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Colombian Police Cooperation with Costa Rica Praised by Government and Rejected by Opposition

by George Rodriguez
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Thirteen high-ranking members of Colombia’s Policía Nacional (PN) are in Costa Rica to help improve this country’s Fuerza Pública (FP), the local police force.

Their presence, Feb. 12-26, is the first stage of what is officially described as a process of technical cooperation in citizen safety aimed at strengthening the Fuerza Pública through training by the Colombian Policía Nacional. For this, the South Americans are pinpointing their Central American colleagues’ strengths and weaknesses to then draw up a proposal for the Costa Rican government on how go about improving its police.

Despite the notoriously different realities each comes from regarding security, plus that the South American police force is part of a military structure while its Central American counterpart is civilian and functions in a country that abolished its army some six decades ago, as well as the contrasting size of their ranks, the opening of the process implies sharing experiences, as officials on both sides have pointed out.

Citizen safety—or the increasing lack of if—is one of Costa Ricans’ major concerns, because of the rise of organized-crime activities—including drug-trafficking, car theft, and murder by hired assassins (NotiCen, June 3, 2010).

During an introductory press conference on Feb. 14, Costa Rican Security Minister José María Tijerino said the Colombian police "come to exchange their experiences with our police in this process of strengthening our Fuerza Pública," in "a very timely visit," because of their "successful experience in fighting drug-trafficking."

Sitting to the minister’s right, Lt. Col. Jaime Romero, head of the Colombian police’s Dirección Nacional Antinarcóticos (DNA) and of the visiting delegation, explained that the process consists of four stages, the first of which implies what he described as mutual reference—the exchange of experiences.

Then comes phase two, "laying out what the courses of action would be by which the Colombian police may transfer all its development, starting with strategy, technology, investigation, intelligence, the officers’ backgrounds, all that has to do with human talent," he went on to say. "This means that all we’ve experienced as the Colombian police, which may be of interest both to the government of Costa Rica and its police, will be offered for it to be applied and for all this to lead to better safety and coexistence in this country."

Another phase has to do with implementing strategies and implies the opportunity for some of Costa Rica’s 12,000-strong Fuerza Pública to be trained in Colombia and see on the spot how the Policía Nacional functions, while Colombian instructors, specialized in fields such as drugs and intelligence, could come and train their local colleagues.

Colombia has some 21 police schools nationwide capable of graduating some 10,000 police a year.
Colombia-Costa Rica police cooperation welcomed by US

Brian Nichols, deputy assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement, told NotiCen that "the relationship between the United States and Colombia I think everyone knows is excellent."

"We believe firmly that Colombia has the expertise that is vital to help governments throughout the [Western] Hemisphere take on the same challenges that Colombia has faced successfully over the last decade," he said during a brief visit last week to Costa Rica on a regional tour that also included Panama. "I think that the Colombian presence in Costa Rica is something that we welcome, and we encourage the Costa Rican government and people to continue to reach out to Colombia as a great advisor, friend, and ally in the fight against narcotics trafficking."

Asked whether the US would encourage other governments in the Central American region to do the same, he answered, "Absolutely. We are working incredibly closely with them."

But Costa Rican union leader Albino Vargas told NotiCen that he thinks otherwise. On the cooperation between the two police forces, he said, "I see it as very, very dangerous. I believe it’s the worst police force we could have chosen to help us solve our security problems."

"If I tell you that in Colombia in the past [three-and-a-half] years 182 union leaders have been murdered...and the Colombian police haven’t been capable of solving a single one [of those crimes], then, that tells me that it is not the best police force we could have called to help us ticos [Costa Ricans]," Vargas pointed out.

"According to figures of the international union movement, a union leaders is killed each week", on average, Vargas said. "We should have chosen police forces from countries with sound stability, with important human rights protection systems, police forces that function in societies...with stronger democratic traditions that that of Colombia," he suggested. I believe there are police forces willing to help, not necessarily that of Colombia, where we all know life is virtually worth nothing."

In Costa Rica, "violence overwhelms the police structure, and we’re clear on that," and the way to focus on that is not through more repression and prisons but with social policies, said Vargas.

Colombia’s police force "is obviously focused on repression, with a very questionable human rights record, which doesn’t help at all the civilian conscience the Costa Rican police has somehow always had," said the union leader. "It’s part of the Colombian military structure...part of the Colombian repression structure," which "may have many ‘virtues,’ but I don’t think it has a remarkable human rights record."

The arrival in Costa Rica of the Colombian police work group coincided with the presentation by Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla of the new security policy—the Política Integral y Sostenible de Seguridad Ciudadana y Promoción de la Paz Social (POLSEPAZ)—nine months after she was sworn-in for the 2010-2014 term. Security Minister Tijerino said it was "a happy coincidence."

POLSEPAZ aims, among its six goals, to "develop actions to overcome conditions of social vulnerability regarding crime and violence," and "create...conditions to strengthen a culture of social peace and human development."

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Regarding citizen safety and general violence, in Costa Rica, with a population of some 4.6 million, homicide cases per 100,000 people rose from almost six in 1993 to between 12 and 14 in 2008.

As for drug-trafficking, one of the major components of the citizen-safety situation, from May 2006 through May 2010, more than 94 tons of cocaine were seized in this country, and security forces cracked down on 312 drug-trafficking organizations, 40 of which operated internationally and the other 272 were local; 94 were family gangs.

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