

Russian Sales to Caracas Worried U.S.

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The  Moscow Times

WASHINGTON — The United States tried to stop delivery of Russian anti-aircraft missiles to Venezuela in 2009 amid concerns that it could pass them on to Marxist guerrillas in Colombia or Mexican drug gangs, The Washington Post reported Sunday, citing diplomatic cables from WikiLeaks.

Venezuela, where President Hugo Chavez heads a strongly anti-U.S. government, received at least 1,800 of the SA-24 shoulder-fired missiles from Russia, the Post said, citing UN arms control data.

Secret U.S. cables said Washington was concerned about the acquisition by Caracas of Russian arms, including attack helicopters, Sukhoi fighter jets and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, the newspaper reported.

It quoted a U.S. State Department cable on Aug. 10, 2009, to embassies in Europe and South America as saying Russian arms sales to Venezuela totaled "over \$5 billion last year and growing." Concern about Spanish plans to sell aircraft and patrol boats to Venezuela were also cited in the cable.

Russia reported to the UN Register of Conventional Arms earlier this year the purchase totaled 1,800 missiles, the Post said. U.S. Air Force General Douglas Fraser said publicly this year Venezuela could be buying as many as 2,400 of the missiles, the newspaper said.

A missile expert at the Federation of American Scientists in Washington, Matt Schroeder, told the Post that the Russian missiles were among the world's most sophisticated and could bring down aircraft from 5,790 meters.

"It's the largest recorded transfer in the UN arms registry database in five years, at least. There's no state in Latin America of greater concern regarding leakage that has purchased so many missiles," Schroeder was quoted as saying, in an apparent reference to reports of Venezuelan arms flowing to Colombian guerrillas.

The UN database also showed that from 2006 through 2008, Russia delivered 472 missiles and launching mechanisms, 44 attack helicopters and 24 combat aircraft to the OPEC member and major oil exporter, the Post said.

It said the cables showed the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama both tried to stop the arms sales by suggesting to Russia the weapons could end up with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a rebel group that Colombian officials say has received material support from the Chavez government.

"In early March, Secretary Clinton raised the sale with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov," the August 2009 cable says, referring to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russia's foreign minister, according to the Post.

It reported that a Feb. 14, 2009, cable from Washington to Moscow said FARC computer files seized by Colombia's army showed Venezuela had tried to help with arms deals for the rebels.

It expressed concern that missiles acquired by the FARC, which is involved in drug trafficking, could end up in the hands of Mexican cartels that "are actively seeking to acquire powerful and highly sophisticated weapons."

Chavez and his government have consistently denied providing help to the FARC.

The August 2009 cable noted Russian ammunition sold to Venezuela was found in FARC hands and U.S. officials raised the issue with Russian diplomats in Washington, the Post reported.

It said an official at the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington said envoys there could not respond to the allegations by U.S. officials and that the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry did not respond to phone calls.

U.S. efforts to prevent the sales of arms by Russia and Spain to Venezuela appeared to strain ties with both countries, the Post reported.

It said an official in charge of disarmament issues at Russia's Foreign Ministry, Anatoly Antonov, told a U.S. Embassy official in Moscow in 2005 that Washington was trying to restrict Russian access to the arms market.

Spain went ahead with the sale of patrol ships and corvettes, but was blocked by Washington

from selling Caracas C-295 transport planes and patrol aircraft because they used sophisticated U.S. electronics, eliciting a complaint by Spain's foreign minister cited in a cable from the U.S. ambassador in January 2006, the Post said.

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