

U.S. bars arms to Chávez

The U.S. government barred all arms sales to Venezuela, saying the country has stopped cooperating in the war on terrorism.

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration has banned arms sales to Venezuela -- which has been on a buying spree to prepare for an alleged U.S. invasion -- accusing President Hugo Chávez of failing to cooperate in the war on terrorism and maintaining close ties to Cuba and Iran.

The decision announced Monday may be largely symbolic because Chávez has been buying the bulk of his weapons, including attack and transport helicopters, patrol boats and military transport airplanes, from Russia and Spain.

The first batch of 33 Russian helicopters arrived in Venezuela last month, and 33,000 of the 100,000 Russian Kalashnikov assault rifles that Chávez bought are expected this month. Caracas is also finalizing a deal with Spain to purchase eight military patrol boats and 10 military transport planes, and ramping up the training of a 2.5-million-member militia to fight a "war of resistance" against any U.S. invaders.

But the U.S. ban underlined Washington's increasingly sour view of Chávez as a ruler who has been undermining democracy in his oil-exporting country, regularly attacking the Bush administration and trying to export his leftist-populist ideology to his Latin American neighbors.

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

Shannon, addressing a seminar at George Washington University, said the U.S. government made the determination, in part, because Chávez "has a relationship with Cuba and Iran, two state sponsors of terrorism that we find worrisome, especially in terms of intelligence liaison relationships." Both nations are on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

"If you have a reasonable or rational expectation that somehow information that you share with them might make its way to just the groups that you're trying to combat, that's certainly negative," added State Department spokesman Sean McCormack. He also cited U.S. concerns over Venezuela's "interactions" with two Colombian leftist guerrilla groups, but gave no details.

'DOESN'T MATTER'

On a visit to London, Chávez said the arms ban "doesn't matter to us at all" and called the United States "an irrational empire," according to The Associated Press. Venezuela's air force has 177 U.S.-made aircraft out of 277, and its navy aircraft are entirely U.S.-made, according to the defense think tank globalsecurity.org of Alexandria, Va., as quoted by the AP.

The ban includes sales and licenses for export of defense articles and services, including weapons systems that are produced by other nations but contain U.S. technology, State Department officials said.

Washington already has vetoed the transfer of U.S. technology in military aircraft sold by Spain and Brazil to Venezuela. But it has denied allegations that it's holding back on spare parts for Chávez's armed forces, especially its 22 aged, U.S.-made F-16 warplanes. U.S. officials said Washington would supply spares to keep the F-16s flying, but would refuse any requests to upgrade the aircraft.

The U.S. government sold Venezuela \$34 million worth of licensed military materiel last year, but on contracts that were approved at the end of 2004. In 2005, Washington approved sales of only \$8.5 million, most of it going to parts for C-130 transport planes.

The Bush administration has also cut direct economic assistance to Venezuela for not doing enough to combat the trafficking of humans and illegal drugs. But the measures have had little impact on the South American nation, one of the top five suppliers of oil to the United States.

Chávez, a former army lieutenant colonel who led a failed coup in 1992 before he was democratically elected in 1998, has called President Bush "the devil," and regularly accuses Washington of planning to invade his country or assassinate him, or of aiding a 2002 coup against him.

His government also has branded as provocative the U.S. Navy maneuvers being held this month in the Caribbean, just miles from where the Venezuelan military has said it may hold similar exercises along its shoreline.

"They are always intimidating," Defense Minister Gen. Orlando Maniglia said recently.

U.S. military officials say the Navy maneuvers are part of a years-old program of routine exercises. Washington has flatly denied Chávez's other allegations, saying he's using them as an excuse to bolster his popularity and his armed forces, which could threaten Colombia, a close U.S. ally.

OUTDATED EQUIPMENT

There's little question that Venezuela's military is not in the best of form these days. Its 75,000-member army, navy and air force have only antiquated equipment, including thousands of decades-old FAL automatic rifles, and a small number of helicopters and airplanes.

With this in mind, the Venezuelan government has purchased about 100,000 AK-103 and AK-104 assault rifles to replace the Belgian-designed FALs. The army plans to obtain 30 more Mi-type helicopters from Russia, as well as 48 more military patrol boats from Spain for defense and antidrug patrols along the Venezuelan coast and the border with Colombia.

Chávez also has said that Venezuela might buy several MiG fighter jets from Russia, after Washington blocked Israel from upgrading his F-16s with U.S.-controlled technology last year.

"The U.S. wants us to be defenseless," Chávez declared during a recent television address. "It does not want to either sell new weapon systems, or spare parts for old ones . . . I may personally travel to Moscow to sign a deal on procuring Russian MiG fighters."

Last year, Chávez threatened to give F-16 technology to Cuba or China. U.S. officials say Venezuela has given 12 U.S.-donated T-34 airplanes, used to train military pilots, to Bolivia without notification or U.S. clearance, and has been using several U.S.-donated C-12 transport aircraft for unauthorized missions. U.S. officials declined to give more details.

A senior U.S. government official, who wished to remain anonymous because of the tense relations between the nations, said Venezuela is accumulating an impressive array of weaponry that may cause concern among its neighbors.

"I don't want to exaggerate, but by the same token, it's hard to argue that what is going on now is a simple natural process of replacing outdated, outmoded and old equipment," the official told The Miami Herald.

He added that the old FAL rifles being replaced by the Kalashnikovs may fall into the black market, and subsequently into the hands of Colombia's leftist rebels. Chávez has said he will make sure that does not happen.

The U.S. official also said there's concern that the Venezuelans will begin manufacturing ammunition for the new AK-103s and AK-104s -- the same bullets used by many of the Kalashnikovs in Colombian guerrilla hands.

Not everyone shares the U.S. concerns. One European diplomat in Caracas, speaking on condition of anonymity because of regulations at his embassy, said that Chávez's weapons buildup was due to legitimate concerns over the antiquated nature of his armed forces' equipment.

"It's like the glass half-full, glass half-empty argument," he said. "You can see it any way you want."