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US Resumes Military Aid To Guatemalan Military

by LADB Staff

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US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld paid a short visit to Guatemala on March 24. In less than 18 hours in the country, the secretary reversed long-standing US policy toward the Guatemalan military. He released a US\$3.2 million military-aid disbursement that has been frozen on his government's ledgers since 1980. The reason for the freeze was the routine violation of human rights to which the army resorted in its execution of the internal war that formally ended in December 1996. But times have changed, the war is over, and the US now has other concerns.

Rumsfeld said the aid was restored because it was needed to make the army better able to battle terrorism, narcotrafficking, and juvenile gangs. The secretary answered few questions at a news conference heralding the belated gift, but the move played in the international press as a reward to Guatemala "for its progress in overhauling a military once blamed for human rights abuses."

Despite the vestiges of that abuse that continue to plague Guatemala, President Oscar Berger said military human rights abuses are a thing of the past. "The shadows that plagued our army have disappeared," he said. Berger said this a few days after the military participated in brawls with citizens protesting approval of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) that resulted in deaths and injuries.

Berger's statement also comes at the same time that hundreds of returned war refugees are reportedly fleeing again to Mexico, victims now of a different kind of human rights abuse, that of indifference and neglect. The army no longer burns villages and kills people at will, but neither does it look after them on lands deep in the interior where the military is the main state presence.

A report in the newspaper Siglo Veintiuno documented the miserable conditions in which the returnees have been left and the state obligations to provide water, electricity, housing, and access to credit for agriculture that have gone unfulfilled. Human rights organizations in the US are unconvinced that the Army's abuses are a thing of the past.

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), prior to Rumsfeld's visit, called upon the US government "to withhold restoring military assistance to Guatemala until the Guatemalan government takes concrete steps to address the continued human rights violations in the country." In a press release on the subject, WOLA noted the resurgence of networks tied to the military-intelligence apparatus that were to have been dismantled by the Army after the December 1996 signing of the Peace Accords. The statement quotes the recently departed UN Verification Mission to Guatemala (MINUGUA) as saying in its final report, "Attempts to investigate and prosecute security-forces members for atrocities committed during the conflict have been generally unsuccessful; those who try have been subject to threats, violence, and years of judicial obstruction."

Dismantling paramilitary no longer a priority

The WOLA statement emphasizes that establishing mechanisms to investigate and dismantle these groups was defined by the US as a top priority in its relations with Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2002-02-21). None of that has been done; proposals to undertake these tasks go unimplemented. To the contrary, observes WOLA, "The military continues to participate in joint police-military law enforcement operations, which are in direct violation of the Peace Accords. Instead of encouraging military participation in joint patrols, civilian security agencies should be strengthened." It is here that Rumsfeld's bequest, and the policy shift it represents, works in contradistinction to the obligation of the state of Guatemala to limit the role of the military to external security.

That the new US interest in a strong army with internal authority comes at a time when the two governments are trying to forge a trade agreement against a tide of popular protest is anything but coincidental, according to some analyses. Henry CK Liu, writing in the Asia Times on the failed-state cancer, points out that the US is at once the leading proponent of liberalized trade and "the leading proponent of superpower military intervention in failed states around the world." He makes a case that, at the same time the US advocates military intervention, neoliberals and neoconservatives join forces to "adamantly oppose government intervention in failed markets that accept unemployment as a necessary antidote for inflation."

It is just this acceptance of pockets of poverty to create centers of prosperity that forms the nucleus of the anti-CAFTA argument and, as that argument takes to the streets, creates the need for a military turned inward. Coincident with the announcement of military aid, the anti-CAFTA forces announced their intention to keep up the pressure by continuing demonstrations. "We will maintain the posture of resistance against the surrender of the country by the deputies ratified by the Executive," said Jose Pinzon, secretary-general of the Central General de Trabajadores (CGTG), an organization with a long history of this specific style of resistance.

Other labor and campesino groups, including the Asamblea Nacional del Magisterio (ANM), the Movimiento Indigena, Campesino, Sindical y Popular (MISCP), and the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), have reiterated their intent to carry on as well. Clinton's apology rings hollow. With the stage set for a season of mayhem in Guatemala, those opposed to renewed relations between the armies of the two countries warn that the US is poised to repeat its own mistakes of the past.

The independent National Security Archive (NSA), working with the UN-backed Historical Clarification Commission study in the late 1990s, documented that the US "lent direct and indirect support to some illegal state operations." The documentation was so compelling that then US President Bill Clinton apologized for the US role, saying, "For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report was wrong. The United States must not repeat the same mistake (see NotiCen, 1999-03-04)." The assertions on the part of critics that restarting military funding is the same mistake as was made before are bolstered by findings that the anti-CAFTA violence in March was touched off by provocateurs who infiltrated what organizers had planned to be a nonviolent event.

Looking beyond Rumsfeld's stated reasons for warming to a more robust Guatemalan military, the country's largest newspaper, La Prensa Libre, took sharp notice of the growing anti-US sentiment in Latin America while Central America, at least at the governmental level, is still in the US camp. In an editorial, the paper speculated that "by deduction the presence of Secretary Rumsfeld must necessarily be related to the current political situation of the world and of the continent. It is valid to consider it evident that the United States is worried about a destabilization that in Venezuela generates Chavez, who openly declares [his hostility], and in Mexico brings possible problems derived from an upturn in the importance of Lopez Obrador as a political figure with possibilities of obtaining an electoral victory...Both have in common, among other things, being openly and viscerally anti-US and, above all, represent the most important elements of a radical leftist movement that is present in several Latin American countries...The United States faces a nebulous panorama in its relationship with the Latin American countries, where its friends are diminishing in a tendency that has repeated throughout history and that must not result in the perception that, after September 11, the subcontinent situated south of the Rio Grande has dropped from US priorities." The editorial concludes that, in that sense, the Rumsfeld visit should serve to counter that perception.

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