

Colombia to Build New Military Base on Venezuelan Border

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BOGOTA: Colombia has announced it will build a new military base near its border with Venezuela, in a move likely to further strain its tense ties with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Defense Minister Gabriel Silva said Friday that the base, located on the Guajira peninsula near the city of Nazaret, would have up to 1,000 troops. Two air battalions would also be activated at other border areas.

"It is a strategic point from a defense point of view," Silva said.

The 1.5-million-dollar facility, paid for with Colombian tax funds, would also have a care facility for indigenous Wayuu people who live in the area, he added.

Army Commander General Oscar Gonzalez meanwhile announced Saturday that six air battalions were being activated, including two on the border with Venezuela.

Tensions between Venezuela and Colombia have been spurred by a US deal with Bogota allowing US forces to run anti-drug operations [sic] from Colombian bases.

Venezuela suspended diplomatic relations with Colombia on July 28 in response to the US-Colombian military base deal.

The agreement, signed on October 30, involves seven Colombian bases and sparked consternation throughout the region, particularly irking Caracas.

Venezuela shares a 2,000-kilometer (1,250-mile) border with Colombia and has denounced the deal, saying it poses a military threat to the sovereignty of Latin American countries.

In November Chavez called on his countrymen to "prepare for war" and Colombia's defense minister said Friday that "for the first time in decades, the defense ministry must study how to prepare to face a foreign threat."

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