

Venezuela denies plan to buy Russia subs

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

The Venezuelan government has no immediate plans to buy Russian submarines, the defense minister told the state news agency Friday, denying a Russian newspaper report.

"The acquisition of those systems is not planned at this moment," Gen. Raul Baduel told the Bolivarian News Agency.

The Russian business daily Kommersant reported this week that Venezuelan President Chavez would sign an initial contract for five Project 636 Kilo-class diesel submarines during a visit to Moscow this month, with the possibility of Russia supplying four state-of-the-art Project 677 Amur submarines later.

Gen. Alberto Muller, a top military adviser to Chavez, said Thursday that the government was studying the possibility but that the money has not yet been set aside.

Oil-rich Venezuela has already purchased some \$3 billion worth of arms from Russia, including 53 military helicopters, 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, 24 SU-30 Sukhoi fighter jets and other weapons.

Washington, which calls Chavez a destabilizing threat to the region, has voiced concern about those deals.