

Aruba an uneasy neighbor as Venezuela builds forces

The Caribbean island of Aruba feels caught between two powers battling for ideological and possibly military control of the region.

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ORANJESTAD, Aruba - On a clear day, you can see all the way from the southern side of Aruba to Venezuela -- a fact that has rarely caused concern since the island became part of the Dutch kingdom in the 17th century.

But with a military buildup going on in Venezuela and U.S. warships recently engaged in large-scale exercises in nearby Caribbean waters, Aruba suddenly finds itself in the center of political tensions that some fear may turn into a military showdown.

"Little by little, we are more concerned," Agustin Vrolijk, Aruba's director of foreign affairs, told The Miami Herald.

He mentioned the recent purchases by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez of 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles, more than 30 Russian helicopters and the desire to manufacture Kalashnikovs to protect his country from a U.S. invasion -- a possibility that Washington has strongly denied.

"Is all this only for defensive purposes?" Vrolijk asked.

Vrolijk's concerns are partly allayed by a long history of good relations between Venezuela and the so-called ABC islands -- Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, all part of the kingdom of the Netherlands and protected by the Dutch armed forces. They have long maintained close commercial ties and have strategic partnerships to tackle issues such as drug trafficking.

There are many Venezuelans living on Aruba, and most islanders speak some Spanish. There is also a Valero refinery that processes Venezuelan oil for sale on the East Coast of the United States, and the Dutch oil giant Shell is expanding its reach into Venezuela.

"We know that Aruba poses no threat to Venezuela, and we don't believe that Venezuela poses a threat to Aruba," Hinkinus Nijenhuis, the Dutch ambassador to Venezuela, told The Miami Herald in an interview in Caracas.

The U.S. government also has interests in the islands, maintaining military facilities in both Aruba and neighboring Curacao. These facilities, known as Forward Operating Locations (FOL), support U.S. airplanes and occasionally ships that are fighting drug trafficking in the region. They are particularly useful because U.S. planes are no longer allowed to patrol in Venezuelan airspace.

RHETORIC IS FELT

Tensions between the islands and Venezuela appear to have grown as a result of the increasingly combative rhetoric between Washington and Caracas, and Venezuela's increased relations with its Caribbean neighbors. In addition to expanding relations with Cuba, Venezuela also has reached out to the rest of the islands with offers of discounted oil and refinery upgrades.

At the same time, Chávez has tried to isolate the U.S. government from the region, calling President Bush "Mr. Danger" and saying repeatedly that Washington has designs to invade his country or even assassinate him. With this in mind, Chávez has ramped up his defenses.

For Chávez, the Dutch islands, which lie between 16 and 30 miles off the Venezuelan coast, would feature prominently in such an invasion plan. On the ABC News program *Nightline* last year, Chávez told Ted Koppel that a war game developed in Spain in 2001 simulated this invasion; one of the launching points for this simulated attack was an FOL near the target.

The United States has denied Chávez's claims but at the same time flexed its military muscle in the region. In April, as part of a large exercise, the U.S. Navy sent the aircraft carrier George Washington to Aruba and to Curacao and St. Maarten, both part of the Netherlands Antilles.

"There's no other symbol of American power like the carrier that conveys our commitment to the region," Brig. Gen. Kenneth J. Glueck Jr., the Southern Command's chief of staff, told The Associated Press at the time.

A destroyer, frigate, cruiser and 60 airplanes joined the aircraft carrier in its tour through the Caribbean.

Tensions also rose after the Netherlands defense minister, Henk Kamp, told parliament in Amsterdam that Chávez had his sights set on the ABC islands. He added that there was little to fear because of Venezuela's "second class" navy.

Chávez, a former army colonel, responded by calling Kamp "a pawn of Washington."

The Dutch government moved quickly to calm the storm, saying Kemp did not convey its feelings toward Venezuela. The Dutch also hosted two Venezuelan military officers during a military exercise of their own and recently sent a high-level delegation to Venezuela.

TOO MUCH ADO?

U.S. analysts like Daniel Erikson of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington also downplay the recent rhetoric.

"This is very much the tempest in the teapot," Erikson said. "There is an unsettled climate around Venezuela's regional ambitions. . . . But while there might be a nervousness there, I just don't see Venezuela having any serious designs on the Netherlands Antilles."

On Aruba, a tranquil, arid island of 80,000 people with a soft breeze and light blue waters, the mood is hardly tense. Tourists escape the news with piña colodas and grilled fish, while locals mostly laugh at the likelihood that Chávez would want to take over their lands.

"We talk about it, but we don't think they'll invade," said Luis Yarzagaray, a former Dutch marine who is now a private security officer.