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## **Selling Plan Merida in Central America: Negroponte Returns**

*by LADB Staff*

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Deputy US secretary of state John Negroponte was in Central America June 3-6 mainly to sell the isthmus on Plan Merida. Also called the Merida Initiative, the US says in a press release the program "aims to help Mexico and Central America combat narcotrafficking, transnational youth crime, and terrorism." The same release quoted Negroponte as saying that the US is backing regional leaders who are "confronting gangs, organized crime, and drug lords." It now appears that the trip was successful.

Plan Merida would provide US\$100 million for Central America, an amount dwarfed by the US \$450 million intended for Mexico, but apparently enough to get the endorsement of isthmus governments. Those amounts were just by way of down payment. Over three years, the US has said it would pour US\$1.4 billion into its drug, gang, and terrorism wars in Mexico alone and "a smaller, unspecified amount for Central America."

To help sell the deal, Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, who accompanied Negroponte, informed local reporters in Guatemala that they are between Colombia and Mexico and therefore have a "special vulnerability to criminals and narcotraffickers." Despite having spent a great deal of money for a very long time on these issues, Shannon conceded elsewhere in congressional testimony on May 8 that drug trafficking and organized crime have grown during the last decade. He said that leaders and the public in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala regard this situation as a "national emergency requiring an urgent response."

Prior to the push on the Merida Initiative, in April, the State Department put out a fact sheet summing the statistics, part of the gist of which is that 70% of the drugs reaching the US pass through Central America. Therefore, said the document, "It is in the national security interest of the United States to support our partners' fight" against criminal groups. Each country's role in the problem Plan Merida's inclusion of Central America leans heavily for justification on the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR). In its country-by-country analysis the 2007 edition of the report found:

**Belize:** Involved in transshipment of drugs to the US. It features borders with Guatemala and Mexico, navigable inland waterways, jungles, unprotected coastline, and hundreds of small islands (keys). Government is corrupt, and the legal system is weak. Money laundering flourishes.

**Costa Rica:** It is increasingly important as a transit point, geographically well positioned for transshipment of heroin and cocaine to both US and Europe. Transnational gangs involved in street level sales.

El Salvador: transit country to Mexico for drugs from South America by both land and sea.

Guatemala: Major transshipment point with added local poppy cultivation increasing recently and estimated at around 600-800 ha. Government, military, and police all involved in corruption, unable to control drugs traffic, and weak institutions. Recent improvements still "not satisfactory."

Honduras: Increasing traffic being shifted from Guatemala. Sparse populations, isolated jungle regions, limited resources, corruption, poor border control all factors.

Nicaragua: Included in the transshipment corridor. Corrupt judicial system hampers control efforts.

Panama: Ideal geographic location and highly developed maritime infrastructure for transshipment to US and Europe. Government is cooperative with US but less so with regional neighbors. Intimating that up to now spending on the drug war has been skimpy, Ray Walser, senior policy analyst for Latin America at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, was quoted in the State Department's releases as calling the Merida Initiative the US's "first big effort to deal with these problems." Until now, said the analyst for the conservative think tank, Congress had only passed "piecemeal legislation," creating small programs. But now, efforts will be scaled up to dealing with the problems regionally through the Secretaria del Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana (SICA).

The initiative will spend more money on the war against gangs "than we have before," but amounts for this and the other items remain uncertain because House and Senate bills differ and have not yet been reconciled. Also, Haiti and the Dominican Republic may be added to the list of participant countries. Because of the uncertainty about the budget, Negroponte was unable to give officials in Guatemala an exact quote, but in a meeting with President Alvaro Colom, Vice President Rafael Espada, Government Minister Vinicio Gomez, and Attorney General Juan Luis Florido, he said Guatemala would be a major beneficiary. It was reported that Foreign Minister Harold Rodas had said earlier Guatemala would get 45% of the total amount destined for Central America and the two potential add-on states. He said this was because his country occupies the end of the isthmus most proximal to the US. Just what is to be done with the funding is still sketchy.

The intelligence chief of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) told a Senate hearing that there would not be any increase in agents in the region. He did not specify how many agents ply Central America, but there are plenty. "In Mexico," he said, "the DEA works with a Special Unit of Investigation of 227 agents. There is another group in Guatemala investigating the rest of the countries of Central America, except Costa Rica." He said what was needed was funding for better air support, surveillance, and information systems.

### *Past humiliations remembered*

After experiencing a lot of pushback in Mexico on the terms of the initiative (see SourceMex, 2008-06-11), Negroponte was careful in his public statements to stress that the plan would avoid interference and sovereignty issues. He said, "This is a plan developed with the affected countries, Mexico and Central America. We want it to be based on collaboration; it is not something we want

to impose." Still, some aspects of the collaboration seem to be a step backward to the time when the US was in a stronger position in Latin America and employed the "certification" mechanism of determining who its friends were in the drug war. Most of the region found the annual ritual of certification humiliating, but now the report-card era is returning under a different guise in Guatemala.

Negroponete said the US would start training the Guatemalan military again but only after certifying that they have cooperated with investigations of officers accused of human rights violations. There was a reported US\$500,000 involved in this. Guatemala's history might well deserve this kind of vigilance, but sovereignty is sovereignty, and this is precisely the kind of imposition Mexico objected to in its negotiations with the US on the implementation of Plan Merida on that side of the border. Even with the more docile attitude taken in Central America toward the northern benefactor, there was plenty of criticism of the Merida Initiative. Security analyst Mario Merida did not have a problem with the terms, but he said Guatemala ought to get more money. "If Mexico gets US\$300 million, Guatemala ought to get US\$200 million," he calculated.

Carmen Rosa de Leon of the Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPEDES) objected that the plan prioritizes US interests, not those of Guatemala. "You don't see integrated support to the police. The narcotraffic unit is strengthened, but the crimes that are the product of narcotraffic and that affect Guatemalans are not mentioned." Guatemala's narcotics police have a long and deep history of corruption, but official Guatemala still wants to see their minions bolstered, and they see Plan Merida as the way to do it.

On the border with Mexico, the unit will get reinforcement from the military. "The unit will be ready within 90 days and will conduct operations as needed in the border zone. It is going to have around 500 people," Government Ministry spokesman Ricardo Gatica told reporters. "The border with Mexico is very porous and that is where all the efforts of this elite corps will concentrate, without ignoring other areas." This operation also has the air of a step backward about it in that it perpetuates the practice of assigning an internal-security role to the armed forces. Citizen sensitivity to the Army's turning against its own people has hardly had time to diminish since the end of the internal war in 1996. It does not go unnoticed that the US played a supportive role then, just as it does now. Besides the Army, the border drug force will also integrate agents of the Presidential Guard and the Secretaria de Analisis e Informacion Antinarcoticos (SAIA). Gatica made the announcement and was confident of the time line in anticipation of the US Congress approval of the funding.

Compared with Plan Merida negotiations in Mexico, Negroponete appears to have had an easy time of it on the isthmus. El Salvador, for example, has been more than pleased to cooperate with the foreign outreach of US President George W. Bush's administration. The assistant secretary mentioned the support of President Antonio Saca's administration for the Iraq war, where Salvadoran soldiers, 280 of them, still serve (see NotiCen, 2007-02-01 and 2008-02-14). He noted as well that El Salvador has opened Comalapa International Airport to US surveillance activities and intimated that the quid pro quo, Temporary Protection Status (TPS) extension for Salvadorans working in the US and boosting the economy with remittances, would be looked upon with sympathy. More than cooperative, El Salvador is eager to participate.

Coming elections in both countries portend far less interest in initiatives of this kind. Polls show Democrats somewhat likely to take the presidency from the Republicans in November and the FMLN very likely to take the office from the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) next March (see NotiCen, 2008-06-12). It was a bit tougher sledding for Negropte in Honduras, where, as US ambassador when that country was fighting its proxy war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Negropte oversaw the militarization of Honduras in support of the contras and the buildup for a US attack on Nicaragua. Seen as a human rights violator himself, Negropte's welcome in Honduras was punctuated with protest.

Among the reasons Honduras has to cooperate with the US on Plan Merida is the Palmerola airport, an important asset with the closure of Toncontin to large international traffic following a May 30 crash (see NotiCen, 2008-06-12). It was reported that the secretary discussed Palmerola with President Manuel Zelaya. The US will contribute US\$87.9 million to build the highway between Comayagua and Tegucigalpa, linking the airport with the capital.

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