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Latin American Military Spending Causes Concern

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An increase in military spending throughout South America as well as increased US military assistance to the region has led a number of organizations to express concern for the health of the area's social institutions. Additionally, tensions regarding the Chilean-Peruvian border and the Venezuelan-Colombian border have cropped up in recent weeks, although they do not indicate an imminent conflict between the countries. Various reports condemn arms buildup as bane to development US military aid to Latin America may soon overtake economic assistance, according to a report released in the first week of October.

A joint report from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), Latin America Working Group (LAWG), and the Center for International Policy (CIP), titled Blurring the Lines: Trends in U.S. Military Programs in Latin America, states that US military assistance to Latin America in 2003 totaled US$860 million, just shy of the US$921 spent on economic and humanitarian assistance in the same year.

The report also attacks vague new doctrines propagated by the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), such as "effective sovereignty" which considers that US security may be threatened by Latin American governments' failure to exercise control over vast "ungoverned spaces" within their borders. The report says that such doctrines are providing new rationales for regional militaries to assert their power over civilian authorities. With significantly larger financial and other resources than the State Department or other US agencies, SOUTHCOM is increasingly defining the US role in Latin America, says the report.

In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. James Hill, outgoing head of SOUTHCOM, expressed concern about "radical populism" as a threat to regional stability and US interests in South America (see NotiSur, 2004-06-11). "Blurring the Lines" refers to the traditional separation of military and civilian institutions, a separation that can easily disappear in countries where democratic, civilian rule may not have a multiple-decade history. "The United States continues to encourage military practices, programs, and doctrine that promote a confusion of civilian and military roles, especially the creation of new military missions within countries' own borders," says the report.

Global military spending is on the rise again after a decline during the post-Cold War 1990s threatening to break the US$1 trillion barrier this year, according to a group of UN-appointed military experts. The 16-member group estimates that military spending will rise to nearly US$950 billion by the end of 2004, up from US$900 billion in 2003. By contrast, rich nations spend US$50-US $60 billion on development aid each year.

"Despite decades of discussions and proposals on how to release resources from military expenditure for development purposes, the international community has not been able to agree on
limiting military expenditure or establishing a ratio of military spending to national development expenditure," says the report.

In the realm of small arms, the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, released its Small Arms 2004 report on June 30, which found that eleven countries Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela had 80 million small arms among their 464 million inhabitants. The report found that 40% of the 200,000 deaths by firearms in the region occurred outside of war. It also found that Latin America had crime rates four to five times higher than the rest of the world, between 13% and 14%, while the global average was 2.8%. That is to say, a third of the world's indexed crimes occur in the region.

Modernization or dangerous buildup?

Military spending has increased in countries like Chile, where expansion in government revenues from various industries has allowed the military to build its forces. Chile has the largest per capita military budget in South America, although that budget includes the pensions of retired military personnel, which fall under the budgets of different ministries in other countries.

Santiago Escobar, a researcher at Chile's Institute of International Strategic and Security Studies, said that, to talk about an arms race, it is necessary to look at spending during a given time period, and not just specific purchases to renovate equipment like the ones currently in the pipeline in South America. Still, Escobar believes that "Chile has spent excessively" on defense, in what he described as an "overdose of weapons without upgrading operational capacities."

Government explanations of military spending in Chile have cited a need to modernize and restructure the armed forces, but critics like Escobar see waste.

Cuban Communist Party newspaper Granma sees something even more malevolent. Granma columnist Joaquin Rivery says the US interest in arming Chile, its "unconditional ally," is growing as a result of the "explosion of social conflicts in Latin America." Behind what he called the "rearming of Chile," Rivery alleged that Washington wanted to create "a powerful right flank (as seen from the north) in MERCOSUR," the Southern Cone Common Market, of which Chile is an associate member, with a view to making the South American bloc part of "a single economic and war machine" guided by Washington.

"There is no arms race in South America," says retired Brazilian army Col. Gerardo Cavagnan, a researcher in the Strategic Studies Department at the Universidade de Campinas, located 100 km from Sao Paulo. "Chile is not rearming itself, but merely renovating its air fleet, just as Brazil is doing, because its old Mirage bombers are turning into junk," he said. Brazil, like Chile, is considering purchases to upgrade its air and navy fleets. But that does not seem to worry its three partners in the MERCOSUR trade bloc Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

Argentine analyst Rosendo Fraga agrees. "I don't share the view that there is a military buildup in South America. On the contrary, this is the region that spends the smallest portion of GDP on
defense in the world, and, although in that context Chile spends more than the rest, that does not mean there is an arms race." Fraga, a lawyer and journalist, is one of the lead researchers at the Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoria in Argentina, which wrote the study "Balance militar de America del Sur," an overview of military spending in South America that offers comparative global and regional statistics.

**Peru-Chile border tensions of special concern**

Arms purchases by the Peruvian and Chilean governments have still led to speculation that there is an arms race between the two nations, particularly as discussion regarding their oceanic border stirs political tempests. Peru's concern is about how to measure ocean access, whether it should be a parallel extension of land borders, as Chile asserts, or whether it should be measured by a Peruvian standard that would, say experts, allow the northern country to gain 35,000 sq km of marine biomass.

The dispute stems from territory Peru and Bolivia lost to Chile during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). During the war, Chile annexed the Peruvian province of Tarapaca and the Bolivian province of Antofagasta, depriving Bolivia of its entire coastline. Bolivian demands for maritime access have also been a source of political and economic tensions between the landlocked Andean country and its coastally endowed neighbors (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23), but Bolivia's military prowess does not appear to be of great concern, at least publicly, for Chilean officials. Chile's position is that subsequent treaties the countries signed closed any border controversy.

A 1954 treaty ended the matter, say Chileans, and "it is inappropriate to propose discussion" around the issue. Nonetheless, several Peruvian legislators did propose discussion of the issue in the late summer, with Peruvian Defense Minister Roberto Chiabra saying that the country's armed forces were "prepared to confront an eventual conflict with Chile." When Chilean legislators passed around satellite photos of the Peruvian air base La Joya near the border to discuss whether activity there presented a threat, Peruvian tabloid Correo published the photos under the headline, "Chile spies on us."

Peruvian officials were quick to point out that the images were publicly available from a commercial-satellite imaging firm and were not an indication of espionage. An Aug. 11 phone conversation between Presidents Alejandro Toledo of Peru and Ricardo Lagos of Chile reportedly resulted in an agreement to quell the "political din" that had arisen between the two countries.

Authorities in both countries made statements that they were ready to go to war to defend territorial claims, but the two presidents said they rejected the saber-rattling rhetoric. As both countries build up their military forces and conduct exercises near their border, the two governments have denied conducting an arms race (see NotiSur, 2004-03-05).

Adding to the controversy, Peru's former intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, recently claimed that his operatives discovered Chilean plans to conduct "preventive war" with Peru during the administration of President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). Montesinos said at his latest corruption trial at the Callao Naval Base, where he is serving a 15-year jail sentence and facing further trials,
"We managed to penetrate Chile and discover how the Chilean armed forces were preparing for a preventive war....It was through the espionage we did that we knew how and when they would decide." He said the discovery allowed the Fujimori government to "prepare itself" in 1998. "We knew in the coming five years Chile was going to go to war with us. Time is proving me correct....I was not mistaken because the Chilean arms race has increased."

### Venezuelan-Colombian border buildup

An arms buildup along the Venezuela-Colombia border increased on the Venezuelan side while the government of Spain slowed it on the Colombian side this month. Spain canceled the planned sale of 40 tanks to Colombia, a sale agreed to under the rightist government of former President Jose Maria Aznar. As had been predicted (see NotiSur, 2004-03-26), the newly installed government of socialist President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero revoked the sale of 40 French-made AMX-30 tanks, choosing a policy against making arms sales to countries involved in active conflicts.

Spain's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Bernardino Leon told the Spanish Senate that the AMX-30s "could have been deployed along the border with Venezuela, an area where Spain would prefer to see smooth ties." Leon said that the sale was cancelled because his country wanted to ensure that "attempts to increase security, while completely legitimate, do not lead to a breaking of balance and the unleashing of an arms race that will only create more tension" in the Andean region.

Zapatero, of the Partido Socialista Obrero de Espana (PSOE), "is adopting the policy that has traditionally been promoted by the social democrats in Germany refusing to sell weapons to regions in conflict," said Alberto Muller, a Venezuelan retired general and political analyst. Venezuela has historically out-equipped Colombia in armored combat vehicles, with 81 AMX-30s and around 20 AMX-15s, while Colombia has bulked up with anti-tank units, like the dozens of Black Hawk helicopters the US supplied as part of Plan Colombia, an anti-drug and counterinsurgency strategy.

A Latin American diplomat who was once a tank officer told Inter Press Service that Colombia's claims that it needed the tanks to fight the guerrillas were "ridiculous, because armored combat vehicles are useless in the kind of irregular warfare that is waged in mountains and jungles."

Venezuela, meanwhile, announced that it would be fortifying its borders with Colombia after six soldiers and a state petroleum engineer were found murdered near the border (see other article in this edition of NotiSur). The Venezuelan government said that it would be buying a fleet of 40 advanced-design Russian helicopters to help increase security along the 2,200-km border. The jungle border has been plagued by irregular groups involved in Colombia's civil war slipping through and threatening the safety of Venezuelans on the eastern side of the line.

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