

## Venezuelans lead the race to Miami

By Alexandra Frean, Miami

Economic and political turmoil in Latin America is helping to fuel an economic revival in Miami.

In the past three years an estimated \$5 billion has been ploughed into Miami's property developments, mostly in high-end apartments in the downtown area.

After suffering one of the biggest downturns of any property market in the United States amid the 2008 financial crisis, Miami is now among the top ten American cities for house price rises, with an increase of 16.5 per cent in the year to November 2013, according to the latest data from the Standard & Poor's Case-Shiller Index.

Tadd Schwartz, a spokesman for the Miami Downtown Development Authority, said that new developments were selling out even before construction had begun. "Venezuelans are the biggest investors. Some are buying sight unseen. We launched a project recently and within three hours they sold 60 to 70 units," he said, adding that the Venezuelans wanted to put their money somewhere safe.

While many purchasers stay in their home country and rent out their new flats, most are attracted by the possibility that the homes could serve as a bolthole should they move abroad.

Patrick Duddy, a visiting lecturer at Duke University's Centre for International Studies, who was the US Ambassador to Venezuela between 2007 and 2010, said that the Venezuelan economy was in "slow motion collapse", with inflation at 56 per cent.

Alice Robertson, head of the Miami Downtown Development Authority, said that Miami was a business hub where much of the business is conducted in Spanish.

Diego Ojeda, vice-president with the Rilea Group, a Miami-based developer, said that the money pouring into its developments had been "honestly earned", but he admitted that there was no way to check its origins.