

# Chavez: Venezuela to buy more tanks over US threat

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CARACAS, Venezuela: President Hugo Chavez said Wednesday his government will buy dozens of Russian tanks because Venezuela feels threatened by a pending deal for the U.S. military to increase its presence in neighboring Colombia.

Chavez announced the plan for to boost Venezuela's military while condemning Colombia's negotiations on an agreement to let U.S. forces use at least seven of its military bases.

"We're going to buy several battalions of Russian tanks," Chavez said at a news conference with international correspondents, saying the deal is among accords he hopes to conclude during a visit to Russia in September.

Chavez's government has already bought more than \$4 billion worth of Russian arms since 2005, including helicopters, fighter jets and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

The socialist leader called Colombia's plan to host more U.S. soldiers a "hostile act" and a "true threat" to Venezuela and its leftist allies. He warned that a possible U.S. military buildup could lead to the "start of a war in South America," but gave no indication that Venezuela's armed forces are mobilizing in preparation for any conflict.

Chavez is seeking to pressure Colombia to turn back on its base plan. He has threatened to cut back on trade between the two nations.

With tensions heightening over Colombia's plan to bring in more American troops to help with his fight against drug trafficking, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe set out on a regional tour this week to defend his plans.

"How many lies would he be telling today?" Chavez jibed as Uribe visited Chile. He called the Colombian leader a "puppet" of the United States.

Chavez also expressed frustration with President Barack Obama over the deal being negotiated with Colombia. He said the Obama he saw in Trinidad and Tobago earlier this year, when they shook hands and pledged better relations, "is disappearing. "

Colombian officials say they hope talks next week will produce an agreement that will give U.S. forces greater access to bases in Colombia. The 10-year lease agreement would not boost the presence of American troops and civilian military contractors above the 1,400 currently permitted by U.S. law, the Colombians say.

Chavez also dismissed Uribe's complaints about anti-tank rocket launchers that were sold to Venezuela in the 1980s and ended up in the hands of leftist rebels in Colombia, calling the accusations "trash" and saying they were timed to "blackmail" his government while trying to bring in more U.S. troops.

Chavez withdrew his ambassador to Colombia last week and threatened to sever diplomatic ties completely, freeze trade and expropriate Colombian-owned businesses if Uribe's government leveled any more accusations against his government. ....

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