

# *Panamanian President-Elect Pledges to Normalize Relations with Venezuela and Colombia*

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Caracas, May 13 (RHC) – Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and Panamanian president-elect Juan Carlos Varela have pledged to normalize relations and re-launch diplomatic, economic and trade ties cut off two months ago, Venezuela's foreign ministry announced.

Maduro spoke with Varela just hours after the Panamanian presidential challenger was declared the winner of a close race. Both reiterated "their firm commitment to continuing to promote Latin American and Caribbean integration within the framework of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)".

Likewise Varela said he was going to talk with Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos to address the power inter-connection project as well as the exchange of tax information agreement, an issue which is particularly sensitive for the Colombian government given neighboring Panama's financial system.

Colombia has threatened to catalog Panama as a 'fiscal paradise' which would severely limit financial and trade activities.

Regarding Venezuela, ties between the two countries were suspended in March by Maduro's government after Panama's outgoing president Ricardo Martinelli, a close US ally, was perceived of aiding Venezuela's anti-government factions.

Varela was Martinelli's vice president, but the two had a falling out three years into their term, with Varela accusing the pro-business Martinelli of corruption. Varela takes office on July 1st.

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