7-10-2014

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George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica-U.S.-Colombia, a Threesome That Authorities See Reaping Results in Security and Other Key Issues

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 2014-07-10

When it comes to the complex issue of security in Central America, the US sees in Costa Rica an outstanding and valuable partner in the region and counts on Colombia as an experienced associate regarding training. In turn, Costa Rica holds both the US and Colombia in high esteem for their ongoing cooperation, which basically includes US equipment, funding, and training, as well as Colombian training.

Since it abolished its army some six decades ago, this Central American nation depends on its different police forces—Fuerza Pública (the actual police), Servicio Nacional de Guardacostas (SNG), Servicio de Vigilancia Aérea (SVA), Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD), Policía de Fronteras (PF), and Policía Profesional de Migración (PPM)—for its security. These forces and specialized units operate within the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (MSP).

Other police bodies are the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ), under the Ministerio Público (MP)—which also benefits from cooperation—and the Dirección de Inteligencia y Seguridad Nacional (DIS), which answers to the Ministerio de la Presidencia.

The cooperation provided by the US and Colombia focuses on MSP forces, mainly the Fuerza Pública, SNG, and, more recently, PF, with emphasis on fighting organized crime—primarily drug trafficking—as well as on citizen safety.

The US-Costa Rica anti-narco effort includes the joint-patrolling agreement, which dates back to October 1999, involving the US Navy and the US Coast Guard (USCG) as well as the Costa Rican SNG (NotiCen, Sept. 2, 1999).

Colombia keeps ongoing support through training different police forces, with instructors provided by the Policía Nacional de Colombia and the Armada de la República de Colombia (NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2012).

Within that South American nation’s cooperation, some two years ago, police experts visited Costa Rica for a thorough check of this country’s police forces, centered on the Fuerza Pública, to pinpoint weaknesses and recommend solutions.

"Everything begins with security"

As US Chargé d’Affairs in Costa Rica Gonzalo Gallegos told NotiCen this month, regarding US cooperation with this country, "Obviously, everything begins with security," but it is not limited to that, so, it is "security, plus economic development, energy, and education."

On the top issue, Gallegos said, "We’re here to help. What we need, though, is a willing partner. We’re helping all through the region, but we’re having the most effect here, with the partner who’s most willing to work with us, who’s most willing to be trained, learn the processes, and then work closely with us."

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In this country, "you had an efficient police force before, they’ve become even more so, and they’re becoming better every day," the diplomat said. "The ticos [Costa Ricans] are very good at the security aspect."

Going into detail, Gallegos said that the PF is on the way to becoming "a key component, in the coming years, to protecting the borders," and, regarding the SNG, he said the US is urging Costa Rican authorities to increase its size. "And I think they’re working toward that end. I think they understand that they need to increase the size of their Coast Guard. We feel that, to be more efficient, they’re going to need more people, and I think that the latest interdictions in cocaine are showing the size of the problem, and they need to meet the problem."

Under the past Costa Rican administration of President Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014), this country’s first woman president and a former head of the MSP as well as the Ministerio de Justicia, the PCD and Fuerza Pública seized some 52 tons of cocaine.

On President Luis Guillermo Solís’ four-year watch, which began Feb. 8, just over 15 tons of the drug have been confiscated so far. As part of its struggle against drug trafficking, this year, until June 17, Costa Rica had destroyed almost 500,000 marijuana plants found in clandestine plantations covering more than 30,000 square meters, spotted mostly in its country’s southern area.

The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that Costa Rica is a regional leader in catching cocaine and weeding out marijuana plants.

This country’s police have also been active in dismantling drug-trafficking organizations.

The most recent official figures show that, during the 2006-2012 period, PCD agents hit 640 such organizations, 552 of which were local and the remaining 88 were international, and they also dismantled 178 family groups—locally known as narcofamilias.

**Trilateral cooperation a joint bet on security**

US, Colombian, and Costa Rican authorities last month highlighted trilateral cooperation against organized crime as a joint bet on security. The point was made during last month’s graduation of 24 SNG, SVA, and OIJ officers who received, from June 2-20, the training course "Diplomado de control portuario y aeroportuario antidrogas."

Roy Perrin, political officer at the US Embassy in Costa Rica, said the course was part of "the strong commitment by each country to fight against common enemies according to the US-Colombia Regional Cooperation and Security Plan of Action."

Regarding Costa Rica, it "represents a trilateral effort to fight against drug trafficking and other illegal activities threatening the citizens of Costa Rica, and—very important—the citizens of this entire region," Perrin explained, reading a speech in Spanish.

"The US and Colombia share an interest in working with partners in the Americas to support and reinforce security," a context in which "we join efforts with the Colombians, and in the year 2012 the Colombia-US action plan was developed," said Perrin. "That action plan sets a framework to identify priority initiatives in Central America and the Caribbean … that we can jointly implement, with US government resources and the experience of Colombia’s security forces, to support our partners in the hemisphere."
Col. Jaime Alfredo Romero, police attaché at the Colombian Embassy in Costa Rica, said, "The worldwide problem of drugs has turned into a tension factor and one of the biggest challenges that states face, since its influence affects to a large extent the social conglomerate’s security and peace because of the diverse signs of violence and crime associated with this transnational crime."

"The constant evolution and mutation of the illegal drugs trade forces police authorities to train, to specialize in getting to know its production chain and the modus operandi of criminal organizations that fund that illegal activity," Romero added. "Thus, the training course is an important contribution to the anti-drug doctrine, taking into account that it provides each participant with conceptual, legal, and practical tools to have a broader scope of the trends shown by illegal drug trafficking."

In Costa Rican Security Minister Celso Gamboa’s view, "There are issues in which there will always be convergence between Costa Rica, Colombia, and the US. It is the shared idea to combat organized crime in all its manifestations."

"The bet by Colombia and by the US to help, with Costa Rica, in training and advancing our officers returns every day," said Gamboa, a former MP prosecutor and former security vice minister who has also been the head of DIS as well as vice minister of the presidency for security affairs and national anti-drug commissioner.

The results are translated into "the high number of drug busts this country is making, the major quantity of arrests, and the head-on combat against organized crime, not with strategies of violence but with strategies of intelligence," Gamboa said. "This shows that betting on education and on improving the environment for Costa Rica’s best—which is this human talent—will make a small police force with successes as important as those managed up to this moment."

The graduation of the SVA, SNG, and OIJ officers took place 15 days after 22 PF officers graduated from the two-month Curso Avanzado de Seguridad de Fronteras, given by US Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) instructors.

US president sees need for economic growth

On the other issues the US focuses on regarding cooperation with this country, Gallegos told NotiCen that, during last year’s visit to Costa Rica, US President Barack Obama made the point that "his visit was expanding the relationship beyond the decades of very security-focused issues. He wanted to stress that, to insure successes, we have to make sure that we expand the people who are being affected by success. The bottom line is: we need substantial economic growth to ensure the secure scenarios that we’re creating."

"And so, people need alternatives to criminality, and you’re only going to get that with a growing economy, where people see opportunity and have choices to make," Gallegos added. "And so, last year, the president decided we really needed to not shift the focus on security but expand what we were doing beyond security, to ensure that we were encompassing economic development, education, because you’re not going to get continued economic development without growth in education rates. And energy, because, throughout the world, the Obama Administration is coming to the conclusion that without cheaper energy we’re not going to be able to drive the economies in the way they need to be driven to create jobs and, then, opportunity."
Thus, the aim of the US in Costa Rica, as well as the rest of the region, in Gallegos’ words, is "security, plus economic development, energy, and education."

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