

Venezuela calls for leftist defense bloc

The Miami Herald
Jun. 07, 2007

CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez called for the creation of a common defense pact between Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia, while the leftist Latin American bloc announced the creation of a development bank to finance joint projects.

Chavez said Wednesday that the four-nation Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA, which began as a socialist-leaning trade group, should cooperate militarily to become more independent of U.S. influence.

"It seems to be the moment to establish a joint defense strategy," Chavez said. He called for joint military aid as well as intelligence and counterintelligence cooperation "to prepare our people for defense so that nobody makes any mistake with us."

Chavez denounced countries in the region that collaborate with the United States on defense and security through the Washington-based Inter-American Defense Board.

He said closer defense cooperation was necessary because of "the terrorism and permanent aggression of the United States."

The countries also signed an agreement to establish an ALBA development bank to finance joint projects. The bank will be active within two months, the Venezuelan government said. It did not give details on the new bank's funding.

Chavez ran through other accords being evaluated by the bloc in areas including tourism, mining, the environment, technology and energy. He also said that a permanent ALBA secretariat would soon be established.

ALBA began as an agreement between Chavez and his Cuban mentor, Fidel Castro, calling for cooperation based on socialist principles. Bolivia and Nicaragua later joined, and Ecuador is considering membership.