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## **Al-qaeda and Remilitarizing the Region**

by LADB Staff

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Honduran authorities have declared a national terror alert saying that the country has received threatening information from alleged al-Qaeda-connected groups. The country thus became the second in the region to experience this problem after El Salvador, the only country in the region to have troops in Iraq (See NotiCen, 2004-08-04).

The declaration to press and populace said that al-Qaeda was recruiting Hondurans to attack the embassies of the US, Britain, Spain, and El Salvador. The US, however, has denied any threat against its embassy in Honduras, but a spokesman said they were aware of Honduran reports and were "taking appropriate measures in coordination with Honduran security authorities."

Security Minister Oscar Alvarez told a news conference, "We are facing a state of preventive national alert because our intelligence services report that al-Qaeda foreigners have made offers for Hondurans to carry out sabotage both here and abroad. We believe that there are Hondurans who could accept these offers, some for money, and others because they believe in Islam. Our best agents are investigating the case and working out a strategy to prevent international terrorists from using Honduras as a base for training terrorists." Alvarez said he had already increased security at embassies involved in Iraq war, as well as at borders, airports, and diplomatic sites of other friendly countries, utilizing officers trained by the US and Israel.

It was not clear why Spain, which has withdrawn its troops from Iraq, was a target. Honduras had sent troops to Iraq under Spanish command but did not renew the commitment after Spain changed policy and left the US-sponsored coalition (See NotiCen, 2004-04-22).

Squeezed between US influence and alleged Islamic incursions, Honduras has made terrorism a high priority and on August 24 ratified the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Treaty against Terrorism. At a signing ceremony in Washington, Honduran Ambassador to the US Salvador Rodezno said his country's participation expresses its "sovereign desire to form part of one of the greatest international cooperative ventures in the battle against terrorism." Honduras has thus become the seventeenth country to ratify the convention since its adoption in Washington on Feb. 2, 1971.

### ***Military maneuvers***

While Honduras did not follow El Salvador back into Iraq, it did participate in a US-sponsored military exercise, Fuerzas Comando 2004, in El Salvador late in July. As one of seventeen countries in the maneuvers at Ilopango military base, the country made clear its will to be among those signatories to an anti-terrorist policy. The other countries participating in the event, which included a competition for best "special operations" teams, were Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, which has no army, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, which has no army

either, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Uruguay, the US, and Belize. El Salvador won the gold, the US, the silver, and Colombia, the bronze.

Another purpose of the maneuvers, one that has been central to the US military agenda for Latin America, was to meld the armies into a working unit. That goal was apparently met, as evidenced by El Salvador's head of the Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Carlos Alfredo Soto, who called the affair an "extraordinary continental encounter, where the fraternal spirit that exists between our institutions of security and national defense has been made evident." Soto said the hemisphere's militaries must be prepared "against any threat that could cross continental stability, be it terrorism, narcotrafficking, organized crime, juvenile gangs (see NotiCen, 2004-08-04), or other things that bring instability and the loss of the fundamental principals and values of our society."

### *No army needed*

Though Costa Rica has no army, it has a police force equipped to interact with neighboring militaries and to coordinate regional police efforts with the military agenda. The country hosted an extraordinary meeting of directors of intelligence and police chiefs of Central America and the Caribbean less than two weeks after the militaries met in El Salvador.

Director of the Fuerza Publica of Costa Rica Walter Navarro, speaking at the meeting, reiterated Soto's sentiments, adding money laundering and car theft to the list headed by terrorism. One of the themes the meeting concentrated on was the construction of databases to aid in the international endeavors.

### *Another maneuver*

Back in Honduras, on Aug. 23, the US kicked off another round of military maneuvers, this time with 29 Latin American countries on board. This event involved 400 members of the participating armies and focused on decision making against a common enemy. The exercise drew personnel from most armies of the region. Venezuela and Mexico were notable exceptions. Honduran Defense Minister Federico Breve Travieso said the event would "permit us to establish alliances to confront any threat and to do it effectively."

UN authorities were also on hand. Honduran Col. Humberto Cabrera explained their presence as key to strategies in which the other nations might invade a single country to establish order and bring humanitarian aid. Nicaraguan Army chief Gen. Javier Carrion said all the countries of Central America are on alert against the possibility of an al-Qaeda-related attack, characterizing the heightened vigilance as "a type of intelligence alert that has as its objective avoiding the infiltration into El Salvador of al-Qaeda activists. He said that Salvadoran military authorities had visited Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras seeking this support. Without inferring any linkage to this generalized rise in military activity, Carrion also said he just returned from Washington, where he negotiated the destruction of more of Nicaragua's stocks of surface-to-air missiles. It has been widely reported that the US wants these Sam-7 missiles gone to achieve a "reasonable balance" of regional forces and that Nicaragua wants certain military equipment, including US helicopters.

## *One more maneuver*

The frenzy of maneuvers and alerts singled out Panama for naval operations in addition to its participation in the other events. Twenty-two ships from ten nations simulated a response to a terrorist threat against the Panama Canal, according to the Servicio Marítimo Nacional (SMN). Chile, Colombia, the US, Honduras, Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Panama all contributed to the exercise, although not all sent ships. Some 3,000 troops were also involved, most from the SMN, which is technically not an army but is increasingly behaving like one.

The hardware included a half dozen frigates, three reconnaissance airplanes, a helicopter, a destroyer, two logistics vessels, and more than a dozen Coast Guard patrol boats. They practiced a variety of tactics for detaining suspect vessels while allowing passage of non-suspect ships. The operations took place on both the Pacific and Caribbean sides. The international force worked international waters, while a local force operated within Panamanian limits, landing ground forces, according to reports. Air support was flown by Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and the US.

The exercise, named Panamax 2004, was orchestrated by the US, whose military spokesman Vincent Smith said, "The defense of the canal is not just the concern of the United States, but multinational, and the solutions against any danger must be multinational." His statement was echoed by SMP chief Jose Isaza who said, "The Panama Canal cannot be defended by Panama alone, we need the concurrence of all the nations of America represented here and others that will be represented in future exercises."

This is the second such exercise to occur in as many years. Isaza said the operations were successful in that the simulation worked to capture and control an invading force, although there had been some glitches. In addition to canal protection, the naval maneuvers also served the larger overall strategy for the region. Hondurans who participated will reinforce anti-drug and terrorism forces at home and will train others in techniques and tactics, military spokesman Col. Rafael Moreno told the media.

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