

Russian nuclear-capable bomber aircraft fly to Venezuela, angering U.S.

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MOSCOW (Reuters) - Two Russian strategic bomber aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons have landed in ally Venezuela, a show of support for Venezuela's socialist government that has infuriated Washington.

Four Russian military aircrafts, including two Tu-160 (Blackjack) bombers, one An-124 (Condor) heavy-lift cargo airplane and an IL-62 (Classic) passenger aircraft are seen in this DigitalGlobe satellite image at Simon Bolivar Airport in Maiquetia, Vargas, located about 21 kilometres from downtown Caracas, Venezuela in this December 10, 2018 image released on December 11, 2018. Courtesy Satellite image ©2018DigitalGlobe, a Maxar company/Handout via REUTERS

The TU-160 supersonic bombers, known as "White Swans" by Russian pilots, landed at Maiquetia airport near capital Caracas on Monday after covering more than 10,000 km (6,200 miles), the Russian and Venezuelan governments said.

Their deployment came days after Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whose left-wing administration is the most significant U.S. foe in Latin America, held talks with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

As OPEC member Venezuela's socialist-run economy implodes, Russia has become a key lender of last resort, investing in its oil industry and providing support to its military.

Capable of carrying short-range nuclear missiles, the planes can fly over 12,000 km (7,500 miles) without re-fuelling and have landed in Venezuela twice before in the last decade.

"Russia's government has sent bombers halfway around the world to Venezuela," fumed U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Twitter.

"The Russian and Venezuelan people should see this for what it is: two corrupt governments squandering public funds, and squelching liberty and freedom while their people suffer."

'HIGHLY UNDIPLOMATIC'

The Kremlin on Tuesday rejected Pompeo's criticism, saying it was "highly undiplomatic" and "completely inappropriate."

“As for the idea that we are squandering money, we do not agree. It’s not really appropriate for a country half of whose defense budget could feed the whole of Africa to be making such statements,” spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Russia’s Defence Ministry, which said the bombers had been accompanied by two other Russian military planes, did not say if the planes were carrying missiles, how long they would stay for, or what their mission was.

Russia has used them in the past to flex its military muscles under the nose of the United States, delighting Venezuelan officials who have cast such flights as evidence it is able to defend itself, with allies’ help, from any attack.

Maduro frequently invokes the possibility of a U.S. invasion in the South American nation, a notion U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration denies.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza called Pompeo’s comments “not only disrespectful, but cynical,” highlighting the number of military bases the United States owns abroad.

U.S. Senate rebukes Saudi Arabia - and Trump

“It’s strange the U.S. government questions our right to cooperate on defense and security with other countries, when @realDonaldTrump publicly threatens us with a military invasion,” Arreaza tweeted, referring to Trump’s Twitter handle.

Venezuela’s Information Ministry did not respond to a request for details on the bombers.

Maduro said the talks with Putin in Moscow this month yielded Russian investment in Venezuela’s oil and gold sectors.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told his Venezuelan counterpart at the time that such long-range flights provided pilots with excellent experience and helped maintain the planes’ combat readiness.

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