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Border Killings Hurt Venezuela-Colombia Relations

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The ambush and murder of six Venezuelan soldiers and a state petroleum engineer near the Colombian border brought differing explanations for the killing from the two countries' governments and an increase in political tensions between them. Bogota identified the killers as members of the rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), while Caracas authorities had not yet named any group as responsible for the Sept. 17 ambush. The ambush led the Venezuelan government to accelerate the purchase of a fleet of Russian helicopters to increase surveillance along the border.

Six soldiers, PDVSA engineer killed by unknown attackers

The bodies of six Venezuelan soldiers and a 23-year-old female engineer were found near the Rio Sarare in the border state of Apure southeast of Caracas. Four engineers and seven of their military guards, who repelled the attackers, survived the ambush. The patrol was inspecting oil fields for the state agency Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).

Colombian authorities were quick to blame the FARC for the killings, though neither the FARC nor the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) claimed responsibility for the attack. Soon after the ambush, more bodies turned up near the border. Venezuelan authorities identified them as undocumented Colombians who had been executed by unknown assailants.

Venezuela asked for Colombian support in reinforcing the border to prevent armed fighters from slipping across and committing atrocities, but guarding the 2,219-km frontier that runs through steep mountains and thick tropical jungle is more easily said than done.

Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel called the border "a box of surprises" after the ambush. Gov. Julio Acosta of the Colombian border department of Arauca accused the Venezuelan government of tolerating guerrilla activities, saying "if Venezuela keeps supporting the insurgency, it's going to end up worse than Colombia."

Venezuelan president says Colombia and US share blame

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, however, laid the blame at the feet of Colombia and the US, saying on Sept. 23, "It's Colombia that's primarily responsible, we are the victims of an internal Colombian problem." He added that the military aid the US gives to Colombia also contributed. "It's inevitable that the Colombian conflict will continue reaching us and produce tragedies, as long as the US continues encouraging this war with arms and soldiers."

Politically, Venezuela maintains neutrality in the Colombian civil war. President Chavez says he would consider supporting the FARC if it became a peaceful political movement. Colombian
Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and Chavez find themselves on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Landowner Uribe is waging a fierce war against the various armed guerrilla groups in his country while courting business interests and conducting fitful negotiations with ultraright-wing paramilitary groups. Colombia gets more US aid, most of it military, than any country other than Israel and Egypt, and Uribe maintains a close relationship with US government and military officials (see NotiSur 2004-04-02).

Chavez, by contrast, has had consistently antagonistic relations with the administration of US President George W. Bush, accusing it of sponsoring opposition groups and coup plotters (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20, 2002-05-03). Chavez has also alienated the business and political elite of his country as he attempts to implement his "Bolivarian social revolution."

Uribe's term in power has brought a renewal of foreign investment and business activity in Colombia, while anti-Chavez destabilization campaigns by opposition groups and business fears regarding his populist policies have hobbled Venezuelan economic growth.

**Will ambush undermine bilateral relations?**

After Chavez overwhelmingly won an Aug. 15 recall referendum, Venezuela's Ambassador to Colombia Carlos Rodolfo Santiago prognosticated a "new era" in bilateral relations where "common policies to improve employment and stimulate economic growth would be necessary and possible."

The president of Colombia's Chamber of Commerce echoed Santiago's optimism. Trade between the two countries has been stuck at less than US$1 billion in recent years, but, prior to the ambush, trade projections had estimated a total of US$2.5 billion by the end of this year. The rhythm of trade exchange quickened with the calming of political crises in both countries and record-high petroleum prices. Both nations are important oil producers. The killings on the border and the politicized response by the two governments may potentially undermine the optimistic outlook for improved bilateral relations of two months ago.

In June and July the two presidents worked on an energy agreement to build a binational gas pipeline to run 177 km from Ballenas in Guajira, Colombia, to the Venezuelan city of Maracaibo, requiring an investment of as much as US$200 million. The two presidents are scheduled to meet in November to review security concerns along the border.

Venezuela maintains 20,000 troops along its Colombian border, troops who are stationed at 180 security and vigilance centers in two theaters of operations. Venezuela has announced plans to buy the fleet of Russian helicopters for US$40 million to increase surveillance along the border. Venezuelan officials say the delivery of the helicopters should begin within two or three months.
In May, Venezuelan authorities arrested 130 Colombians who were accused of being paramilitary fighters preparing a military strike to "destabilize" the Chavez government (see NotiSur, 2004-05-21). Mothers of the detained Colombians from the border town of Cucuta recently petitioned Chavez to release their sons, saying that "they have little food, and only permission for one hour to go outside and visit each other." The prisoners are being held in Fuerte Tiuna, a military garrison in Caracas, and the Ramo Verde jail. The relatives also complained that the men's legal defense team, 10 officers from the Venezuelan army, are not viable advocates.

Chavez recognizes Venezuelan guerrillas, denies supporting them

In media broadcasts, Chavez acknowledged the border-area guerrilla group Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberacion (FBL), an irregular group that appeared three years ago to "defend" Venezuela against Colombian irregulars, according to statements the FBL made to local press outlets. It was the first time Chavez acknowledged the group's existence, but he denied supporting the group or recognizing it as legitimate. "I don't need any guerrilla support," he said. "The Venezuelan armed forces is the armed support for this people, this Constitution, and this president."

Chavez called on the irregulars to do peaceful work in a television and radio broadcast. "If it is true that you are Venezuelans and it is true that you are revolutionaries, get rid of this supposed FBL and come to do work, plant coffee, and work in social missions. The National Armed Forces is there to fight against the presence in Venezuela of paramilitaries, guerrillas, narcotraffickers, or whatever may be, and they know how to do it," said the former paratrooper. Chavez had denied the existence of the FBL since reports about them surfaced three years ago and rejected accusations that he was providing assistance to the group.

Defense Ministry officials said preliminary indications were that that the FARC was responsible for the Sept. 17 attack, but there was also mention of the possibility that the FBL was involved.

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