

U.S. aircraft carriers head to Caribbean: Venezuelan President Chavez accuses US of planning an invasion

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U.S. aircraft carriers head to Caribbean

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ABOARD THE USS GEORGE WASHINGTON — An aircraft carrier strike group moved into the Caribbean this week to begin two months of naval exercises in what the U.S. military hopes will be a show of its commitment to the region.

The deployment by the USS George Washington group will also focus on threats such as drug and human trafficking, according to the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command, which oversees military activities in Latin America.

Brig. Gen. Kenneth J. Glueck Jr., the Southern Command's chief of staff, called the tour an "opportunity for us to touch base with our partner countries."

He added: "There's no other symbol of American power like the carrier."

Members of the strike group, led by the nearly 1,100-foot long Nimitz-class carrier, made their first port stops Monday and Tuesday. The USS Stout, a destroyer, stopped in Curacao, while the USS Underwood, a frigate, docked in Cartagena, Colombia.

The military has dismissed allegations by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez that it is planning an invasion of his country. But analysts say the show of force sends a signal to Chavez and other Latin American leaders about U.S. strength.

Although the group has no plans to dock in Venezuela, the U.S. ambassador in Caracas met Sunday with the head of the Southern Command, Gen. Bantz Craddock, aboard the George Washington.

Southern Command leaders were conducting a routine quarterly meeting, but the high interest from Venezuela in the deployment prompted the diplomatic participation, according to Southern Command Spokesman Jose Ruiz.

The carrier will arrive at its first stop in St. Maarten on Friday. Other countries on the tour

include Honduras, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Trinidad Tobago, Curacao, Aruba and St. Kitts.

Daniel Erikson, a Caribbean analyst for the Inter-American Dialogue policy institute, said many Latin American nations are concerned because the U.S. has threatened since 2002 to withdraw military aid from governments that do not sign an agreement pledging not to turn American citizens over to the International Criminal Court.

A number of Caribbean countries have not signed the waiver.

“Washington has been trying to figure out ways, without backing down, to show the U.S. is still willing to engage with allies in the region,” he said.

The deployment also sends a signal to China, which has invested heavily in Latin America, Erikson said, explaining that many Caribbean leaders “have been puzzled by what they see as Washington’s passivity” on China’s role in the area, Erikson said.

The Norfolk, Va.-based strike group also includes the USS Monterey, a cruiser, and a 60-plane air wing.

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