

Chavez: US is preparing an invasion of Libya to seize control of its oil reserves.

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Global Research, March 01, 2011

Associated Press 1 March 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [Oil and Energy](#), [US NATO War](#)
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Chavez says he won't condemn Libya's Gadhafi

, Associated Press - 1 hr 43 mins ago*

CARACAS, Venezuela - Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said Monday that he won't condemn Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and he warned that the United States is preparing an invasion of the North African country to seize control of its oil reserves.

"We must be prudent. We know what our political line is: We don't support invasions, or massacres, or anything like that no matter who does it. A campaign of lies is being spun together regarding Libya," said Chavez, in a televised speech to a crowd of graduates who had just received diplomas from state universities.

"I'm not going to condemn him (Gadhafi)," he said. "I'd be a coward to condemn someone who has been my friend."

The U.S. government is behind the campaign to remove Gadhafi, he added.

"The United States has already said it's ready to invade Libya, don't you see? And almost all the countries of Europe are condemning Libya ... What do they want. They are rubbing their hands together. Oil is what's important to them," he said.

Chavez noted that numerous countries have condemned Gadhafi for cracking down on Libyans who have risen up against him.

"Maybe they have information that we don't have," he said.

Chavez slammed the United States for moving naval and air forces closer to Libya amid active international discussions about imposing a no-fly zone over the country.

The U.S. has a regular military presence in the Mediterranean Sea, two aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf area and a wide range of surveillance equipment available for use in the region. Without specific information about what assets were being moved and where, it was impossible to tell whether the U.S. moves were intended as a military threat or were simply a symbolic show of force.

A flight ban seemed unlikely in the short term. Senior U.S. officials said the issue was not discussed during Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's meeting with Russian Foreign

Minister Sergey Lavrov, whose country would have to support such a move if the U.S. and its allies wanted authorization from the U.N. Security Council. Lavrov dismissed the idea in public remarks.

Chavez and Gadhafi, united in their mutual antagonism toward Washington, have forged close ties.

Venezuela's opposition has strongly criticized Chavez for his close relationship to Gadhafi. Earlier on Monday, a coalition of opposition parties warned that Chavez's failure to take a stand against Gadhafi's violent crackdown is smearing Venezuela's reputation.

"By distancing himself from the numerous nations that condemn the criminal actions of the Libyan leader, Chavez makes our country out to be his defender and irresponsibly puts us alongside governments rejected by the international community," the coalition said in a statement.

Opposition politician Gustavo Azocar demanded that Chavez ask Gadhafi to return a replica of a sword that once belonged to 19th-century independence hero Simon Bolivar.

Azocar said in an e-mail sent to The Associated Press on Monday that Venezuela's foreign minister, Nicolas Maduro, "should explain why the government gave the sword of the Liberator, Simon Bolivar, to an assassin like Gadhafi."

Chavez gave the sword to Gadhafi last year. The self-proclaimed socialist has scoffed at suggestions by his adversaries that protests similar to those sweeping the Middle East could occur in Venezuela.

Venezuela and Libya are both major oil exporters. ___ Associated Press writer Fabiola Sanchez in Caracas contributed to this report.

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