

Venezuela seizes 2.5 tons of cocaine

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Venezuelan authorities seized 2.5 tons of cocaine bound for Africa and arrested nine suspects including four federal police officers and a U.S. citizen, the military said Sunday.

Following an undercover operation, military intelligence agents seized the drugs Saturday at the airport on the tourist destination of Margarita Island, National Guard Cmdr. Marcos Rojas Figueroa said.

The alleged smugglers were preparing to load it onto a private plane bound for Sierra Leone, Rojas Figueroa told the state-run Bolivarian News Agency. He did not say how authorities knew the drugs were destined for the west African nation, a common way station for Colombian cocaine bound for Europe.

Four police officers who helped transport the cocaine to the airport tarmac were detained along with an airport security guard and four foreigners, including one U.S. citizen, two Mexicans and a Sierra Leone national, Rojas Figueroa said.

Venezuela is a major conduit for Colombian cocaine, and Washington has accused President Hugo Chavez of not doing enough to crack down on authorities who collaborate with traffickers.

Chavez, who says Venezuela is doing everything it can, vowed Sunday to send additional soldiers to the porous 1,400-mile border to crack down on Colombia's leftist rebels, right-wing paramilitaries and other groups involved in drug smuggling.

"I call for any subversive group to be neutralized," he said on his weekly "Hello President" broadcast.

Chavez also urged a small, pro-government Venezuelan militia accused of extorting and kidnapping cattle ranchers to disband.

"Nobody can be recognizing this Bolivarian Liberation Force," said Chavez, whose political movement is also named after independence hero Simon Bolivar. "If some of them are acting in good faith and are truly Bolivarians, then put down the weapons."