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George Rodríguez

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An Arms Race Looms over Central America

by George Rodriguez
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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.


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.

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“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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