

Russian army helping Venezuela amid US 'threats' — Moscow ambassador

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MOSCOW, Russia (AFP) — Russian troops in Venezuela are helping President Nicolas Maduro's embattled regime prepare in the face of the "threat of the use of force" by the US, Moscow's ambassador to Caracas told AFP Friday.

A key Maduro ally, Moscow deployed around 100 soldiers in March to bolster the Caracas regime that has faced a growing crisis since opposition leader Juan Guaido proclaimed himself acting president and is now recognised by dozens of countries including the US.

The move ratcheted up already high tensions between Washington and Moscow, with US President Donald Trump calling for Russia to "get out" of the South American country.

"The Venezuelan government has been in a state of anxious anticipation since the US has repeatedly threatened to use force against the country," Russian ambassador Vladimir Zaemsky told AFP in an interview in Moscow.

"In these conditions they need to be sure that the weapons they have are in a functioning state," he said.

Russian military experts, Zaemsky said, are there to train the Venezuelans "in maintaining combat readiness of their equipment and teach them how best to use it."

They are legally allowed to be there under an agreement signed between the two countries in 2001, he said.

But the Russian diplomat said he nonetheless believed in a peaceful way of resolving the crisis, through "dialogue and the search for compromise".

He said Moscow welcomed mediation efforts undertaken by Norway, where both the Maduro regime and the opposition sent delegations.

"It is very good that these talks are taking place," Zaemsky said.

But he blamed US-backed Guaido and an opposition "influenced by radicals" for stalling the dialogue in Venezuela.

Washington has given full throated backing to Guaido, who tried but ultimately failed to ignite an anti-Maduro military uprising.

"It looks like American strategists hoped that the regime change efforts would bring quick successes," said Zaemsky. "Clearly the lack of success has caused some irritation and they looked for who to blame"

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