

Venezuela's Chavez - US Orchestrated 911 Attacks

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CARACAS (Reuters) -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez asserted on Tuesday that the United States could have orchestrated the Sept. 11 attacks five years ago to justify its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Chavez, who regularly accuses the Bush administration of planning to invade Venezuela and plotting to overthrow or assassinate him, offered no evidence to support his assertions.

He claimed, however, that momentum was growing for a conspiracy theory aired on television this week by a Venezuelan journalist.

"It is still not clear what the cause was, nor who directed the terrible act that claimed thousands of lives in seconds and gave the American empire an excuse to hit out with more even brutality and fury at the world," the Venezuelan president said in a speech in Caracas.

"It is difficult to believe that the towers of the World Trade Center could have collapsed as they did, in the blink of an eye, because of the planes." Chavez suggested the towers could have been dynamited and noted that the wreckage of the plane that smashed into the Pentagon had not been recovered.

Conspiracy theories persist about the 2001 attacks by hijacked airliners, which killed nearly 3,000 people when they crashed into New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But no evidence has emerged to dispute the accepted version of events.

The US government says Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden masterminded the attacks and Al-Qaeda itself has claimed responsibility for them. The events of Sept. 11 were also filmed and photographed and seen live on television screens by millions across the world.

The leftist Venezuelan president regularly rails against the United States for sending its forces into Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the war on terrorism it unleashed after the attacks.

In Washington, a US State Department spokesman said he had no comment on Chavez's remarks, which were based on a TV program on Monday in which Venezuelan journalist Carlos Sicilia aired his theories on the attacks.

"The hypothesis that is gaining momentum, that Sicilia said last night could blow up soon, is that it was the imperial American power itself that planned and committed this terrible terrorist act to justify its acts of aggression," said Chavez.

With his confidence underpinned by an oil-fueled economic boom, Chavez has focused his foreign policy on creating what he calls a multipolar alliance of states to counterbalance the world's only superpower.

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