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## VENEZUELAN LEADER SEALS ARMS DEAL WITH MOSCOW

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has sealed a massive arms deal to buy Russian fighter jets, officials said Thursday, as he met with Russia's Vladimir Putin on a tour seen as a snub to the United States.

The two leaders focused on Russian energy investment in Venezuela and Venezuelan arms purchases from Russia at their Kremlin meeting.

"There has been extraordinary progress in our military technology cooperation. I want to thank President Putin for his strong support," Chavez said.

The head of Russia's arms export agency, Sergei Chemezov, told reporters after the meeting: "Some contracts for three billion dollars (2.4 billion euros) have been signed over the last year and a half" including "for 24 Sukhoi (fighter jets) and 53 helicopters."

Chavez said Russian weapons were badly needed by his country following a US government ban on sales by US defence contractors to Venezuela.

"We would like to thank you for freeing us from a blockade," Chavez told Putin.

"We were practically disarmed," Chavez said, referring to Venezuela's problems getting spare parts for its existing fleet of US-built F-16 fighter jets.

Putin sought to dispel concerns raised by the United States that Venezuela's arms purchases exceeded its defence needs and that weapons supplied by Russia could fall into the hands of guerrillas.

"The cooperation between Russia and Venezuela isn't aimed against anyone," Putin said.

Washington had called on Russia to reconsider the sale of the Su-30 fighter jets, which earlier reports said would amount to 30 such jets.

Putin also welcomed plans for Russian energy firms to develop energy deposits in

Venezuela.

Russia's No.1 oil producer Lukoil is carrying out exploration work in the Orinoco basin, while Gazprom has obtained licences to blocks in the Rafael Urdaneta gas field in the Gulf of Venezuela.

"Venezuela for us is a natural partner," Putin said. "These (reserves) represent colossal potential and I'm very happy that our companies are working to find joint solutions in the energy sector."

Chavez said Gazprom was expected to participate in a 20-billion-dollar project to build a gas pipeline between Venezuela and Argentina via Brazil.

Putin gave his backing to Venezuela's bid to join the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, something which Chavez's world tour is partly aimed at winning support for.

"We will support Venezuela's candidature to become a non-permanent member of the Security Council ... We are for a multipolar world," Putin said.

The Russian business daily Vedomosti said Thursday that Chavez was also planning to buy Russian Tor-M1 short-range surface-to-air missile systems designed to shoot down planes, helicopters and cruise missiles.

But Russia's defence ministry could not confirm the report.

Chavez's fourth visit to Russia is part of a tour seen by analysts as an attempt to bolster resistance against US influence. Later, after a visit to Qatar, he was set to visit Iran, regarded by Washington as part of an "axis of evil" in the world.

"The biggest threat in the world is the US empire," Chavez was quoted as saying by RIA-Novosti on Thursday while unveiling a bust of the 19th century South American independence hero Simon Bolivar at a Moscow library.

Already on his tour Chavez has met with two of Washington's arch-foes, Cuban leader Fidel Castro and President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus -- the latter country dubbed "the last dictatorship in Europe" by US officials.

Earlier this week the United States renewed its calls for Moscow to reconsider the sale of Su-30 fighter jets to Venezuela.

"We've repeatedly (told) the Russian government that the arms purchases planned by Venezuela exceeded its defensive needs and are not helpful in terms of regional stability," State Department spokesman Tom Casey said.