



Breaking down the U.S. military buildup near Venezuela amid strikes on alleged drug boats

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U.S. sending aircraft carrier strike group to Latin America in major buildup

By [Eleanor Watson](#), [Melissa Quinn](#)

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Washington — The Pentagon said Friday that the U.S. is sending an aircraft carrier strike group to the waters off Latin America, an escalation that will dramatically increase the number of service members and ships dedicated to the Trump administration's campaign to counter narcotics traffickers.

Sean Parnell, a Pentagon spokesman, said on X that Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth "has directed the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group and embarked carrier air wing to the U.S. Southern Command" area of responsibility. Southern Command is responsible for the Caribbean Sea, Central and South America and the surrounding waters.

Parnell said the "enhanced U.S. force presence" will "bolster U.S. capacity to detect, monitor, and disrupt illicit actors and activities that compromise the safety and prosperity of the United States homeland and our security in the Western Hemisphere."

The USS Gerald R. Ford is the Navy's newest and most advanced aircraft carrier, having been commissioned into service in 2017. At more than 1,100 ft. long with a displacement of 100,000 long tons, the carrier is the largest in the world. It's powered by two nuclear reactors and can reach a top speed of 34.5 mph, according to the Navy.

The carrier group will join eight U.S. vessels that are already in the region, including three destroyers, one cruiser, a littoral combat ship, an amphibious assault ship and

two transport ships.

The Ford is currently in the Mediterranean Sea, a defense official told CBS News, along with three destroyers.



The USS Gerald R. Ford in Newport News, Virginia, on April 8, 2017.

Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ridge Leoni/U.S. Navy via Getty Images

News of the decision to send the carrier group to Latin America comes after the U.S. launched another strike on a vessel allegedly operated by the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua that Hegseth said was trafficking drugs in the Caribbean Sea.

The secretary said on X that the strike killed all six men who were on board, and took place in international waters. He said it was the first strike to take place at night.

"The vessel was known by our intelligence to be involved in illicit narcotics smuggling, was transiting along a known narco-trafficking route, and carrying narcotics," he wrote. Hegseth posted a video, marked unclassified, showing the vessel as it was hit.

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This latest strike appears to be the 10th carried out by the Trump administration against alleged drug trafficking boats over the past several weeks, which have now led to more than 40 deaths. The first several took place in the Caribbean Sea, but this week, the administration's campaign broadened into the Pacific Ocean.

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