

Venezuela seeks defense missiles

Venezuela said it wants to obtain missiles to guard against attacks, which the United States insists it isn't planning.

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CARACAS - (AP) -- Venezuela plans to obtain air defense missiles to guard strategic sites such as oil refineries and major bridges against any air strike, a top military advisor to President Hugo Chávez said Tuesday.

Gen. Alberto Muller said Venezuela is looking to buy surface-to-air missile systems from Russia or another country to defend refineries, hydroelectric dams and "other strategic points in the country."

"They are for air defense," Muller told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "They are not for attacking anybody . . . We are not the United States of America. We don't have imperialist ambitions."

Chávez, a close ally of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, has repeatedly warned against a possible U.S. invasion. American officials insist they have no such plans, but Chávez insists Venezuelans must be ready just in case.

In Washington, designated Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte warned Tuesday that Chávez poses a threat to democracies in Latin America.

"I do not think he has been a constructive force in the hemisphere," he said.

Negroponte, a veteran career diplomat, has served as ambassador to Honduras and Mexico and most recently has been director of national intelligence.

Chávez said last August that Venezuela planned to install an advanced air-defense system with missiles capable of shooting down approaching enemy warplanes, and said his military was looking at systems produced by Russia, Belarus and Iran.

Russia's Interfax-Military News Agency reported Tuesday that between 10 and 12 Tor-M1 missile systems could be supplied to the South American country.

John Pike, a defense analyst at GlobalSecurity.org, a think tank based in Alexandria, Va., said Venezuela's neighbors should not be alarmed by Chávez's plans to obtain surface-to-air missiles because such systems usually have a limited range and are not meant for offensive purposes.

"Typically, a surface-to-air missile, if it's a fixed defense system, is going to have a range of several miles. It might have a range of a couple dozen miles, but that's about it," Pike said.