

Venezuela accuses US of sponsoring plan to kill Chavez

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Caracas - The Venezuelan government on Thursday accused the United States of sponsoring a plan to assassinate President Hugo Chavez, hours after he ordered an investigation into a military conspiracy to overthrow him. Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro said Caracas had no doubt of Washington's involvement in the plot and would file formal complaints against the United States in international fora.

"As investigations move on we will get to see to what extent (the United States) was involved," Maduro said.

Late Wednesday, Venezuelan state television broadcast recordings of conversations between retired Venezuelan military officers who were allegedly discussing preparations for a coup d'etat.

Chavez immediately ordered Defence Minister General Gustavo Rangel to investigate.

"There is obviously a conspiracy here. We have been following this for a while now," Chavez told a television interviewer.

"We are going to take this plot against the life of the president to international institutions for the world to see the face, the plans and the testimonies of the Venezuelan extreme right, where there are retired military officers and a small group of active military officers, media and businessmen," Chavez said.

"The plan is to destroy the president's life and Venezuelan democracy," he added.

Foreign Minister Maduro stressed that the plot was not some abstract deal, and insisted it "has a name, a face, an identity."

"Let them not come forward and say they are being persecuted in Venezuela. This is very serious," he told reporters, referring to the Venezuelan opposition's complaints of government persecution.

The minister expressed confidence in the country's armed forces. "In any case, if there was a coup, the counter coup would be devastating, a revolutionary counter coup," Maduro said.

Relations between Washington and Caracas have been tense for years - Chavez is a vocal critic of US policies, and the US sees Venezuela as a country that promotes instability in the region.

This is not the first time that either Chavez or his government has accused the US of plotting to assassinate him. The US has consistently denied all the allegations.

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