

On Venezuela's Doorstep: US proposes military test site in Suriname

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US proposes military test site in Suriname

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PARAMARIBO, Suriname: President Roland Venetiaan said Saturday after a meeting with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates that the US government has proposed to establish facilities in Suriname to test the performance of newly developed US military vehicles.

Gates met with Venetiaan and Suriname Defence Minister Ivan Fernald in Paramaribo at the close of his five-day, five country tour through Latin and South America. The US official's visit to Suriname coincided with the conclusion of the humanitarian mission of the US Navy hospital ship Comfort, which offered free medical and health care services to locals.

Venetiaan didn't disclose details of the proposed US military test site or when it could be feasible, but he mentioned that the government has been discussing this issue with Washington for a while. The president observed, however, that Suriname is willing to assist the US

"This is an issue we are discussing for some time now and it has been mentioned again by the Defense Secretary. We have the conditions and if vehicles could be tested in our conditions we are willing to assist, off course on basis of mutual benefit," said the president after the meeting with the Defense Secretary at the Presidential Palace.

Responding to questions from the local media, Gates said he did not discuss possible establishment of a US military air base in Suriname or elsewhere in the four other nations he previously visited during his tour.

"We have no interest in a base in Suriname. I know that there's been a good deal of speculation about the purpose of my trip to various countries in Latin America, and I can tell you that the subject of an American base did not come up at a single one of my stops," he said.

The US is in search of an alternative location to establish a small air base for counter-narcotics flights. It is likely that Ecuador will not renew the lease on a facility it hosts when the agreement expires in 2009. US officials are, however, hoping that Ecuador will change its position.

Besides the good relationship with the US, Venetiaan and Gates also discussed issues regarding Suriname's commitment to join the International Criminal Court (ICC). Venetiaan noted that his government is aiming at completion of the process to join the ICC next year.

"It all depends on the National Assembly and the United States if before that we sign an Article 58 bilateral agreement or not," said the president, hinting on bilateral agreements exempting US military and nationals from being handed over to the ICC for prosecution.

Venetiaan, in his meeting with the Defense Secretary, also queried whether Suriname could just join the ICC and receive a waiver without Congress ordering Washington to cut off all US military aid to the country.

According to Venetiaan, Gates noted the urge to strengthen military ties with Suriname, without putting forward "specific wishes". Venetiaan expressed his concerns regarding the global war on terror, since this issue is placing a financial burden on cash-strapped governments and small developing countries to comply with the constantly changing international standards regarding security.

Gates' visit will certainly improve relations with the US said the Head of State, since Suriname responded positively to entertain the Secretary of Defense and be part of the Comfort's mission.

The visit will also be regarded as a signal to the world and especially the region of the close ties between Washington and Paramaribo, although in several fields US policies are putting a strain on the economic performance of Suriname, for instance the vast subsidies of the US government to its agriculture sector.

Venetiaan also urged the US to do more in the fight against climate change, which is also affecting Suriname and the region. Suriname in this regard has contributed its part in declaring 160 million hectares of its rainforest a protected area, said Venetiaan.

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