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Russia offers Chavez \$1 billion for weapons

By Michael Schwartz

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MOSCOW: Russia will loan Venezuela \$1 billion for arms purchases and military development, a Kremlin spokesman said Friday, the second day of a visit here by President Hugo Chávez aimed at tightening a relationship that has caused increasing discomfort in the West.

Chávez, who is on his second visit to Russia in two months, met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Thursday, and on Friday traveled to the southern city of Orenburg near the border with Kazakhstan to meet with President Dmitri Medvedev.

A Kremlin statement released Thursday night said Putin and Chávez had spoken on enhancing economic cooperation and trade in commercial goods as well as military technologies.

The \$1 billion loan will help finance programs related to military-technical cooperation, the statement said. The Kremlin spokesman, who spoke anonymously under normal diplomatic ground rules, would not elaborate on the details of the deal.

Between 2005 and 2007 Venezuela has signed 12 contracts for weapons purchases from Russia for a total of more than \$4.4 billion, the Kremlin statement said.

The move is the latest gesture of military friendship between Russia and Venezuela, two countries that have increasingly positioned themselves as mavericks vis-à-vis the West. The Kremlin says its economic and political stability have allowed it to broaden the scope of its military and economic cooperation beyond what it calls its traditional sphere of influence.

Moscow is also frustrated with what it considers aggressive military posturing from the West, particularly the United States. Washington's plans to deploy elements of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as its support of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, have set Russia on edge.

In turn, Russia has sought to expand its military footprint in recent years, inching closer and closer to American shores. Russian bombers have flown sorties close to Alaska and its naval vessels have been pushing deeper into the Atlantic.

Latin America, and Venezuela in particular, has become a major theater for this expansion.

Earlier this month a pair of Russian Tu-160 long-range bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons received a warm welcome when they landed in Venezuela. Russia has also dispatched a squadron from its North Sea Fleet to the Caribbean to take part in joint naval exercises with the Venezuelan Navy sometime in November.

"Latin America, of course, is becoming an obvious link in the chain making up a multipolar world," Putin said during his meeting with Chávez. "We will allocate more and more attention to this vector of our economics and foreign policy."

Russia has already delivered Sukhoi Su-30 fighters, Mi-17 transport helicopters, and thousands of Kalashnikov assault rifles to Venezuela. There are also plans to build a factory in the country that will manufacture these weapons under license.

Ties between the two countries appear to have been strengthened following Russia's five-day war with Georgia last month, which caused relations between Moscow and the West to plummet to their lowest point since the Cold War.

At his meeting with Medvedev on Friday, Chávez expressed "firm support" for Russia's unilateral recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two Georgian separatist enclaves, Interfax reported. Only Nicaragua has officially followed Moscow's recognition, which prompted broad international criticism.

Chávez's remarks fell short of official recognition of the republics, despite speculation that he would use

his visit to offer it.

Correction:

Notes:



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