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Region Plans Combined Military Force

by LADB Staff

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Defense ministers of the isthmus met in Miami Oct. 12-13 with US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for a conference on the broad topic of security and investment opportunities. The focus was on the creation of a rapid-response force that would combine the militaries, or in the case of Costa Rica, which has no military, security forces that could rush to the scene of an event thought to imperil the region.

Central American defense ministers were reported to have requested the meeting with Rumsfeld in August, when the issues were narcotrafficking, international terrorism, and international youth gangs, but the subject grew to include natural disasters after the remnants of Hurricane Stan struck and caused horrific damage in several countries of the isthmus (see NotiCen, 2005-10-06, 2005-10-13).

Nicaragua's Defense Minister Avil Ramirez described the Fuerza de Respuesta Rapida (FRR) in August, telling reporters, "We have to join forces, and what Central America needs for this FRR is that the US provide us patrol boats, radar, communication equipment, interceptor airplanes, and helicopters, and this is what we will present to Secretary Rumsfeld." Although the US has been advocating and encouraging combining the region's militaries in just this way, and on just these issues, Ramirez denied that this was anything but a homegrown decision and a "coincidence between the interests of the US [and those of] Central America." He said the decision was formalized among the ministers of defense, government, and security at the meeting of the Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) on Aug. 31.

At the October meeting in Miami, the ministers agreed to develop three FRRs: one for natural disasters, one for peacekeeping, and one for transnational crime. Several hurdles must be overcome, however. Ramirez said, "Some legal impediments exist in some countries for the use of military elements outside their borders, and we will look for formulas that respect the juridical norms." Ramirez was in the process of defusing a problem for Nicaragua regarding its stock of surface-to-air missiles, Russian SAM-7s. The US wanted them destroyed and, to stress the seriousness of the matter, suspended military aid. But Ramirez reported after a meeting with Rumsfeld, "We are confident that soon we will have military cooperation with the US again."

Rumsfeld said he was assured that the Nicaraguan Army had done everything it could to deal with the situation. "They have assured me that the missiles are maintained in a secure manner," he said. "This is very reassuring." Rumsfeld was satisfied that the Nicaraguan military was not the problem and that the authority for their destruction lay with the legislature.

Ramirez said, "The missiles that are in the warehouses of our Army are totally secured and we are only awaiting Asamblea Nacional approval of the destruction of the 651 rockets, the bill for which has been submitted for passage. We are sure we will soon have good news."

Against the cultural and geopolitical grain

The more substantial legal problems for a multinational force are rooted in historic skirmishes over border disputes, questions of sovereignty, and constitutional limits on the role of the militaries, as they vary from nation to nation. There is also variation within nations regarding the relationship of the military to the civilian populations.

In Guatemala, for instance, there remains a strong reluctance within communities that suffered massacres at the hands of the Army to allow the military into their midst, even under the dire circumstances of natural disasters (see NotiCen, 2005-10-13). Honduran Defense Minister Federico Breve Travieso outlined other problems. "The legal frameworks have certain restrictions that impede easy mobilization," he said, "especially those missions related to combating new threats, not so much peace missions or attention to disasters, because that is humanitarian aid.

But when you talk about visions related to narcotrafficking, terrorism, gang activity, organized crime, and arms trafficking, then obviously authorization of our legislatures is required. What we are looking for is to have a legal framework that permits speeding up that response. It's not about multinational forces, much care must be taken in that because they are forces of each country interacting, working together." Breve Travieso said that forces to attend to disasters already exist, but for these other threats, "each country has agreed to form a unit internally, and the next step is for them to be able to interact." That could be a big step.

The Honduran minister said the presidents of the countries are ready to take this project on, but there again, each country has unique political circumstances, and each country's executive has a different relationship with its legislature.

Costa Rica is particularly unique. Having no military, the country was present at the meeting technically as an "auditor." Before the meeting, President Abel Pacheco said his country would participate in areas like illicit traffic in drugs, arms, and people, but, "since Costa Rica has no army, then we attend these discussions as auditors. We will participate in what is police action, but if it is about military action, we will restrain ourselves and keep quiet." The gang issue spills into an area of uncertainty. For Costa Rica, it is a police matter, but for some of the others, there has been increasing talk of militarizing the response to the problem (see NotiCen, 2004-02-05, 2005-03-03, 2005-06-30, 2005-08-18).

At the meeting, host Rumsfeld appeared to play along with the scenario that the FRR was a Central American initiative, and he seemed almost cool to the notion. He told the ministers, "The military is not the answer" to the region's economic and security problems. Some reporting suggested he was hedging in response to criticism that the US is pushing these militaries, some if not most of which have long histories of atrocities against their own people, into law enforcement. Rumsfeld emphasized economic approaches to security problems, chief among which was the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The ministers were somewhat bemused by this, wanting instead to talk about responding to natural disasters.

Said Guatemala's Defense Minister Gen. Carlos Humberto Aldana Villanueva, "We have to prepare a bit more for the future, now that disasters seem to be coming every day. State responses are sometimes limited." His troops were still involved in the aftermath of mudslides that may have buried as many as 2,000 people and the hostile reception the Army has received in many communities. The others agreed that FRRs and regional coordination would be key elements in surviving the next disaster.

On the gang issue, Rumsfeld was more accommodating of the military solution. "There are still some who want to obstruct the path to social and economic progress, to return Central America to darker times of instability and chaos," he said in reference to the maras. "No one nation can deal with those kinds of cross-border threats."

Threats do not lend themselves to military responses

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) was one of the severest critics of the FRR plans and of the role of the US Defense Department. A WOLA news release said the Pentagon sent mixed messages about the appropriate institutions for responding to threats. Joy Olson, WOLA executive director, was quoted as saying, "The only problem with this analysis is that these threats do not lend themselves to military responses. They require effective policing and judicial systems, but police and justice officials were woefully underrepresented at the meeting. It leads me to ask, why are we talking with the militaries about combating crime? Shouldn't a different set of actors be in the room? This is clearly a moment when the future role of the Central American militaries is being redefined."

WOLA associate Laurie Freeman was quoted as saying, "Defaulting to the region's militaries to solve problems is old school. If the US does not think that police roles are appropriate for the region's militaries, it needs to say so. Supporting a clear line between police and military doesn't violate anyone's sovereignty. At this meeting the Pentagon sent a mixed message at best."

The US military is not unaware of the debate regarding the proper role of the military in civil disasters. After Hurricane Katrina, that discussion is going on in Washington as well. The Pentagon's senior civilian official for domestic security matters, Paul McHale, said there was little doubt the Defense Department would be called upon again in the event of another such catastrophe. He said discussion is continuing on whether to have a FRR of its own, specially equipped and trained for relief efforts. It is also the case that a Central American FRR could take the pressure off an already stretched US military.

As it fights two wars and considers additional domestic duties, the Pentagon has sent 15 CH-47 Chinook and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters to Guatemala from Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras. Spokespersons have said that a medical unit from the Arkansas National Guard, as well as additional helicopters, could be sent. Gen. Bantz Craddock, head of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), said he expected US military personnel to be assisting relief operations in Guatemala for at least a month.

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