

U.S. Officials Say Venezuela Knew Military Equipment Was in Seized Cargo

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Aug. 27 — Venezuelan military and customs officials were notified of the military equipment contained in diplomatic baggage at the center of a dispute between Venezuela and the United States before its delivery here last week, officials at the American Embassy said Sunday.

Venezuelan authorities' seizure of the baggage, which included replacement fuses intended for ejector seats ordered by Venezuela's air force, set off accusations from Caracas and Washington that international law governing diplomatic baggage had been violated.

At the heart of the dispute are fears frequently expressed by Venezuelan officials that the United States is trying to foment opposition to the administration of President [Hugo Chávez](#).

Interior Minister Jesse Chacón Escamillo said Friday that the diplomatic shipment had been stopped because it had been smuggled past customs officials, and that it contained military equipment including detonators and rocket motors.

Ministry officials did not respond to requests for comment on Sunday.

The shipment was brought here on a C-17 military transport plane, and not aboard a civilian aircraft, because it contained fuses and other material for ejector seats that had been ordered by Venezuela's military mission at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, two American Embassy officials said. Each official asked not to be identified because of the heightened tension between the countries.

Although political relations between Venezuela and the United States are deteriorating and sales of military equipment to Venezuela by American companies have been banned since May, Venezuela still has a small mission at the base near Dayton and a larger mission, with about 20 military officials, in Miami. The United States has more than 20 military officials connected to its embassy here in Caracas.

The shipment of the ejector seat equipment was apparently allowed because the order had been placed before the ban on military-related sales. The American officials said a manifest listing the contents of the shipment was sent before its arrival last Wednesday to military and customs officials at Maiquetía airport near Caracas, and the baggage was cleared through customs and was en route to Caracas when it was intercepted by the Venezuelan military.

Venezuela's attorney general and National Assembly signaled that they intended to investigate the incident, though it was not clear what disciplinary action they could take, since the seizure involved diplomatic baggage.

Reports over the weekend in local news media aligned with Mr. Chávez's government called for close attention to the incident, asserting that the United States secretly brought military equipment into Chile in diplomatic baggage before the coup that toppled Salvador Allende in 1973.