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Venezuela Cancels Military Agreement with US

by LADB Staff

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The Venezuelan government cancelled a 35 year-old military exchange program with the US on April 22, saying the US had been spreading a negative image of his government to the soldiers they were training. The suspension of the agreement also coincided with the arrest of several US citizens who were accused of taking photographs of military and petroleum installations, leading President Hugo Chavez to say that the US might be planning to invade his country.

During his weekly television and radio show, Chavez complained the US officers "are sent here to turn our boys against us. It's best that they leave, until someday we can have transparent, clear relations and cooperation with the civil and military institutions of the United States, the way we do with almost all governments on the planet."

An official at the US Embassy said there were four US military instructors in Venezuela and roughly 90 Venezuelan military personnel in the United States. The US Embassy said Venezuela had abruptly and without explanation ended the military exchange program.

Ambassador William Brownfield said the five US officers in Venezuela involved in the program had been notified. It was not immediately clear how the other Venezuelan personnel in the US would be affected. The US embassy said in a statement that it "regrets this unexpected action. The US government hopes to maintain the historical fraternal relations between the two military forces."

An embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity to the Associated Press, said the US officers in Venezuela "were basically told to leave the Venezuelan military institutions and bases where they were," the official said in a telephone interview. "We have no explanation as to why this was done."

Photographers detained Chavez simultaneously announced the detention of several Americans and said the US might be planning to invade his country. Chavez said that a woman in the US armed forces had been detained by authorities while taking pictures of military installations in central Venezuela. He did not identify her or say whether she had been released. "If she or any other US official does this kind of activity again, they will be imprisoned and face trial in Venezuela," he said.

Brownfield said the US Embassy in Caracas had not been notified about any such arrest. But he confirmed that in February a woman enlisted in the US military lost a purse in the city of Maracay, home to Venezuela's main air force base and numerous military installations.

The purse belonging to the woman contained her military ID card, passport and a disposable camera, said a US embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity. The woman was dressed in civilian clothes and had been in the city to visit a military museum and was never detained, the official said.
Chavez also said several US journalists were detained taking pictures of a refinery 60 miles west of Caracas. He did not elaborate except to say they were released. Chavez said the cases indicated the US might be planning to invade Venezuela.

Venezuela is a top US oil supplier, but tensions have risen due to US criticism of Venezuela’s purchase of 100,000 assault rifles from Russia, and Chavez’s continuous criticism of the US occupation of Iraq. Chavez and his cabinet have been responding to US criticism of planned arms purchases for months, asserting Venezuelan sovereignty and stating that the purchases are transparent and of a strictly defensive nature.

Chavez “concerned by the infinite arming of the US government”

During a May 6 speech, Chavez accused Washington of "having an interest in the Colombian war" and warned Latin American countries that "US narco-militaries in Colombia" represent a grave threat for which "all neighbors who want peace in the continent should be concerned." In public statements Chavez has contrasted US and Venezuela military spending and gone after the US military presence in neighboring Colombia. "It is necessary to tell the US president that we have reasons to be concerned by the infinite arming of the US government.

US military expenses last year alone reached US$500 billion, in other words, five times the GDP of Venezuela. The military expenses of this country are over 50% of the military expenses of the world," said Chavez, calling President George W. Bush "Mr. Danger." "We do have reasons to be worried, Mr. Danger, about the US arms buildup, about US threats, about the presence of US soldiers in Colombia," he said.

The US Congress recently doubled the number of soldiers allowed to be in Colombia to 800 and increased the number of permitted US military contractors there from 400 to 600. Chavez’s comments follow harsh criticism by several high-level US officials condemning the sale of 100,000 Russian-made assault rifles, eight Spanish patrol boats and 10 transport aircraft, and 24 Brazilian Super Tucano planes.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a recent tour of several Latin American nations, where she encouraged leaders to join US efforts to isolate the Chavez government. Rice was met with open refutation from the government of Brazil’s President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

At a joint press conference with Rice, Brazil’s Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said, "Obviously, we know that, like any other society, there are problems and that those problems have to be worked out by the Venezuelan people." He added that Brazil "will do what we can do to help in a positive way, always respecting" the country’s sovereignty. Amorim was responding to a question about whether Brazil shares the US concern about the centralization of power in Venezuela, which the US government says may be in violation of the Organization of American States’ (OAS) charter, which says all signatories must follow democratic procedures.
Another member of Lula’s administration later said that Brazil was not an intermediary between the US and Venezuela. Miguel Angel Moratinos, Spain’s foreign minister, recently defended his country’s decision to sell military planes and boats to Venezuela, insisting the equipment was essential for fighting the drug trade and won’t upset the region’s military balance. Besides the eight military patrol boats and 10 transport planes from Spain, President Chavez’s government is buying 100,000 Kalashnikov-style assault rifles from Russia.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that he believes "Spain is making a mistake." Other US officials have said that Venezuelan arms purchases may aid leftist guerrillas in neighboring Colombia. Two US soldiers were recently apprehended attempting to sell munitions to rightist paramilitaries in Colombia. US officials denied that it was part of a larger scheme to arm paramilitary groups in the country.

During the business association Council of the Americas meeting in Washington, D.C., on May 3, Rumsfeld stated that the US will not use its military power to remove Chavez from office. According to the secretary of defense, the actions of the Venezuelan government are "not a winning approach." However, he denied that US involvement is necessary and believes that the Venezuelan people will deal with Chavez without US assistance.

In spite of Rumsfeld's statements, the Chavez administration remains unconvinced that US military action against Venezuela is unlikely. "The US is interested in a war," stated Chavez, saying that the US government financed, armed, protected the governments of Iraq, including Saddam Hussein, as well as Afghan leaders such as Osama Bin Laden, only to later place them in the axis of evil under the pretext of the war against terrorism.

According to Chavez, "It would not be anything strange that the US is arming everyone in order that they continue to kill each other for I don't know how many years in order to justify the Patriot Act and to have military bases. And later, from Colombia, threaten Venezuela and any other country. It is the perfect excuse for the Lords of the War." The arms purchased by Venezuela, said Chavez, "are a defensive weapon; if we were buying transatlantic missiles, then they could worry, now they have thousands of those devices, they have spy satellites, invisible airplanes, all have intelligence mechanisms, they have thousands of military bases in the world."

"This (purchase) is part of our effort to re-equip the Venezuelan Armed Forces, which has the same rights as any army," said Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who added that Venezuela was growing tired of hearing Washington repeat its concerns regarding Venezuela's acquisition of the Kalashnikov rifles.

**Venezuela prepares to liquidate Citgo refineries**

Even though there is frequent verbal sparring between the Chavez and Bush regimes, the flow of oil sales from Venezuela to the US is too valuable for either party to forgo. In previous instances of heightened tensions, Chavez has moved to assure business sectors that petroleum sales will not drop. The Chavez government is, however, planning to sell two Citgo refineries in the US. Citgo
is the US branch of Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA), the state-owned oil company. PDVSA acquired the US company in 1990.

Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez said on April 18 that the government would not seek to sell all of Citgo's assets, but only some installations. "We'll continue with Citgo and we'll continue with our presence in the North American market, which is one of the most important markets," said Ramirez in an interview with Caracas daily El Universal. Ramirez also acts as president of PDVSA. "What is clear is that there are at least two refineries there that don't interest us at all because they are giving us systematic losses, because they don't refine our petroleum, and, in that sense, we have received offers from some companies that we are working with confidentially," said Ramirez.

A month earlier Chavez had announced that his government was looking for partners to share Citgo business. Chavez said that "Citgo does not create profits for Venezuela," because the company devotes a large part of its income to the payment of US taxes. The president said that his government had agreed upon a "re-dimensioning" of the company and begun a search for a partner. "We want to sell part of Citgo and remain at the best with 60%, 50%, 40%. It will depend on the partners we get," he said.

Chavez assured his listeners that outside of the sale of the stock portfolio of Citgo, Venezuela would continue supplying petroleum to the US. Citgo is one of the largest providers of petrochemical materials in the US with more than 15,000 gas stations and a daily production of about 1 million barrels.

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