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Chavez: Venezuela making drones, assembling rifles

CARACAS, Venezuela

President Hugo Chavez said Wednesday that Venezuela has begun to assemble Kalashnikov assault rifles with assistance from Russia and started producing surveillance drones.

Venezuela has spent billions of dollars for Russian arms and military aircraft since 2005, including 24 Sukhoi fighter jets, dozens of attack helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles.

"We are a free and independent country," Chavez said.

Army Gen. Julio Cesar Morales Prieto, president of Venezuela's state-run arms producer, said 3,000 AK-103 assault rifles have been assembled since Venezuela and Russia signed the 2005 agreement for the construction of a Kalashnikov assembly factory.

The factory has begun production, but construction of the facility has not yet been completed, Morales Prieto said.

The factory eventually will have the capacity to produce 25,000 rifles annually.

Chavez, a former paratroop commander, said that Venezuela has also started making grenades, ammunition and surveillance drones for its military. Three drones has been built so far, he said.

"We do not have any intentions of attacking anybody," he said. "These projects are for defense, for peace."

One of Latin America's most outspoken critics of U.S. President Barack Obama, Chavez has repeatedly warned that the United States could invade Venezuela to seize control of its immense oil reserves.

Chavez, whose anti-U.S. stance has been a defining feature of his 13-year presidency, has often used vehement condemnations of American "imperialism" to appeal his supporters' nationalist sentiments.

Chavez's political opponents have strongly criticized his government for spending billions of dollars to buy and produce weapons, saying the money should instead be used to build schools and infrastructure.