

Chavez touts new air-defense system

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez said Friday his government was planning to develop an advanced air-defense system and purchase other arms that would make Venezuela impregnable to attack.

The leftist leader, who has repeatedly accused the United States of planning to invade his oil-rich nation, said Venezuela had test fired missiles on Thursday but it was not clear what kind of projectiles he was referring to.

"We're going to have a tremendous air-defense system, and with missiles capable of reaching 200 kilometers (124 miles)," Chavez said during a televised speech. "(It) will convert Venezuela into a nation truly invulnerable to any external threat, invulnerable to any plan of aggression."

Chavez denied Venezuela was engaged in an arms buildup or posed a threat to regional stability as Washington has suggested, saying Venezuela was simply modernizing its military after years of neglect.

"They are necessary investments. We're not going to attack anybody," he said at the speech at a military academy in Caracas.

Chavez also announced spending of more than US\$561 million (euro411 million) for factories to build automatic AK-103 assault rifles, munitions, and detonators; a facility to train pilots to fly Russian M-17, M-26 and M-35 helicopters, and another facility to overhaul F-5 fighter jets.

Venezuela was considering building a plant to maintain Russian helicopters, he added.

The government has also approved funds to set up bases in preparation for the launch of Venezuela's "Simon Bolivar" satellite in Aug. 2008, Chavez said.

Chavez has mentioned some of the plans before but had provided few details.

He first mentioned installing an air-defense system with missiles capable of shooting down approaching enemy warplanes following a world tour last August, saying his military was looking at systems produced by Russia, Belarus and Iran. He did not specify Friday if Venezuela planned to purchase or develop its own system.

"The (U.S.) empire doesn't want use to be independent or to have the technology or to be able to develop," he said.

Washington has repeatedly denied it plans to invade Venezuela.