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An Arms Race Looms over Central America

by *George Rodríguez*

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The violence in Central America, which seems never to end, could be setting the stage for an arms race in the region.

After fighting for its independence from Spain in the 19th century, Central American countries suffered through political armed clashes between conservatives and liberals in the early 20th century, and then through wars between armies and guerrillas.

The civil wars in Nicaragua (1982-1990), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (1960-1996) ended with peace agreements reached within the framework of the *Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica* (Procedure to Establish Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America) signed on Aug. 7, 1987, in Guatemala.

Now the showdown is taking place between national security forces and invading organized crime structures—mainly Colombian and Mexican drug-trafficking networks—and their local representatives ([NotiCen, June 16, 2016](#), [Aug. 4, 2016](#), [Sept. 8, 2016](#)).

The drug traffickers' upper hand in the present confrontations has led several governments to resort to military might, even though that path has not proved successful in the past: In Mexico, former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) led a militarization of the fight against drug cartels that disastrously claimed at least 60,000 lives and showed few results ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#), [Nov. 5, 2008](#), [Oct. 26, 2011](#)).

Calling in the armies

Arguing that police forces have proven ineffective to counter the viciousness and fire power of the drug traffickers, governments are involving their armies in the fight and modernizing their arsenals ([NotiCen, Oct. 13, 2016](#)). This poses a threat to the military balance achieved through the peace process. A regional report issued last year pointed to Central American "militarization on the pretext of the struggle against drug trafficking and crime," and placed much of the blame on the war on drugs declared by the US.

According to the *Informe Estado de la Región en Desarrollo Humano Sostenible 2016* (State of the Region Report on Sustainable Human Development 2016), "the struggle against drug trafficking and organized crime has served to justify a greater presence of the armed forces in the region, mostly in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua." In June 2006, those four nations signed the *Convenio Centroamericano de Libre Movilidad* (Central American Free Movement Agreement), a border-control treaty usually referred to as *Centroamérica-4* (Central America-4) or the CA-4 group. The agreement grants the citizens of CA-4 nations the freedom to travel within the sub-region without visas or passports, except for minors, who must carry passports as a measure against the trafficking of children.

The report is produced by Costa Rica's Programa Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano (State of the Nation in Human Development, PEN) of the Consejo Nacional de Rectores de

las Universidades Públicas de Costa Rica (National Council of Rectors of Costa Rica's Public Universities, CONARE).

"To face the struggle against drugs, United States military and police assistance for the Central American nations totaled US\$768 million between 2004 and 2014 with important variations per year and country," the 2016 report noted. "Guatemala has received most of the resources, while the opposite has happened in Costa Rica."

The report pointed out that and the members of the so-called Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) are the biggest beneficiaries of US financial, military, and police assistance. US sales of weapons and equipment to the entire Central American region for 2004-2014 totaled about US\$2 billion, it said, and Honduras took the lead with purchases just over US\$1.5 billion (approximately 75% of the region's total).

On the other end of the scale, Nicaragua showed the lowest figures, with US\$19.1 million. But Nicaragua has recently purchased 50 Russian-made T-72B1 tanks worth a US\$80 million, 20 of which have been delivered, according to the electronic news outlet Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH) ([NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2016](#)). Russian sales to Nicaragua also include patrol speedboats, armored vehicles, and police equipment, according to RBTH.

"The purchase of Russian tanks ... changes the situation and turns Nicaragua into one of Russia's main partners in Latin America in this field," the 2016 report noted. "The appearance of these tanks will not go unnoticed in the region and will cause enormous concern among Nicaragua's neighbors."

Concern has already surfaced in Costa Rica, Nicaragua's immediate neighbor to the south. The two countries have a record of recurring tension, and news about the purchase of Russian tanks sparked Costa Rican officials' concern and disapproval.

'A feeling of sadness'

Speaking to reporters, Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís lamented the Nicaraguan government's decision, saying the investment could have been focused more effectively on the people.

"More than a concern or a threat, the feeling is one of sadness," Solís said. "Any resources spent especially on weapons, when these aren't necessary because there's no threat of conflict to justify an investment of such a size and equipment of such sophistication in the Central American region ... could be invested on its population." He noted that Nicaragua needs "resources for education, health, construction, and housing to improve quality of life." Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Central America, after Honduras.

Acknowledging that each country is sovereign and free to use its public resources according to what it considers necessary, Solís added, "I hope this process doesn't mean the start of an arms race in the zone, which would not benefit the peoples in the region."

Ana Yancy Espinoza, the academic director of the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, said Nicaragua's purchase of tanks has worried Central Americans.

“When there’s the perception that a country starts to build up its [military] assets, neighboring countries involve themselves in the same process, trying to stop the imbalance from growing between them ... which is, precisely, a race,” she told LADB.

In her view, Central America is moving in that direction. “I wouldn’t say, perhaps, that it’s openly an arms race, but it’s on an evolution process,” she said. “It’s like the prelude to the process.”

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