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# INTERVIEW-Poland expects Patriot in 09, US 'yes' to shield

Mon May 18, 2009 7:38am EDT

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WARSAW, May 18 (Reuters) - Poland expects a U.S. Patriot battery to be deployed on its soil in 2009 regardless of whether President Barack Obama opts to press ahead with missile defence plans in Europe, a senior defence official said on Monday.

NATO member Poland agreed last year to host 10 interceptors as part of a planned U.S. missile defence shield which is strongly opposed by Russia. In return, Washington pledged to help update Poland's air defences with, among others, a Patriot battery.

"We expect the Patriot battery to be deployed on Polish soil by the end of 2009, as initially agreed with the Americans. This is important for Polish public opinion," Deputy Defence Minister Stanislaw Komorowski told Reuters.

"Regardless of the decision (on missile defence), President Obama has said other cooperation with Poland, including strategic projects such as modernisation of our armed forces, will definitely be continued," Komorowski said in an interview.

Obama's administration is reviewing the missile shield project for cost effectiveness and viability, though the president said during a visit to Prague last month that Washington would continue to research and develop the plans.

Poland sees the Patriot battery as an important symbol of the U.S. commitment to its defence at a time when Russia is becoming more assertive again in foreign and security policy.

Under the Patriot deal, the battery -- armed with about 100 missiles -- would be based in Poland for a short period each year in 2009, 2010 and 2011 "providing an opportunity for training up our soldiers and our systems". From 2012, Komorowski said, a U.S. Patriot battery would be permanently based.

"At present, we cannot afford to buy Patriot batteries because of budget constraints but by 2013 we will consider starting to acquire that kind of theatre missile defence system for our armed forces," he said.

## SECURITY WORRIES

Moscow opposes the U.S. missile shield project as a direct threat to its own security and has threatened to station missiles near the Polish border if the project goes ahead.

Warsaw has been urging NATO, whose forces are battling Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, not to neglect potential security threats closer to home in Europe and has expressed its willingness to host alliance infrastructure.

"The more installations you have on your soil the easier, and also the more strategically important, it becomes to defend that territory. So more NATO installations on Polish territory would help to make us feel more secure," said Komorowski.

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Talks with the United States aimed at providing a legal base for deployment of U.S. forces in Poland should be wrapped up by the end of July, he said, paving the way for both the Patriot battery and -- if approved by Obama -- the missile shield.

Poland favours a strong dialogue with Russia but this does not mean ignoring its "wrongdoings" in places such as Georgia, he said, referring to last summer's conflict and Moscow's unilateral recognition of two breakaway Georgian provinces.

Washington insists the shield is directed not against Russia but against Iran, which the West accuses of trying to build nuclear weapons. Tehran rejects those claims.

Poland expects Obama to press ahead with missile defence after completing the review of the project, Komorowski said.

"We undoubtedly expect a clear 'yes' from the American side, it is just a matter of time... because there is no reason to think the threat from Iran has grown smaller since last year," Komorowski said. (Editing by Robert Woodward)

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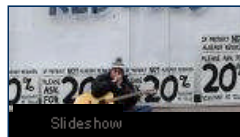
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