

Washington promotes Arms Race between Colombia and Venezuela

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Colombia Warns Of Arms Race With Venezuela

CARTAGENA – AFP Colombian President Alvaro Uribe warned April 6 of the “enormously damaging” effect of a potential regional arms race following Venezuela’s latest purchase of Russian weaponry.

Leftist Venezuelan firebrand President Hugo Chavez last week inked new deals with Russia’s visiting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who said later that the military sales may top \$5 billion.

Between 2005 and 2007 Venezuela also bought \$4.4 billion worth of Russian weapons, including Sukhoi jet fighters, combat helicopters and Kalashnikov automatic rifles.

“Colombia is a country that has faced the challenge of internal violence but does not participate in the arms race,” Uribe, a staunch U.S. ally, told reporters in the northern Caribbean port of Cartagena.

“We must meet our duties to fight terrorism, but we also believe that an arms race is enormously damaging.”

Bogota has accused Caracas several times of supporting leftist guerrillas with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), something that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has denied.

Venezuela, in turn, claims that a new agreement that allows the U.S. military access to Colombian bases represents a potential risk to his country, and “froze” relations with Bogota in July 2009.

The growing military cooperation between Russia and Venezuela, including joint navy exercises with Russian warships in the Caribbean in 2008, has raised worries in the United States that Moscow is encroaching on its traditional zone of influence.

U.S. officials on April 5 publicly worried that the arms may wind up elsewhere in Latin America.

“We’re hard-pressed to see what legitimate defense needs Venezuela has for the equipment,” said State Department spokesman Philip Crowley.

“Our primary concern is that if Venezuela’s going to increase its military hardware, we certainly don’t want to see this hardware migrate into other parts of the hemisphere,” he said.

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