Security Equipment from U.S. to Help Costa Rica Fight Organized Crime

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Security Equipment from U.S. to Help Costa Rica Fight Organized Crime

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Having abolished its Army over six decades ago, Costa Rica is having to rely on its police forces to counter an onslaught of illegal activity by international organized crime structures and local gangs, mostly dealing in drugs.

Costa Rica is one of the countries along the route that smugglers use as a path for South American drugs bound for the US and as a return trail for money and weapons. The path is also followed by US-bound irregular migrants moved by coyotes, as the organized criminals who deal in human trafficking are known.

A portion of the smuggled drug shipments remains in the country, in the form of payments to local support organizations, as well as in other countries along the way. Within this context, drug-related violence—territorial wars between gangs, contract murders—has escalated in Costa Rica, although not nearly as much as in the countries making up the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—one of the most violent areas in the world.

Peaceful image under assault

Thus, Costa Rica’s well-earned international image as an essentially peaceful country is under assault. A recent report by Costa Rica’s Programa Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano (State of the Nation in Human Development, PEN), put violence and crime at the heart of Central America’s nightmare (NotiCen, July 30, 2015, March 31, 2016, and Sept. 1, 2016).

Despite the fact that its security is in the hands of its often-shorthanded police bodies, Costa Rica describes itself as the country in Central America with the best record in curbing drug trafficking. As such, it is a key partner of the US in the regional effort to combat illegal trade.

According to the latest Security Ministry estimates, between January and August, agents of the country’s drug police (Policía de Control de Drogas, PCD) confiscated, among other drugs, almost 13.3 tons of cocaine and just under 4.9 tons of marijuana, and destroyed almost 1.6 million marijuana plants. These figures are close to last year’s PCD confiscation of just over 15.1 tons of cocaine and almost 4.9 tons of marijuana, plus the destruction of some 1.8 million marijuana plants.

“As the United States has said, we... are the country it finds contributing the most in the struggle against drug trafficking,” María Fullmen, one of the country’s three security vice ministers, said during an August press conference to announce a major US donation of security equipment and other plans for cooperation. She added that Costa Rica’s record shows that “our work is important despite the [resource] deficiencies.”

Commissioner Juan José Andrade, who doubles as security vice minister and director of the police force (Fuerza Pública), said there was a need to provide the police with “fresh resources.” Some of
the police forces in other Central American countries, he noted, have twice as many agents as Costa Rica.

**Police force understaffed**

In this regard, Communication Minister Mauricio Herrera pointed out, as an example, that Panama’s police force is made up of some 25,000 officers, compared with Costa Rica’s 12,500, who have fewer air and sea resources. “Even so, we have a very high effectiveness... in [drug] confiscations,” he said.

Over 18 months, Costa Rica and the US worked out the details of what Costa Rican authorities have described as the largest display of US security cooperation in three decades. Top security officials in Costa Rica announced the donation on Aug. 22 as Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís and US President Barack Obama were meeting in the White House.

According to a joint press release issued by Costa Rica’s government and the US Embassy in San José, the assistance is focused on keeping transnational criminal organizations from permeating Costa Rican society, on reducing the tide of drugs toward the US, and on “working with the government and civil society on a prevention program.”

An additional press release on the results of the Solís-Obama meeting detailed three “concrete actions” to be taken as part of the US cooperation in the fields of organized crime, safe borders, and violence prevention.

The support covers four areas—to “equip and train national authorities,” to “transform and strengthen capabilities,” to “build safer communities,” and to “address the causes of violence,” according to the press release.

Regarding the fight against organized crime, the donation includes, among other items, two 110-foot patrol ships, two patrol and cargo C-145 airplanes, and two interceptor vessels, plus the construction of a hangar for the Costa Rican coast guard (Servicio Nacional de Guardacostas, SNG) and an operations center on the southern Pacific coast. The total value is calculated by officials at $79 million.

On action for safe borders, which will be focused on “irregular migrant flows,” the cooperation agreement covers, among other components, the construction of a checkpoint 35 km from the southern border with Panama and biometric equipment for identifying undocumented migrants. It also includes tents, equipped with beds, to provide emergency help and humanitarian aid to as many as 2,400 persons, something that could prove essential in situations such as the migrant crisis Costa Rica has been facing since last November (NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015, Dec. 17, 2015, and July 7, 2016).

The violence prevention component of the accord refers to community safety and includes a $3 million grant for labor training programs for youngsters at risk. This will support a program to prevent school desertion in two of the regions with the most critical social and economic indicators—the Caribbean province of Limón and the Pacific province of Puntarenas. According to Herrera, past US security aid has been effectively used. The US, said Herrera, “insists that Costa Rica is a great partner for cooperation, insofar as that cooperation having very clear and very effective results in... the struggle against drug trafficking.”

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Carlos Alvarado, the SNG’s chief legal adviser, noted that all the cooperation being received from the US government is destined to help the police. “There’s no military equipment,” he said. Alvarado, a former head of the anti-drug agency Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas (ICD), was addressing the concern, voiced by Costa Rica’s government, about Nicaragua’s purchases of Russian military equipment, something they see as causing a regional arms imbalance (NotiCen, March 26, 2015).

Press reports have mentioned this year’s purchase by Nicaragua of 50 Russian T-721B1 tanks, added to the two MI helicopters Russia delivered to that country in 2009, and Nicaragua’s intention to buy six MIG fighter-bomber aircraft. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has said that the military equipment is sought in order to reinforce the fight against drug trafficking, and that his administration has also taken up the point with the US. Speaking at the celebration of 36th anniversary of Nicaragua’s Navy last month, Ortega said Russia “has committed itself to deliver naval means… that will allow day and night navigation of the Caribbean, the Pacific, or the Gulf of Fonseca,” a region shared by El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

During a press conference on the morning of Aug. 23, after his return from Washington, Solís addressed a question about whether the US cooperation accord was a response to Nicaragua’s military by insisting that it should “in no way” be seen as such. “We’ve been working intensely on the process of acquiring this equipment as a donation from the United States for over a year and a half,” he said, adding, “No, there’s no relation.” Solís went on say that there was an “absolute difference” between the US donation and “the purchases by Nicaragua from Russia,” which he described as “military cooperation.”

“The equipment Costa Rica is receiving is absolutely police equipment,” Solís said. “There are no gunships, we’re not receiving weapons, there are no combat tanks, there are no combat airplanes. The two airplanes that have been donated are transport airplanes.”

A police airplane to be repaired as part of the aid will be used “for radar purposes and for follow-up of irregular activities on the coast,” including “illegal fishing activities,” Solís said. He also said Costa Rica was not receiving military consulting from the US to learn how to use the equipment.

Five days later, on the government’s weekly television broadcast, Solís described the aid from the US as “undoubtedly the largest over the past 30 years,” saying it reflected “the good state of the relations” between the two countries and that it reaffirmed “both countries’ commitment to human rights, the well-being of their peoples, and the search for increasingly safe communities.”

“It’s a strategic alliance that will last many years,” he said.

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