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U.S., Poland Sign Missile Pact

Russia Issues New Warning, Threats

By Vanessa Gera and Monika Scislowska The Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — The United States and Poland signed a deal Wednesday to place a U.S. missile defense base 115 miles from Russia — a move followed swiftly by a new warning from Moscow of a possible military response.

For many Poles — whose country has been a staunch U.S. ally in Iraq and Afghanistan — the accord represented what they believed would be a guarantee of safety for themselves in the face of a newly assertive Russia.

Negotiators sealed the deal last week against a backdrop of Russian military action in Georgia, a former Soviet republic turned U.S. ally, that has worried former Soviet satellites across eastern Europe. It prompted Moscow's sharpest rhetoric yet over the system, which it contends is aimed at Russia despite Washington's insistence that the site is purely defensive.

After Wednesday's signing, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice dismissed any suggestion that the 10 missile defense interceptors — which Washington says are intended to defend Europe and the U.S. from the possible threat of long-distance missiles from Iran — represent a threat to Russia.

"Missile defense, of course, is aimed at no one," Rice said. "It is in our defense that we do this."

She denounced an earlier threat from a Russian general to target NATO member Poland, possibly even with nuclear weapons, for accepting the facility.

Such comments "border on the bizarre, frankly," Rice told reporters in Warsaw. "The Russians are losing their credibility," she said, adding that Moscow would pay a price for its actions in Georgia, though she did not specify how.

"It's also the case that when you threaten Poland, you perhaps forget that it is not 1988," Rice said. "It's 2008 and the United States has a ... firm treaty guarantee to defend Poland's territory as if it was the territory of the United States. So it's probably not wise to throw these threats around."

Hours after the signing, Russia's Foreign Ministry warned that Moscow's response would go beyond diplomacy. The system to be based in Poland lacks "any target other than Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles," it said in a statement, contending that the U.S. system "will be broadened and modernized."

"In this case, Russia will be forced to react, and not only through diplomatic" channels, it said without elaborating.