

Rumsfeld stays mum on Nicaragua politics

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua - Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld criticized Venezuela's hostile politics and longtime adversary Cuba but avoided any talk about another old antagonist, Nicaraguan presidential candidate Daniel Ortega.

"I don't get involved in politics in the United States," Rumsfeld told reporters Tuesday during a gathering of defense ministers from the Western Hemisphere. "So you can be certain I don't get involved in politics in Nicaragua."

In Caracas, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez took note of Rumsfeld's three-day visit to Central America by calling the American defense secretary a "dog of war" and saying that Rumsfeld had no business suggesting that neighboring countries are concerned about arms purchases by Venezuela.

Chavez called on Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to clarify whether he shares Rumsfeld's worries about Venezuela's acquisition of helicopters, fighter jets and assault rifles.

"If this man is saying that my neighbors are worried because the weapons that Venezuela is acquiring could go to the leftist guerrillas, I need to know, President Uribe, if you have some type of worry regarding this," Chavez said in a televised speech. "It should be you who says it, not the dog of war."

U.S. officials are watching Nicaragua's upcoming elections very closely, mindful that a win by Ortega, the leader of the Sandinistas, could be another destabilizing force in a region where democracy has slowly taken hold.

Ortega's socialist government was a major adversary of the United States in the 1980s. He led the overthrow of dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979 and fought the U.S.-backed Contra rebels as Nicaragua's president from 1985-1990.

Rumsfeld made a passing reference to Cuba in his formal remarks to the ministers, and on Tuesday he said the island nation would be welcome in the conference when it becomes a "free and democratic country."

However, Rumsfeld was blunt about the concerns being raised by Latin American leaders over Chavez' billion-dollar weapons buildup. He dismissed the claim that the arms were needed for defense.

"I don't know of anyone threatening Venezuela, anyone in this hemisphere," Rumsfeld said.

Chavez called Rumsfeld a "little dog" and "Mr. Dog" in his TV address. He grabbed headlines recently when he called President 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. 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 said it is important for the Central American countries to continue to work together on counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, natural disasters and other threats. But he agreed that as one country cracks down on drug trafficking, the problem may migrate to another country.

After meeting with Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos, Rumsfeld said he was pleased with the progress the Nicaraguans have made in their effort to destroy a cache of about 1,000 Soviet-era surface-to-air missiles. However, he noted that the job is not yet complete. U.S. officials have considered the missiles a potential threat to civil aviation.