



JUAN BARRETO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Colombia to dismantle troubled intelligence agency

Hugh Bronstein

Reuters

Colombia's state intelligence agency will be dissolved, the Government said following a flood of scandals in which agents are accused of wire-tapping judges, reporters and opposition politicians. Former officials of the DAS agency are also being investigated for taking bribes in exchange for providing right-wing cocaine-funded paramilitaries with hit lists of union leaders and human rights activists. Agents are accused of continuing to listen in on the phone conversations of politicians, rights workers and journalists despite public outcry over the practice.

"The DAS will be dissolved in order to make way for a new civilian intelligence agency," DAS chief Felipe Munoz said in a statement posted on Colombia's presidential website. "A definitive change is needed," the statement said. The new agency will offer "absolute trust and transparency," it said. The move could help allay fears in Washington among Democratic lawmakers who have blocked a trade deal with Colombia based on accusations that President Alvaro Uribe has allowed local union leaders to be persecuted with impunity.

Mr Uribe, Washington's main ally in South America, said that the DAS should be dismantled and that the national police could take over many of its responsibilities. A bill will be presented to Congress next week proposing the end of the DAS and outlining the structure of the new intelligence agency, according to Mr Munoz's statement. More than 40 former DAS employees are being investigated over the telephone-bugging accusations.

Despite these and other scandals, Mr Uribe is seen as a hero to many for his crackdown on Marxist guerrillas. He may stand for an unprecedented third term next year if his supporters manage to amend the constitution to allow him to run. Margaret Sekagya, UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders, called on the DAS to stop its illegal monitoring of activists. She said the surveillance has been used to trump up false charges against rights workers, who are regularly accused by government officials of supporting the outlawed rebel army known as the FARC.

Paraguay rejects US military cooperation deal

The latest development resulting from renewed diplomatic pressure over US presence in the continent

Daniela Desantis

Reuters

Paraguay rejected a military cooperation agreement with the United States this month amid a growing diplomatic rift in South America over the presence of US troops in the region. Paraguay's socialist President Fernando Lugo said his government decided to halt a series of exercises between the Paraguayan and US militaries. Similar programmes have been carried out in the country in recent years.

"There would be about 500 US military and other personnel in the country and that wouldn't go unnoticed," Mr Lugo told reporters at a news conference. "It's neither prudent nor convenient at this time and could raise concerns among the other members of the Mercosur and Unasur," he said, referring to South America's trade bloc and political group of regional leaders.

The decision comes as South American countries step up arms

purchases and are divided over a US plan to relocate its hub for anti-narcotics operations in Latin America to Colombia, which would host US troops in seven military bases. Arms buildup is picking up in South America, where earlier this month Venezuela announced it secured over \$US2 billion in credit from Russia to fund the purchase of 92 tanks and an advanced S-300 missile defence system.

Brazil is planning a similar deal with France, while Ecuador and Chile recently beefed up their air forces with new equipment. Bolivia is planning to buy new combat planes and helicopters from France and Russia. "We regret the decision but we respect it," Lilia Ayala, the US Ambassador to Asuncion told a local radio station. Ms Ayala said the military programme aims to provide medical and dental health services to impoverished communities as well as training to Paraguay's military.

A similar programme implemented during Paraguay's previous



NORBERTO DUARTE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

South American countries are stepping up arms purchases, but Paraguay has decided to halt traditional military exercises with the US.

administration faced harsh criticism in the region, raising concerns about a possible US military base being established in the country. Still, Paraguay officials denied the announcement could raise tensions

with the United States. "We have an excellent bilateral agenda with the United States, with more than 30 agreements currently in place," said Hector Lacognate, the country's foreign minister.

Weapons put provocateur Chavez back in US spotlight

Frank Jack Daniel

Reuters

Fresh from a visit to Moscow, a gleeful Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez poured over diagrams and charts showing his latest arms purchases. "We're ready for you!" he warned on a TV show – a warning directed at the United States and Colombia.

Mr Chavez's growing armoury, including the advanced S-300 missile defence system along with 92 tanks he is buying from Russia, has put him back where he is happiest – challenging US power and ingratiating to his home crowd. Russia this month lent \$US2.2 billion for arms to Venezuela, where it has growing oil interests. It is not clear how much the latest weapons purchases cost.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accused Mr Chavez of fuelling an arms race in South America. Venezuela has some of the world's largest oil reserves, mainly close to the Orinoco River. Despite their mutual hostility, the United States is the OPEC country's main buyer.

Mr Chavez went ahead with the arms purchases despite a sharp drop in oil income that forced budget cuts earlier this year. Government TV stations, newspapers and websites echo Mr Chavez's warnings of an attack, which analysts say are



THOMAS COEX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

unfounded, but are fuelled by a new deal giving the United States more access to Colombian military bases.

"This is Chavez bluster but it's an upping of the ante," said Matt Gertken, a Latin America analyst with risk consultants Stratfor. "He is once again rhetorically raising the stakes and garnering a little more attention." On the world stage, Mr Chavez is committed to countering US foreign policy and longs to be a diplomatic heavyweight. While that status may be a long way off, his ever closer ties to Russia and Iran keep him on Washington's radar. Russia and Venezuela made it clear they will undermine new oil sanctions the United States may seek against

Iran over its nuclear programme. Washington is also unhappy about Mr Chavez's plans to develop nuclear energy with Russia, even though he vows never to seek an atomic bomb.

Low risk of war

Risks of war in the region remain low, analysts say, but the recent arms purchases only add to distrust in the Andes, where relations between Ecuador and Colombia are strained and Mr Chavez is winding down trade with Bogota.

In part, the regional tensions are linked to Washington's war on drugs, which has financed \$US6 billion in aid to Colombia to fight armed groups and cartels involved in the

cocaine trade. Last year, that war briefly spilled into Ecuador, sparking a crisis.

Venezuela objects to Colombia's security agreement with Washington that will allow US troops into more Colombian bases to help fight drug traffickers and guerrillas.

Colombia and the United States fear Venezuelan arms will find their way to Colombia's Marxist rebels, although Mr Chavez denies he has ever backed any armed movements.

South American economies grew rapidly in recent years on the back of a commodities boom, allowing the countries of the region to retool long-neglected armed forces.

Analysts say their real external threats are minimal, but some spending is justified by the need to control territory from drug traffickers and insurgent groups.

Venezuela had an added need to replace equipment because its former main arms supplier, the United States, refuses to sell spares for equipment it sold to previous governments.

"Since 1998, when things began souring between the US and Venezuela, Caracas has required modernisation of its fleet," said Eduardo Gamarra of the Florida International University.

Venezuela's arms spending as a share of domestic product is on a par with Brazil and well below Chile and Colombia.