10-24-2013

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Government Increases Military Presence on Dominican Republic-Haiti Border

by Crosby Girón

Category/Department: Dominican Republic

Published: 2013-10-24

At the end of May, the government decided to "reinforce" border security with 1,500 extra troops. This is far from being a recent event, as for years both countries have engaged in joint security operations.

Minister of Defense Maj. Gen. Rubén Darío Paulino Sen told the local media that the troops sent to the border would be trained to prevent all sorts of crimes in the border area. This occurred amid a series of media stories regarding the "unchecked flow of illegal immigrants," particularly women and children, across the Dajabón border-crossing point.

Paulino Sen said the troops that would be sent to the border to reinforce the Quisqueya Task Force would be relieved every two weeks by groups of 30 men. The aim would be to provide support at strategic points to prevent illegal immigration, contraband, drug trafficking, and arms trafficking, among other criminal activities.

Paulino Sen said border security would be increased from Pedernales, in the south, to Montecristi, in the northeast.

The minister of defense embarked on a tour of the border from the General Benito Monción de Mao Fort, where the Army's fourth brigade is stationed, to Monción, where soldiers undergo training as part of a course named macheteros.

Army accused of corruption

Jesuit priest Regino Martínez accused the armed forces of engaging in practices that tarnish the country's image as well as their own reputation, such as accepting bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to illegal activities along the border. Martínez said that sources from Dajabón province have accused members of the Army of engaging in extortion in the border control checkpoints along the Río Masacre.

Martínez said that every day many undocumented Haitians pay soldiers on the border and at the checkpoints between 100 and 200 pesos (between US$2.35 and US$4.70) to be allowed to enter Dominican territory. There are also allegations that the Army accepts bribes to allow contraband merchandise to enter the country.

Martínez said, "The Haitians who cross the border to sell their products remain in specific parts of the city and are later detained during Army operations. Some Haitians have been attacked by soldiers who confiscate their goods and then deport them back to Haiti".

An old problem with no solution in sight

The border that separates the two countries is 501 km long. Because of the lack of border checkpoints it easy to cross from one side to the other, which has led to conflicts and confrontations that date back to the colonial era.
Martínez told the local press that the government sought to "seal the border definitively to prevent immigrants from crossing." Sealing the border would mean provisionally disbanding markets along border areas that do not meet health and safety standards but that constitute the only means of survival for hundreds of Haitians and Dominicans in border areas. "It is the only means of earning a living that many people have," he said.

Surveillance has been increased in critical areas where the trafficking of illegal immigrants has been documented in Elías Piña, Pedernales, Montecristi, and Jimaní. Added to this, the Army is carrying out random checks in various towns and toll barriers along the border, working with migration officials who decide whether or not a foreigner ought to be deported.

Press reports say the Haitian authorities decided to close Haiti’s border-crossing points in response to the measures taken by the Dominican government to prevent illegal immigrants of Haitian nationality from crossing the border. This means that many Dominican vehicles have been unable to return to their country of origin, which has led to a number of complaints from drivers. Some of those affected temporarily abandoned their vehicles and decided to cross the border on foot, the same border where markets are held twice a week.

The Dominican Republic would benefit from the Haitian government’s decision to build a wall along the border, as this would control the exodus of Haitians towards the more prosperous side of La Hispaniola Island. By erecting this wall, the administration of Haitian President Michel Martelly seeks to control trade between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, ensuring that taxes are paid, which would mainly affect Haiti’s own impoverished citizens.

The wall would be an obstacle for military and civilian people traffickers as the Dominican government would have the power to effectively stop illegal Haitian immigrants from crossing the border. The wall is being built in Carrizal, 8 km from the Dominican Republic’s customs and migrations offices.

Haitian and Dominican traders have complained against the proposal and have argued that they would be forced to pay taxes on their products on both sides of the border. Local traders say the wall would have a negative impact on the relationship between the Haitian and the Dominican governments.

Dominican Republic Sen. Adriano Sánchez Roa, from the Elías Piña province, says the wall will sink Haitians even further into poverty. "We are aware of the problems that Haiti is facing. The products that reach Haiti via Elías Piña are low cost and if they are taxed their price could go up on the Haitian market," he said.

The Dominican authorities have also kept a watchful eye on the project’s development and the Instituto Cartográfico Militar aims to establish whether the wall is encroaching on Dominican territory. The institute’s director, Gen. Francisco Miguel Corominas, promised to put together a report on the part of the wall that would be built on Dominican soil.

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