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Regional Conflicts Over Troops to Iraq

by LADB Staff

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With the intention of lengthening the list of countries contributing troops to the post-war situation in Iraq, Spain has signed up El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic in its Brigada Multinacional Plus Ultra. The plan would put 1,200 or more of the region's troops under Spanish command. Early plans called for a mission that concentrates on peacekeeping, minesweeping, and medical services, with an emphasis on keeping the troops away from direct contact with Iraqi resistance forces. The deployment is expected to last about a year, with the US and others picking up the tab.

Honduras intends to send 370 troops, sometime in August. Defense Minister Federico Breve said, "We are not going to confront Iraqi troops, the motive of our mission is simply to contribute to the re-establishment of order in that country." The contingent will be composed of 40 officers, 22 noncommissioned officers, 21 technicians, and 287 soldiers, under the command of Col. Carlos Andino Cobos. Of these, 110 are land-mine specialists. They have, during the past eight years, deactivated 24,000 mines and other explosive ordnance left in Honduras after the Nicaraguan contra war.

Most members of the Fuerza de Tarea Xatruch, as the contingent is called, have been deployed to peace missions in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the Western Sahara. The Honduran legislature narrowly approved the deployment on May 29, at the request of President Ricardo Maduro. Only 66 of 128 deputies in the congress voted for it, 61 from the governing Partido Nacional (PL), four from the Partido Demócrata Cristiano de Honduras (PDCH), and one dissident from the leftist Partido de Unificación Democrática (PUD).

Dominican Republic and Nicaragua approve despite opposition

The Dominican Republic's 300-person contribution to the post-war effort has been mired in politics. President Hipolito Mejia unilaterally agreed to the deployment without consulting the Congreso Nacional, touching off a constitutional battle. Mejia infuriated deputies when he responded to questions about the issue saying, "I've already made my decision." He told reporters, "It's already approved by the president. Do you think the Congress won't pass it if we order it?" Opposition Deputy Pelegrin Castillo took that to mean, "He believes he is above the Constitution. We cannot permit, in principle, that they be sent without congressional approval."

Enriquillo Reyes, president of the Comisión de Justicia of the Senate, who affirmed that Mejia could not constitutionally send troops without congressional authorization, seconded Castillo. Mejia's party, the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), has 29 of the 32 seats in the Senate, and 73 of 150 seats in the lower house. With congressional disapproval improbable, Castillo announced that he was taking the issue to the Suprema Corte de Justicia (SCJ). "This man has to remember that there is a Constitution," he said. Castillo also wants to have adjudicated his view that the

deployment violates the Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Reciproca (TIAR), an agreement of the Organization of American States (OAS). Castillo contends that the only way the country can legally participate in the reconstruction of Iraq is by UN mandate, and the UN has issued no such mandate.

Nor was it smooth sailing in Nicaragua for a presidential intention to send troops. President Enrique Bolanos, more mindful of constitutional requirements than his Dominican counterpart, sent the Asamblea Nacional (AN) an urgent request for approval of his executive decree ordering 230 officers and soldiers to Iraq. Deputy Jose Figueroa, vice president of the Comision de Defensa y Gobernacion, took the president to task for the request, predicting that the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) would reject it and holding Bolanos responsible, in advance, for the deaths of Nicaraguan soldiers in Iraq. "It is a highly irresponsible attitude to order Nicaraguan soldiers to run these risks, and we are warning that from now on that we will hold the government of Nicaragua responsible if one soldier comes back dead," said Figueroa.

The response from Bolanos' own party, the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), was not unequivocally supportive. For them, money talks: "Our support depends on the economic factor. Who is going to pay the costs, insurance, and travel expenses? Let's remember that these people can't take the equipment donated by the OAS, so who is going to give all the equipment for de-mining? If the army tells us that there is already an arrangement between Nicaragua and the US, and that everything is covered, there won't be any objection," said Enrique Quinonez, head of the PLC's congressional delegation.

Some of his deputies, while supporting the measure, were personally against it. PLC Deputy Noel Periera Majano said, "We still have here a lot of mines that require the work of those members of the army, it's not that we are egoists, but we have to evaluate our own needs. Personally, I don't think they should go." The government has responded with assurances that the costs will be covered by any of several countries, under the provisions of Resolution 1483 of the UN Security Council.

Also, according to the Army's chief of operations and planning Cesar Delgadillo, "The equipment has been offered by the US, and the government is working with several countries on financial arrangements to get the funds for salaries, life insurance, and other things." Other conditions under which Nicaraguans will go to Iraq include the guarantee that, in case war breaks out, the troops will immediately withdraw and return home. "Our troops will participate uniquely and exclusively in missions of a humanitarian nature, excluding participation in missions of public order, keeping clear that in case of aggression they have the right to self-defense recognized by international humanitarian law," read the document requesting approval that the executive sent the AN.

On the other side of the aisle, however, the opposition was far from convinced. Sandinista Deputy Gustavo Porras said of the administration's request for the Fuerza de Tarea de Ayuda Humanitaria Nicaragua, "It is a servile attitude of President Enrique Bolanos, who acts like a gringo." Porras enumerated the tasks that remained undone by the army, including de-mining of their own territory. He also objected to military doctors going to Iraq while the country suffers a variety of epidemiological problems. Forty or more Nicaraguan physicians are part of the deployment. Porras rounded out the invective with a blast at deputies of the governing PLC, whom he accused of going

along with the plan in order not to lose their US visas in connection with corruption scandals related to ex-President Arnaldo Aleman (see NotiCen, 2003-01-09).

On July 9, it was all over but the shouting. The AN approved sending troops over the FMLN opposition. The vote was 50 to 37. FMLN deputies continued to speak of an "immoral occupation." Dissident PLC Deputy Jaime Morales said, "We are victims and hostages of conflicting, historical, and irreconcilable political alignments." Response of El Salvador and Guatemala differ The political climate in El Salvador is similar. There, 300 members of the Batallon Cuscatlan stand trained and ready to roll, while a battle regarding whether they should go rages around them.

The opposition Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) is bitterly against the idea, but, while it is the largest party in the Asamblea Nacional, the governing party, together with its lesser partners, has the votes. Still, said FMLN Deputy Manuel Melgar, "We're not going to vote for the authorization. Those soldiers should stay here to perform social tasks that haven't been completed." The popular movement is also solidly against sending troops. Said Lorena Martinez of the Movimiento de Resistencia Popular (MRP), "The families should oppose sending the soldiers to Iraq, they're going to serve as cannon fodder. You have to remember that there are still persistent attacks." MRP is a consortium of grassroots organizations. The archbishop of San Salvador, Fernando Saenz, said that sending the soldiers was the result of pressures from the US for "favours done."

The FMLN, however, is in the midst of an electoral campaign that includes outreach to the military (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05), and it can't afford to be too doctrinaire about its opposition to the army's chance to play in the big leagues. So, while denying its votes in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), FMLN Deputy Walter Duran said in a radio interview that it would continue to study the question. He faulted the government's lack of clarity on just what the Salvadorans would be doing there, emphasizing that President Francisco Flores had not sent the legislature a contract spelling out the particulars of a "supposed mission of peace that we have our doubts about." "We don't believe you can have a peace mission in a country that is in a state of war," said Duran. "There is no means of proceeding legally." He also questioned a part of the document the president sent that said that the soldiers could move about freely in Iraqi territory, saying that would be completely illegal.

His final objection was constitutional; he said the Salvadoran Constitution limits the military to defending national sovereignty, and not that of other countries.

Guatemala's military plays no part in the region's expedition for a multiplicity of reasons, not least of which being that President Alfonso Portillo declined to sign on to a joint statement of support for the war, subscribed in whole or in part by the other presidents (see NotiCen, 2003-03-27). But Guatemala City was the scene of a rejection of the deployment by members of the Central American Parliament (Parlacen).

Together with leftist deputies from Andalusia, Spain, they released from Parlacen headquarters a joint statement reading in part, "We manifest a categorical "no" to the war, and express our firm rejection to sending soldiers of the Central American region and of Spain to Iraq." The statement demanded "the immediate withdrawal of United States and Great Britain troops from Iraqi

territory so that, with the support of the United Nations, the people of Iraq can freely elect their governors, giving them the form of government that conforms with their reality, and control their natural resources and wealth." Aznar comes to region looking for coalition support Increasing the probability that, in the end, the troops will go to Iraq, Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar has been in the region, thanking the countries in advance for the gesture. To opponents, Aznar represents the other claw of a pincer that holds the region helpless in its grip.

While the governments have been doing their best to placate the US while they try to come to a free-trade agreement, Aznar now dangles support for a trade deal with the European Union (EU). The coalition, of which Aznar is part, is in desperate need of a show of international support. Recent reports say that, of an expected 20,000 international troops for post-war operations, the coalition has only been able to get 8,000. They suffered a setback both in numbers and in credibility, when India, Pakistan, and Portugal declined to participate.

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