

10-5-2006

Militaries Meet In Nicaragua, Debate U.S.-driven Agenda

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Militaries Meet In Nicaragua, Debate U.S.-driven Agenda." (2006). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9450>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Militaries Meet In Nicaragua, Debate U.S.-driven Agenda

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2006-10-05

The hemisphere's defense ministers met in Nicaragua Oct. 1-5, with an agenda aimed at a further blurring of the lines between military and civil security functions. Within the broader context of the VII Western Hemisphere's Defense Ministers Conference, a smaller meeting of eight countries of the Central America region gathered around US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

For years, Rumsfeld has been the prime mover of a Central American military redesigned and integrated to take jurisdiction over gangs, drug-trafficking, northward migrations of workers and terrorists, and other problems of political interest in the US. More than 30 nations participated in the conference.

In turn, the Central American ministers asked Rumsfeld for more money in the form of US aid to get these jobs done. Showing how capable they can be given the proper resources, Nicaragua seized 3,000 kg of cocaine in a shootout on Sept. 30, the day before the meetings began. Outside the Central American region, some militaries are interested in, and debated the merits of, forming a regional peacekeeping force. Venezuela has proposed linking the armies to guarantee the region's security and counterbalance US influence, but Guatemalan Defense Minister Gen. Francisco Bermudez said the discussions centered on forming a force for UN peacekeeping missions and disaster relief.

He said, "At no moment have we talked about creating another force for other means. We believe that as a region we can support the strengthening of world peace, democracy, and respect for human rights as our fundamental mission." Much ado about Rumsfeld Rumsfeld pressed hard his vision for Latin American military priorities. "Almost every problem we face is a problem that cannot be solved by a single nation. Whether it's counternarcotics or gangs or hostage-taking or counterterrorism, all of these problems require very close cooperation among nations, many nations," he said.

Nicaragua's President Enrique Bolanos asked the conference to support a proposal to create an international center for humanitarian minesweeping in Nicaragua. The country has ample experience in the field (see NotiCen, 1995-07-14), the result of the aftermath of the contra war. His other contributions were to open the meeting and to deploy hundreds of soldiers on the streets of Managua to protect Rumsfeld from anti-US demonstrations. Nicaraguans, and partisans of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in particular, have been outraged by US interference in the coming national elections. The army and police restricted vehicle access all the way to Managua International Airport.

Rumsfeld denied any intention to influence the course of the campaign. "I don't get involved in politics in the United States," he said, "so you can be certain I don't get involved in politics in Nicaragua." What Rumsfeld does seem to want from Nicaraguan politicians, however, is the

destruction of some 1,000 Soviet-era surface-to-air missiles. He reportedly discussed the issue with Bolanos and said he was pleased with progress made to get the legislature to cooperate on the matter, even though Defense Minister Avio Ramirez said a month ago that he expected approval from the Asamblea Nacional for the destruction of the SAM-7s to come before this meeting (see NotiCen, 2003-12-04, 2004-08-26 and 2005-10-20).

Declining US influence

As the meetings wound into their final day, Rumsfeld said he was pleased with progress made between the US and Central America on forging the kind of military the US wants to see. But, in the rest of the hemisphere, it was apparent that the decline in US influence had affected military relations as well. Concurrent with the opening of the conference, Paraguay announced that it had reconsidered its position and decided to refuse diplomatic immunity for US troops stationed in the country and had decided not to renew a military-cooperation pact.

Last May, Paraguay allowed the entry of some 400 US troops for joint military maneuvers that focused on fighting urban terrorists, improving public security, and providing humanitarian assistance (see NotiSur, 2005-09-02 and 2006-01-20). The US has conditioned aid and other cooperation in the region and around the world on individual countries granting US personnel immunity from prosecution before the International Criminal Court (ICC), to which it does not subscribe (see NotiSur, 2003-07-11 and 2002-09-13, and NotiCen, 2005-09-22). The immunity extends not only to the military, but to diplomats and ordinary citizens.

Paraguay is a member of the MERCOSUR trade block, whose other members, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela, have already refused to accord this immunity. What is different here is that these four nations all have leftist governments. The Nicanor Duarte government in Paraguay is farther to the right. The Paraguayan decision was something of a surprise in the US, but officials in Paraguay told the media that Duarte had told Undersecretary for Latin American Affairs Thomas Shannon about it in August.

The Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue's Michael Shifter speculated, "My guess is there was a lot of pressure on the Paraguayans to fall more in line with Brazil and other MERCOSUR countries in terms of not having a special military relationship with the United States. I do think it's a further setback for the US in terms of its influence and its objectives in the region." The military cooperation is expected to continue until 2007, when the current agreement ends. In Paraguay, the government's concession on the ICC last May caused strong negative reaction on the left. Less surprising was Venezuela's reaction to US attempts to dominate the conference.

Rumsfeld had repeatedly spoken of regional concerns regarding Venezuela's recent arms acquisitions. The purchases came after US threats of a cutoff of arms supplies and after the attempted coup against Chavez in 2002 (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19), after which Venezuela became increasingly concerned about the possibility of attack from the US. Russia recently sold Venezuela 100,000 AK-103 rifles, a license to produce these weapons, 53 helicopters, and 24 Sukhoi Su-30 fighter planes to replace the aging US aircraft for which the US has denied replacement parts.

Chavez denied that there was any concern coming from the region and charged it was all coming from Rumsfeld. He called upon Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, with whom he shares an often-contentious border, to deny any such concern. "For the dignity of Venezuela," he said, "and for the dignity of Colombia, I publicly ask President Alvaro Uribe before the world to speak out about this and that he clear this up for me, because they are speaking for him, they are speaking for Colombia." Chavez explained, "It is clear there is no leftist or rightist guerrilla anywhere else, unfortunately only in Colombia is there a situation of internal conflict."

Uribe, clearly in a pinch, responded to Chavez on a radio broadcast saying, "Colombia is a country that has very good relations with its South American brothers, with Venezuela, and very good relations with the United States. The only thing Colombia has to say is that it maintains a totally prudent policy for the sake of these good relations with these countries." However Colombian military officials have said in the past that Venezuela's arms purchases were a "sovereign decision."

-- End --