27 May, being replaced by a state-sponsored station.

President Hugo Chavez has accused RCTV of plotting against him and supporting a coup attempt in 2002.

The demonstration in support of RCTV snaked through the Venezuelan capital to the office of the Organisation of American States (OAS) where protesters handed in a letter detailing their concerns.

"Threats to freedom of expression affect all citizens equally. It doesn't matter if you are pro-government or against the government," said Rafael Fuenmayor, a journalist with another opposition-aligned station, Globovision.

RCTV - Venezuela's oldest private broadcaster - is due to go off air at midnight on Sunday when the government says its licence will expire and not be renewed.

Its frequency is set to be taken over by a new government-funded channel called TVES or Televisora Venezolana Social.



The new state-sponsored station will perform a social role, its board says

Officials deny that there is any threat to media freedom and that TVES will have diverse programmes.

On Monday, the government swore in the new channel's board, headed by a journalist Lili Rodriguez, a well-known journalist.

"We hope our station will perform a social service, a

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public service, that it will inform and entertain," she said.

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Further demonstrations, both for and against the decision to deny RCTV a broadcasting licence, are expected throughout the week.

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President Chavez was re-elected by a landslide last year.

His welfare spending programme has won him massive support among the poor but his opponents accuse him of turning the country into an increasingly authoritarian socialist state, modelled on Fidel Castro's Cuba.

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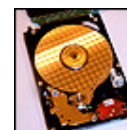
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