

## **U.S. GENERAL SAYS CHÁVEZ WORRIES REGION**

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[Nicaragua](#), Oct. 2 — The commander of United States military activities in Latin America said Monday that [Venezuela](#) under President [Hugo Chávez](#) had become a destabilizing force, and that other countries in the Western hemisphere shared that concern.

The commander, Gen. Bantz J. Craddock of the Army, said, “What I have heard in the last few months is more concern by more countries” about an increase in Venezuela’s purchase of weapons, especially small arms.

United States officials said Venezuela had used its oil wealth to undermine democratic forces in other Latin American countries. “There’s a factor here that is destabilizing,” General Craddock said.

Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) and General Craddock were in Managua for a meeting of defense ministers from more than 30 countries in the hemisphere.

In recent months, Venezuela has bought AK-47 assault rifles and military helicopters from Russia and patrol boats from Spain.

General Craddock said he did not know the reason for the purchases. “I don’t have much military-to-military contact with Venezuela,” he said.

Asked about Venezuela’s recent call to form a military coalition in opposition to the United States, General Craddock said, “I don’t see any traction” for the proposal.

Delegates from Brazil and other countries said they “did not see a rationale or need” for such a coalition, General Craddock said.

On Sunday, President Chávez said he had received warnings that the United States might be plotting to assassinate him. General Craddock responded: “That’s mindless. That’s far out. It’s way over the top.”

One reason for United States concern about Mr. Chávez is that he is supporting Washington’s old cold war nemesis, Daniel Ortega, who is running for president

of Nicaragua. Public opinion polls suggest that Mr. Ortega could return to power after the election on Nov. 5.

The commander in chief of the Nicaraguan Army, Gen. Omar Haleslevens, said Monday that the army would remain apolitical, regardless of who won the election.

General Haleslevens told American officials and journalists that the Nicaraguan Army was determined to stay out of politics. "We have a professional army that follows the Constitution and the law and will not be used for political or partisan purposes," he said.

General Craddock said he believed the assurances from the Nicaraguan commander.

In 1989, Nicaragua's army had more than 73,000 men. "That was an army that was created for war," General Haleslevens said, noting that the army now has 11,000 men.

The president of Nicaragua, Enrique Bolaños, said that his nation has had extensive experience removing land mines left from its civil war and that it was eager to share its expertise with other countries, like Afghanistan and Iraq.

General Craddock welcomed the offer, saying, "That's a distinct possibility."