

# Venezuela's Ragtag Reserves Are Marching as to War

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CÚA, [Venezuela](#) — As dawn broke in this gritty city adorned with revolutionary graffiti and murals one day recently, about 300 residents were practicing military-style marching, strutting under the hot sun and clicking their heels in a salute to their commander. This ragtag army of nurses, students and other citizens is one of many being formed throughout Venezuela, part of President [Hugo Chávez's](#) attempt to create Latin America's largest civilian reserve force.



María de Lourdes Martínez, 74, leads reservists on a march in Cúa, Venezuela, part of their training to defend against an American invasion.



Citizen soldiers train every Saturday in Cúa and other cities.

"I always thought of myself as a peaceful person with barely the will to kill a cockroach," said Carmen Tovar, 55, a nurse who had been training with reserves for several months. "But now I'm prepared to defend with ferocity the sovereignty of our homeland."

The drills here and in other towns each weekend are a key part of Mr. Chávez's rising military profile, which includes arms purchases and what he contends will be the training of as many as two million citizens to fight a guerrilla war, all in preparation for what Mr. Chavez insists is the threat of invasion by the [United States](#).

Officials at the American Embassy in Caracas have said repeatedly that no such plans exist. But their denials do not appear to convince Mr. Chávez, who was briefly ousted in a 2002 coup tacitly supported by Bush administration officials.

The two sides have become each other's foils in a war of insults and ideology that has begun to harden into actual policy.

Last month, the United States placed Venezuela on a list of countries that had not cooperated in fighting terrorism, citing its close relations with Cuba and Iran and effectively suspending American arms sales to Caracas.

Even as they acted, American officials acknowledged that such sales were already negligible, as Mr. Chávez has looked to sources as varied as Brazil, Spain and Russia for everything from guns to fighter jets to patrol boats.

Early this month, Adm. Orlando Maniglia, Venezuela's defense minister, announced the arrival of 30,000 Kalashnikovs from Russia, part of a \$54 million sale agreed on last year of 100,000 rifles.

While military analysts say Venezuela's upgrading of its arsenal is not unusual compared with arms purchases by neighboring countries, the United States has responded warily.

It moved to block Venezuela's acquisition of military aircraft from Spain and Brazil by denying export licenses for the transfer of American-made components for the planes. Mr. Chávez threatened instead to turn to China or Russia.

At home, the Venezuelan leader portrays such steps as a kind of aggression by an already unpopular Bush administration. Plans for the citizen reservists serve both strategic and political ends for Mr. Chávez,

while, critics say, deflecting attention from domestic concerns like violent crime.

Alberto Garrido, a military analyst in Caracas, says Mr. Chávez is using the insurgency in Iraq as the inspiration for how he would fend off an attack by the United States, which Mr. Chávez says covets Venezuela's oil, the largest proven conventional reserves outside the Middle East.

"In Chávez's view, the regular forces aren't as important," Mr. Garrido said, citing public comments by Mr. Chávez. "By taking inspiration from Iraq, he considers the eventual fusion between civilian and military forces as the best method for striking back at an enemy with far superior firepower."

The training of civilians can be seen in communities throughout Venezuela most Saturday mornings, with official estimates of reservists at about 100,000. The reservists in Cúa, a city with 120,000 residents 24 miles south of Caracas, ranged in age from 18 to 74.

"Everyone here is a spirited volunteer with the objective of securing our country from attack," said Maj. José Ramón Graterol, who is in charge of training the reservists in Cúa on a cordoned-off section of asphalt in front of a social security office. Some of his charges wore military fatigues but most wore jeans or athletic wear.

Some were eager to voice support for Mr. Chávez's call to prepare for an invasion. But others said they were simply glad to get the small daily stipend, about \$7.40, for showing up to march and do calisthenics. María de Lourdes Martínez, 74, a retired shopkeeper, said she was also studying computer programming through Misión Robinson, one of Mr. Chávez's antipoverty programs. "That man has made my life a delight," Ms. Martínez said of Mr. Chávez.

While training for the reservists in Cúa consisted mostly of a march and some light-hearted orders to fall in formation, critics see the program as a way for Mr. Chávez to build a parallel force loyal to him outside the regular army, parts of which took part in the 2002 coup, while using the United States as a bogeyman.

"This is a peaceful country that hasn't experienced war for more than a century, so it's difficult to see Venezuelans fighting with the profound fanaticism witnessed in Iraq," said Fernando Ochoa, a former defense minister.

Still, Mr. Ochoa said the United States has at times sent troubling signals, like the recent deployment of 6,500 American military personnel for two months of naval exercises in the Caribbean.

Washington said the purpose of the deployment had been to focus on drug and migrant trafficking. But Mr. Chávez interpreted it as a threat.

Shortly after the naval exercise started in April, Mr. Chávez threatened to use the ultimate weapon at his disposal, Venezuela's oil reserves, explaining that he would take inspiration from Iraq and blow up the nation's oilfields to thwart an attack from the United States.

"The real reason for the open conflict," Mr. Chávez said, "is energy."

Indeed, Venezuela still ranks as the United States' third-largest supplier of oil, behind Canada and Mexico but ahead of Saudi Arabia and Nigeria.

"The irony of the present situation," said Mr. Garrido, the military analyst, "is that the United States is the principal financier of an increasingly creative movement against its authority in its own backyard."