

## Venezuela, Nicaragua Propose Joint Military Force for Latin America

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega proposed the formation of a joint military force among Latin American countries to defend against outside intervention yesterday. On his Sunday TV and radio show *Aló Presidente*, Chavez also promised to dramatically increase food production in Venezuela during the inauguration of a “socialist” corn-processing plant.

The Nicaraguan president, in Caracas for the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) Summit on Saturday, joined President Chavez on his TV and radio show on Sunday. The two leaders discussed the possibility of creating a joint military force among the member-nations of the ALBA block.

“The countries of Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela, and now Dominica should work to form a joint defense strategy and start joining our armed forces, air forces, armies, navies, National Guards, and intelligence forces,” said Chavez. “Because the enemy is the same, the empire.”

Chavez called on the defense ministers of each ALBA member-nation to begin preparation for an ALBA Defense Council “to unite our military forces and have the nations of ALBA united.”

“If [the United States] messes with one of us, they are messing with all of us, because we will respond as one,” he said.

The Venezuelan president suggested the idea after Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega assured that any aggression against Venezuela would be considered an attack on all of Latin America. President Ortega made the statement in light of the recent accusations by U.S. officials that Venezuela is a “threat” to the region.

“If they touch Venezuela, it will light up the region. No one is going to stand idly by, because to touch Venezuela is to touch all of Latin America,” said Ortega.

Chavez said that the idea of a joint defense strategy has already been proposed for the South American nations, and that President Lula of Brazil is in agreement.

“In December, Lula said here in Caracas that we are going to create the South American Defense Council. Okay, let’s create our ALBA Defense Council too, but not only a defense council, the ALBA military forces,” said Chavez.

The two leaders aired the program from the eastern state of Monagas, where they inaugurated a “socialist” corn-processing plant and spoke with local agricultural producers. President Chavez promised to raise food production in Venezuela to reduce dependence on imported food.

“We are determined to raise the agricultural production of the country,” he said. “It is a hard, intense campaign.”

Chavez announced that the Venezuelan Government approved a budget of \$600 million for the agricultural sector in 2008. He emphasized that these resources would be focused on improving infrastructure, irrigation systems, and the construction of basic services for the agricultural sector. He also announced the approval of \$10 billion in low-cost agricultural credits.

“The day will come that we will not have to import so much food,” said Chavez upon seeing the amount of land designated for the production of tomatoes and corn.

The two leaders inaugurated a “socialist” corn processing plant constructed as a part of an agreement for technology transfer between Iran and Venezuela.

This plant, with a capacity of 72 tons of corn daily, is one of several Iranian-equipped corn plants to be inaugurated around the country in 2008. The plants are called Socialist Production Firms because they are managed and operated by the communal councils in the surrounding community with support from the national government.

Apart from corn, this plant will also process and package other grains such as black beans and lentils. The plant is expected to create around 500 new jobs, with the incorporation of 97 graduates from the job-training program, Mission Che Guevara.

“It is a way for the government and the people to guarantee our food sovereignty for the first time in this country,” said one plant worker. “This plant will signify well-being for the people and we are going to all work together to carry out the production.”

The new plant will work to supply the surrounding regions with its production, starting by supplying local schools, soup kitchens, and the subsidized food markets known as “Mercal” stores.

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