

U.S. government bans weapons sales to Venezuela

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration has banned all U.S. weapons sales to Venezuela because President Hugo Chávez has allegedly stopped cooperating on counter-terrorism programs, maintained close ties with Cuba and Iran and done too little against Colombian guerrilla groups that operate within its borders.

"This a step we undertake with enormous reluctance," Thomas Shannon, the assistant secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, said Monday. He added that the decision came after "years" of failed attempts to develop better ties in areas like energy and counter-drug and terrorism activities.

Speaking at George Washington University, Shannon said the U.S. government made the determination because "Venezuela has a relationship with Cuba and Iran, two state sponsors of terrorism that we find worrisome, especially in terms of intelligence liaison relationships."

Those ties "limited our ability to conduct certain actions in the region focusing on terrorist organizations," Shannon noted, without giving further details.

The ban includes U.S. sales and licenses for export of defense articles and services to the oil-rich nation, State Department officials said, including arms that are produced by other nations but that contain U.S. technology.

The United States had ceased selling new weapons systems some time back to Chávez, a harsh critic of President Bush, and has vetoed sales of military aircraft by Spain and Brazil to Venezuela because they contained U.S. technology. Officials did not clarify whether the new ban includes spare parts.

Chávez has complained that the U.S. government has held back on spare parts for his armed forces, especially several aged F-16 warplanes.