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Venezuela's Chavez aims to tap nuclear energy

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BY IAN JAMES
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

CARACAS, Venezuela -- Hugo Chavez wants to join the nuclear energy club and is looking to Russia for help in getting started.

The Venezuelan leader is already dismissing critics' concerns over his nuclear ambitions, offering assurances his aims are peaceful and that

Venezuela will simply be following in the footsteps of other South American nations using atomic energy.

Yet his project remains in its planning stages and still faces a host of practical hurdles, likely requiring billions of dollars, as well as technology and expertise that Venezuela lacks.

Russia has offered to help bridge that gap, and Chavez has announced that the two countries have created an atomic energy commission.

"I say it before the world: Venezuela is going to start the process of developing nuclear energy, but we're not going to make an atomic bomb, so don't be bothering us afterward ... (with) something like what they have against Iran," Chavez said Sunday.

The socialist president is closely allied with Iran and defends its nuclear program while the U.S. and other countries accuse Tehran of having a secret nuclear weapons program.

"We're going to develop nuclear energy with peaceful aims as Brazil, Argentina have," Chavez said.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly on Monday expressed misgivings about Venezuela's nuclear ambitions. Responding to a reporter's question about whether the United States would be worried about nuclear transfers between Iran and Venezuela, Kelly said: "The short answer is, to that, yes, we do have concerns."

Kelly noted that Venezuela is a signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which would restrict any nuclear program to nonmilitary purposes.

Some of Chavez's critics among American lawmakers are alarmed. U.S. Rep. Connie Mack urged the U.S. and its allies to "unite to prevent Chavez from gaining access to new nuclear technology." Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a fellow Florida Republican, said Russia's plans to sell Venezuela more arms, along with plans for nuclear cooperation, "create an eerie sense that the history of Iran's Russia-backed military and nuclear buildup is repeating itself almost identically in Venezuela."

Chavez said he discussed the nuclear issue last week with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during a visit to Moscow.

"Putin himself has said it: 'We're going to support Venezuela so that it has nuclear energy,'" Chavez said.

Sergei Novikov, a spokesman for Russian state nuclear agency Rosatom, said a framework agreement signed last year that pledges cooperation is "all there is for the moment."

"There are no concrete projects that have been worked out and agreed upon," Novikov told The Associated Press in Russia on Tuesday.

Any joint work on mining uranium or the radioactive metal thorium is likely "a long way" off at this point, Novikov said. He noted that Venezuela says it has deposits but needs to decide whether it wants Russian help exploring them and, if so, create a joint venture for the purpose.

If an agreement is reached for Russia to help Venezuela create a nuclear research center, Russian specialists would likely participate closely to ensure nuclear safety and security, he said.

A Venezuelan delegation visited Moscow last month, and discussed creating programs for training Venezuelan specialists in nuclear safety and in the use of reactors, the Russian nuclear agency said in a statement. It said they also discussed training Venezuelans on designing and building "a cyclotron or research reactor with the aim of producing radioisotopes for medical purposes."

Associated Press writers Steve Gutterman in Moscow; Foster Klug in Washington; Alan Clendenning in Sao Paulo; and Mayra Pertossi in Buenos Aires, Argentina, contributed to this report.

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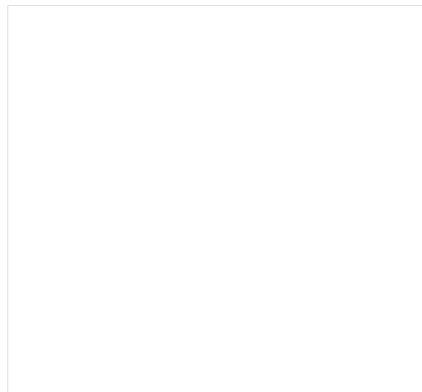
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