

Rumsfeld: Venezuela build-up is concern

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua - Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld passed on an offer of Venezuelan tobacco, but tried to smoke out the government of President Hugo Chavez on the country's recent military buildup.

"I don't know of anyone threatening Venezuela, anyone in this hemisphere," said Rumsfeld, who is attending a meeting here of Western hemisphere military leaders - many of them concerned about the weapons, jets and helicopters Chavez is buying.

Other countries in the region are worried that the weapons could end up in the hands of terrorists, Rumsfeld told reporters Monday, adding, "I can understand neighbors being concerned."

While he raised questions about the buildup, he also exchanged greetings with Venezuelan defense minister Gen. Raul Isaias Baduel, who also is attending the meeting.

"I have spoken to Mr. Rumsfeld to convince him that he should try smoking Venezuela's good tobacco," Baduel told the Associated Press. "He said he doesn't smoke, that his wife wouldn't let him."

Baduel, who did not meet one-on-one with Rumsfeld, also said his country's recent military spending spree wasn't "an arms race," despite Washington's protests.

Rumsfeld also did not meet with Chavez, who has repeatedly charged that United States is planning to invade his country, a claim American officials dismiss as preposterous. And he said Sunday that he's heard the Bush administration is plotting to assassinate him or topple his regime.

U.S. Army Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, chief of U.S. Southern Command, called the accusation "mindless" and "way over the top." But he also agreed that Venezuela's recent deal to buy roughly \$3 billion worth of arms from Russia - including rifles, jet fighters and helicopters - is triggering "more concern from more countries."

Meanwhile, Craddock and other officials said Monday that they don't see a credible threat in Venezuela's call for the creation of an anti-U.S. military coalition with other leftist countries in the region. Craddock said Brazil's defense minister told the gathering he doesn't see a need for a regional military organization.

Gen. Moises Omar Hallesleven, the commander of the Nicaraguan military, told U.S. reporters he is not concerned about the Chavez effort.

Venezuela, he said through an interpreter, has very weak influence in the region. Hallesleven also vowed that as long as he is its leader, the Nicaraguan military will remain apolitical and professional - even if Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega wins the upcoming presidential election.

Chavez grabbed headlines recently when he called Bush "the devil" and slammed U.S. leaders for trying to block his country from taking a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

U.S. officials have long considered Chavez a destabilizing force. And they have suggested that Venezuela would make the Security Council unworkable if the nation were to win its bid against U.S.-backed Guatemala for a rotating council seat.

Rumsfeld, in his formal remarks to the gathering, also made a reference to the other main U.S. antagonist in the region: Cuba.

He said he hoped that one day soon "the final holdout in our hemisphere against the democratic sweep of history will give its citizens the right to choose their own destiny and will participate in our conference."

Rumsfeld also called for more regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

"These new challenges can be solved only if we work together to protect our free democratic institutions and to provide economic opportunities for our people," Rumsfeld said.

The military conference, along with a NATO defense ministers meeting and other military visits in the Balkans last week, have largely kept Rumsfeld out of Washington for the past week, where there is renewed debate on his stewardship of the Iraq war.

He said he will not resign, and told reporters he has not read, and likely won't read, the new book, "State of Denial" by Washington Post assistant managing editor Bob Woodward, that is critical of his stewardship of the war.