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Tensions High on Colombia-Venezuela Border

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's longstanding problems of guerrilla and paramilitary violence, drug trafficking, and corruption are increasingly spilling over the border into neighboring Venezuela. Some Venezuelan politicians say the international community, especially the UN, should respond. Venezuelan Sen. Pedro Pablo Aguilar, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Commission, has proposed taking the ongoing violence and other border problems to the UN.

Aguilar said bilateral diplomacy has not been successful in stemming incursions, and it is time to appeal to a broader forum. Aguilar also doubted Venezuela's effectiveness in the "Group of Friends," formed to mediate in Colombia. The group was proposed at the Ibero-American Summit on the island of Margarita in October, and Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela offered their assistance in resolving Colombia's 50-year guerrilla war (see NotiSur, 11/14/97). "Venezuela must not limit itself to offering its good offices and forming part of the Group of Friends," said Aguilar. "The dialogue with Colombia must be more in depth, recognizing that the internal problems are not exclusively Colombia's, nor can they be reduced to the conflict along the border."

Aguilar added that irregular armed groups in Colombia affects not only Venezuela but also Panama and Ecuador, and drug trafficking affects the entire world. Ranchers propose paramilitary groups to solve problems Frustrations in Venezuela are increasing as border incidents continue.

The Venezuelan government has denounced frequent incursions by Colombian guerrillas and paramilitary units, and some residents along the border have proposed drastic responses, such as forming paramilitary brigades in Venezuela for protection. In late December, Venezuelan cattle ranchers denied that they had approached Carlos Castano, head of the extreme right Colombian paramilitary group Autodefensas Campesinas de Cordoba y Uraba (ACCU) to set up similar groups in Venezuela. But in an interview in a Venezuelan magazine, Castano said 140 ranchers from the Venezuelan states of Zulia and Barinas had spoken with him about organizing a self-defense organization along the 2220-km border. The Colombian government has offered a US\$1 million reward for Castano's capture (see NotiSur, 12/19/97).

Human rights organizations say the paramilitaries are protected by the Colombian military, and the Colombian public defender's office has blamed paramilitaries under Castano's command for more than 50 massacres during the past year. Jose Luis Betancourt, head of the Venezuelan ranchers' organization Federacion Nacional de Ganaderos (FEDENAGA), said FEDENAGA opposes any armed operations other than those carried out by state security forces. Colombian drug money could taint Venezuelan elections Also affecting relations between Colombia and Venezuela are reports that Colombian drug lords, looking for a cheaper route to the US for their cocaine, marijuana, and opium shipments, see Venezuela as a solution and could interfere in that country's December elections.

Venezuela is a traditional transshipment point for US- and Europe-bound Colombian drugs. Until recently, as much as 80% of the cocaine consumed in the US passed through Mexico, where traffickers often demand a kilo of cocaine as payment for every kilo they smuggle through Mexico. To avoid such kickbacks, the Colombians are increasingly returning to the Caribbean routes they used during the 1980s, US officials say. Venezuela, with its largely unpatrolled border with Colombia and a corrupt, inefficient judiciary, could provide better access to markets. Giancarlo Di Martino, regional coordinator of Venezuela's Comision Nacional Antidroga (CNA), said that Colombia's La Guajira cartel was approaching Venezuelan politicians with offers of campaign contributions.

Di Martino said the drug lords are looking for friendly politicians who will facilitate new land routes and sea ports to move their product north to the US. Although the national headquarters of the CNA denied Di Martino's allegations, Venezuelan government officials have long acknowledged that drug traffickers and money launderers operate in the country. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan government has launched an investigation into any infiltration of Colombian drug money into Venezuelan politics, and local press reports said the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is aiding the investigation.

"Drug trafficking presents a permanent threat to the political process," said political analyst Jose Vicente Rangel. "There is no way to control it, and it is happening now." Pompeyo Marquez, assistant minister for border affairs, called on all organizations involved in the electoral process to be on a permanent state of alert regarding sources of campaign financing. Political parties will move into the election campaign during the next few months in anticipation of the Dec. 6 general elections. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 12/23/97; Associated Press, 01/05/97; Notimex, 01/06/97, 01/07/97; El Nuevo Herald, 01/07/97)

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