

Venezuela to Reinforce Troops on Colombia Border with Russian Tanks

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MEXICO — Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has announced plans for the deployment of new Russian-made tanks and combat helicopters on the border with Colombia.

Ties between Venezuela and Colombia deteriorated last August after Washington signed a deal with Bogota allowing U.S. forces to run anti-drug operations from Colombian bases. Chavez has criticized the deal and called for the Venezuelan people and army to prepare for a war.

"We are expecting the arrival of the first shipment of tanks [from Russia] which will be sent to Barracas [in the state of Barinas] to reinforce a motorized infantry brigade," Chavez said in his weekly TV program, Alo Presidente, on Sunday.

"In addition, attack helicopters arriving from Russia will be deployed along the Colombian border," he said.

Chavez secured a \$2.2 loan from Russia during his visit to Moscow last September for the purchase of 92 T-72 main battle tanks, an undisclosed number of Smerch multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), and a variety of air defense systems, including the advanced S-300 complexes.

Between 2005 and 2007, Moscow and Caracas signed 12 contracts worth more than \$4.4 billion to supply arms to Venezuela, including fighter jets, helicopters and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

Venezuelan military already has nearly 200 tanks, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, while Colombia has no tank units.

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