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Russian arms arrive in Venezuela

By Greg Morsbach
BBC News, Caracas

Venezuela has received its first delivery of tens of thousands of Russian assault rifles.

It is the first batch out of a total of 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles which Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has ordered from Moscow.



Moves by Mr Chavez to boost his armed forces have worried the US

Venezuela's military is undergoing a profound transformation, with a major recruitment drive and new technology.

The move is likely to worry the US, which regards Mr Chavez as a destabilising influence in the region.

Most defence experts agree that President Chavez needs to overhaul his outdated military hardware.

But the United States and Venezuela's neighbour Colombia regard the arrival of 33,000 Kalashnikov rifles as further proof that Mr Chavez is seeking to throw his weight around in the region.

The Russian-built AK103 rifles come complete with more than half a million rounds of ammunition, state-of-the-art night vision scopes and bayonets.

Another 70,000 rifles are expected to arrive before the end of the year.

But what worries Washington more are Venezuela's plans to build a factory here to assemble and export these Kalashnikov rifles along with bullets.

Mr Chavez's administration is now in talks with the Russian manufacturer which holds the licence to make the guns.

The US, which recently ordered a complete ban on arms sales to Venezuela, has accused of President Chavez of trying to destabilise Latin America.

But Venezuela insists it has a right to buy arms for defensive purposes.

President Chavez has repeatedly warned that the Bush administration was planning to invade Venezuela to get its hands on the country's oil resources.

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