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U.S. Pressure to Consolidate Militaries

by LADB Staff

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Central American politicians have begun to respond to a U.S. call for reduction and reorganization of the region's military forces as "interference." In El Salvador, where emotions in some sectors are still raw over what is seen as an intrusion into their democratic processes on the part of outgoing US Ambassador Rose Likens, legislators and others now say that statements decrying the value of the region's militaries from US Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Daniel Fisk are just one more incident of meddling in their affairs.

Fisk publicly recommended from Washington, while CAFTA negotiations were going on in Honduras, that the countries sign a nonaggression pact and undertake a profound reform of their armies. The media and analysts duly noted the timing. For Salvadorans, Fisk's comments come not only when Likens was signaling her country's displeasure at the prospect of a Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) victory in the 2004 presidential elections, but also while the leftist party was making a major push to line up the support of current and former military personnel for its campaign and had made its effort to gain that support a centerpiece of its recent public discourse.

David Munguia Payes, a former colonel and key figure in the FMLN's outreach to the army, departed from his party's most recent attempts at appeasement with Washington to issue a harsh analysis of the US military role in the world, recommending the US reduce its arsenals before "they come to us with prescriptions, failing to recognize that in this country there already is a treaty, where measures of confidence have been established with the armed forces, which guarantee peace and stability in the isthmus."

Regional papers report that the US is seeking to create a regional army under UN mandate that will function in accordance with US interests. Munguia took a dim view of the idea. "I believe that our own army has to guarantee our security," he said. "We're not going to expect that others might come to do it." The former soldier looked back at his nation's history to recall that it was the US that built up these militaries when they were concerned with the communist menace, and, now that their menace of choice has changed to "terrorism, narcotraffic, arms traffic, and immigrants," they want to retool the region's security forces to reflect those concerns. He also emphasized that El Salvador's army has halved in size since the end of the US fueled war (1980-1992). Irritation with the US proposal did not appear to be a partisan issue.

Gerardo Suvillaga, deputy of the ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), said that Fisk's statements were not relevant to El Salvador because the armed forces there have been functioning with the same budget since it was reduced in size following the war. "What's more," he said, "it has been decreasing. The armed forces are used more than anything to attend to natural disasters, anti-terrorist projects, and national emergencies."

From the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PNC) came the statement, "Washington fomented militarism and now brings a counterorder." The party called the Fisk statement "contradictory." Similar statements were issued by the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) and the Centro Democrático, whose spokesman, Deputy Jorge Villacorta, scolded, "The United States ought to respect each country's own [way of doing] things." Col. Munguia's statements notwithstanding, the FMLN was alone in not taking a firm position on the military issue. The party is deeply involved in attempting to allay US fear of its probable victory in the 2004 elections and has sent delegations to the US to explain its plans for governance.

Julio Hernandez of the FMLN's Comision Política, however, defended the army's role in the country's development. He pointed out that the Salvadoran army has been exemplary in the region in adapting to the demands of a democratic society and to the real needs of the country. "It seems important to us," he said, "that we can succeed in having the armed forces in peacetime play an important role in the country's development, and that it continue to professionalize. It also seems to us that the militaries ought to have an opportunity to have civilian professions."

Part of Fisk's concern in seeking international supervision of the local armies was the "excessive" inventories of armaments, especially surface-to-air missiles, which, he said, could fall into the hands of "international mafias" and "terrorists." The most likely reference was to Nicaragua, where the army has a stash of SAM 7 missiles left over from the US- created contra war (1981-1990).

A spokesperson for the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry said that the ministry had received no formal notification from Washington about the concern, or about any nonaggression pact, but Deputy Jose Figueroa, first secretary of the Comision de Gobernacion y Defensa del Parlamento, said that the call for the pact made "no political sense."

Maj. Alvaro Ibarra Castellon, Nicaraguan army public- relations chief, said, "Everything relating to armaments and to Central American armed forces is a subject that is within the framework of the rational balance of military and security forces [among the countries]. A few days ago, the chiefs of the Central American armies, in a meeting of the Consejo Superior de la Conferencia de las Fuerzas Armadas Centroamericanas (CFAC), talked about this subject, and that is the forum where these matters will continue to be discussed."

Nicaragua's Vice Minister of Foreign Relations Salvador Stadhagen acknowledged the US has an interest in seeing a "rationalization" of the region's forces, as do other developed nations and donor nations. But, he said, there already exists a Tratado Marco de Seguridad Democrática (TMSD), a treaty signed in 1996, to discuss the evolution of security in the region. Referring to the Sam 7 issue, he said that Nicaragua has "neither included nor excluded any type of armament" in the proposal for gradual disarmament that is scheduled to come up soon in the region. "In the rational balance of forces, all the elements have been taken into account, both arms and personnel, but there have already been considerable reductions on Nicaragua's part," said Stadhagen. He said that the proposal that Nicaragua will present to the regional treaty negotiation on July 12 "is nothing extraordinary, but is contemplated in the Tratado Marco de Seguridad Democrática."

For these reasons, both Stadhagen and Minister of Defense Jose Adan Guerra have said that, because Nicaragua is a signatory to the TMSD, which guarantees regional peace, the nonaggression pact suggested by Fisk would be redundant.

But retired Gen. Hugo Torres had a view that might be more reflective of the military view. He said that pressure from the State Department had no purpose other than the imposition of a world order under its power. "It has to be clear that the US wants to impose its new world order, its doctrine, a policy that intrudes on the sovereignty of other states and that it seeks to implement despite anything. This is an inescapable reality," said the defense minister.

A possible misdirect and blowback

There have been indications that the Fisk statement might not have originated with the State Department, however. The Salvadoran daily *El Diario de Hoy* reported that two Central American presidents were behind the scheme to reconfigure the regional military presence: Ricardo Maduro of Honduras and Francisco Flores of El Salvador. The paper said they had discussed it privately during a meeting in Costa Rica. The two drew up a document outlining the plan that they then circulated among the executive branches of the other governments of the isthmus. George W. Bush was also involved. The plan then blew back through Fisk.

It was Maduro's and Flores' idea to have it announced during the CAFTA negotiation. The strategy was to take advantage of the obligatory economic integration upon which CAFTA is based to force regional military integration and possible reductions in military spending in return for increased aid from the US and possibly from Europe. President Enrique Bolanos of Nicaragua is also reportedly in favor of the plan. His country has earned a reputation as a major supply depot for clandestine arms throughout Latin America and in particular for guerilla forces in Colombia.

Guatemala is expected to be the weak link in the chain. President Alfonso Portillo is in no position to be ordering the Guatemalan military about, and the army has demonstrated its power to influence politics and judicial matters almost at will. A more likely scenario for that country would have the military giving orders to the president. Analysts also conclude that Costa Rica might balk at the idea. President Abel Pacheco is enmeshed in domestic issues, and appears to have nothing to gain as president of a country that has no army.

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