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Role of U.S. Military, Arms Sales Questioned in Latin America

by LADB Staff

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he visit of US Defense Secretary William Cohen to Latin America has put the regional spotlight on the role of the US military in Latin America. US President Bill Clinton's administration is being pressured by those in the US and in Latin America who are advancing conflicting causes. Some put arms restraint and the promotion of democracy as primary concerns, while for others the priority is lucrative arms sales. Advance publicity stressed that the purpose of Cohen's first trip to Latin America as defense secretary was to strengthen US ties with the region and foster continued progress in democratic civilian control over militaries there, and not to sell arms. Most press coverage during the trip, however, focused on the sale of sophisticated weaponry to Latin America and on controversial training by US Special Forces in Colombia.

Chile could initiate military modernization

Chile lobbied successfully for the US to lift its twenty-year ban on sophisticated-weapons sales, and last year Clinton approved future sales "on a case-by-case basis." Chile is shopping for US \$600 million in jet fighter planes, and both Lockheed-Martin and Boeing want to provide them (see NotiSur, 04/08/97 and 08/08/97). France and Sweden are also competing for the sale. On May 19, a senior defense official said Cohen would not offer Chile Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM), which Chile also wants, as an incentive to buy US jets. Defense officials said any F-16s sold to Chile would be equipped with the ability to launch the advanced missiles but that the missiles themselves would not be sold.

Asked whether Cohen's trip to Santiago appeared aimed at promoting a US sale, a Chilean diplomat, who asked not to be named, said, "The timing's awfully suspicious." Cohen said Washington's resumption of sales in advanced warplanes and other weapons to Latin America was unlikely to initiate an arms race or military conflicts in the region and said the US would move cautiously in approving sales. Cohen said Clinton's lifting of the arms embargo in what could be a lucrative military market would not mean a wholesale push to sell weapons to every country that wanted them. "I would expect a rational assessment of what they need for their own individual security and, hopefully, regional security," Cohen told reporters. "We are not trying to sell expensive, sophisticated weapons to countries that can't afford them. That is not in our interest to do so."

Argentina unconcerned about Chilean planes

In Argentina, Cohen discussed cooperation in issues of mutual interest, and Cohen told Argentine officials the US will support its efforts to stop international terrorism. "I think the US is in a position to support us with technology, with data about how terrorism is moving throughout the world," said President Carlos Saul Menem after meeting with Cohen. "It has more sophisticated organizations than we do in this area. And we cannot forget that the US is the most powerful country in the world."

Menem said he was not worried about Chile's plans to buy new fighter jets because both countries were now working jointly for stability in the region. Argentine Defense Minister Jorge Dominguez also said Chile's purchase would not create regional problems. "It will not change the military balance in the region," said Dominguez. "Chile's purchase takes place in a context of very positive relations not only in defense, but in general."

Brazil's future big-ticket spending

The buying in Chile is merely a prelude to future upgrading in Brazil, which will soon decide where to buy more than 120 fighter planes for about \$2 billion. It is reportedly considering Lockheed's F-16s, Boeing F-18s, French-made Mirage 2000-5 and Swedish JAS-39 aircraft. "Brazil's going to really modernize, assuming its economy straightens out," said Richard Millett, Latin American military specialist at Southern Illinois University.

Cohen spent two days in Brazil in meetings with President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and senior military leaders. "I am here to establish personal relationships and to praise President Cardoso for his efforts in dealing with the economy, and for his determination to have a Ministry of Defense," Cohen said.

Colombia captures attention on trip

Although Colombia was not a stop on Cohen's Latin American trip, reports that hundreds of US Special Forces are training Colombian soldiers who are fighting guerrillas and drug traffickers broke during the trip, forcing Cohen to address the issue. The Washington Post ran the story about the military training on May 25, while Cohen was in Chile. The training by US Special Forces implies a greater level of military involvement more direct and autonomous than the Clinton administration had previously acknowledged.

This program, according to The Washington Post, involves tactical formation, anti-terrorist operations, and the gathering and use of information. The number of troops participating is increasing. The training program began in 1996 and survived the various cutoffs of aid and tensions between Colombia and the US, including US decertification of Colombia in 1996 and 1997. The exercises fall under a program that avoids restrictions imposed on military aid by the Clinton administration in response to Colombia's dismal human rights record and drug-related corruption.

The Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program allows Special Forces to train troops in another country if the training is designed primarily to benefit US troops. The justification in Colombia is the 200 US military personnel who operate a radar base to monitor flights that could be carrying drugs to the US. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-VT) said that, while it is illegal to train or equip foreign security forces who violate human rights, "from Colombia to Indonesia, our Special Forces have trained foreign troops without regard for who they are or whether they turn around and torture and shoot pro-democracy students." The training does not include techniques that could be used to violate human rights, said Cohen.

In an interview with CNN in Santiago, Cohen said the US "only intends to work with the Colombian government, which is fervently trying to control the flow of drugs from its country." The timing

of The Washington Post story not only coincided with Cohen's Latin America trip but also with renewed emphasis on human rights abuses by Colombian military.

A storm of protest forced Colombian President Ernesto Samper to disband the 20th Intelligence Brigade for its involvement in several massacres. The US also canceled the visa of Gen. Ivan Ramirez Quintero, the inspector general of the armed forces, who has a lengthy record of backing paramilitary forces involved in death-squad activity. Ramirez was the army's intelligence chief between 1992-1995 and oversaw the 20th Intelligence Brigade. The US government has insisted it would not become involved in Colombia's fight against the guerrillas, but both Colombian military and US politicians have blurred the lines between rebels and drug traffickers, continually referring to "narcoguerrillas."

While the degree of guerrilla involvement in drug-trafficking is debated, the influence of the drug trade has spread to every level of the Colombian government and to the military. In addition, cooperation between the military and right-wing paramilitaries is widespread. Thus, providing US aid that does not contribute to civilian repression is next to impossible.

On May 26, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said the Defense Department would begin monitoring Special Forces training programs to ensure the US troops are not working with forces involved in human-rights abuses. "Secretary Cohen felt that in light of the growing congressional interest in the program...particularly related to Indonesia and now Colombia, that it was appropriate that he have somebody in his immediate office...monitoring this program," Bacon said.

US troops have worked on counterterrorism training and hostage-rescue training with Colombian forces but have not trained Colombian counterinsurgency forces, Bacon said. Administration officials said an across-the-board assessment of Colombian policy is underway, involving the State Department, Defense Department, and intelligence agencies because of concern that Colombia's stability is threatened by the escalating violence. (Sources: The New York Times, 05/24/98; Associated Press, 05/15/98, 05/25/98; The Miami Herald, 05/15/98, 05/23/98, 05/25/98; Notimex, 05/19/98, 05/22/98, 05/24/98, 05/25/98; The Washington Post, 05/21/98, 05/25/98; CNN, Inter Press Service, 05/25/98; Spanish news service EFE, 05/15/98, 05/23/98, 05/26/98; Reuters, 05/19/98, 05/23/98, 05/26/98)

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