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Mercenaries Operating in Latin America

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Discoveries that private military contractors have been training and recruiting mercenaries to fight in the Iraq war has led to scandal and international tensions in Honduras and Ecuador, as the governments of those countries have investigated different companies. While the main legal violations have been because the companies were operating without proper governmental authorization, some government officials criticized the companies' presence as contrary to national law and international norms.

Peruvian news reports also revealed the existence of a recruitment center in Lima, while Costa Rican authorities have been forced to deny that businesses dedicated to training private fighters for Iraq are operating in their country.

Unlicensed US company found recruiting Colombians in Ecuador

The discovery that a former US military man had been recruiting Colombian ex-military and ex-police in Ecuador touched off a political firestorm in August. Jeffery Shippy, a former US Air Force officer who had come to the US-operated military base in Manta, 260 km southeast of the capital Quito, to work as a firefighter, allegedly recruited 1,000 Colombians.

The Ecuadoran government wasted little time expressing its "categorical rejection" of Shippy's business, Epi Security and Investigation, which supposedly paid mercenaries up to US$5,000 for going to serve as private security personnel in Iraq on behalf of the US occupation there. The legal basis for the Ecuadoran government's complaints was that the company was not legally constituted in that country and was operating outside the control of the superintendency of companies and outside the norms set by the law governing companies, according to superintendent Fabian Albuja.

The Foreign Ministry put out a statement on its "categorical rejection" of practices of "circulating information relating to the use of Ecuadoran territory for the operation of businesses dedicated to contracting so-called mercenaries." The Foreign Ministry release said that "mercenary operations that translate themselves into terrorist attacks, genocide, trafficking and kidnapping of persons, narcotrafficking, and arms and contraband trafficking put themselves into opposition with national laws and international mechanisms that expressly prohibit the use of said practices."

Foreign Minister Antonio Parra said news that Epi Security was recruiting mercenaries out of its headquarters in Manta was "very bad....Mercenaries are people who are paid to make war and do criminal acts and violent acts, or go to war in other countries." He said the practice was "almost the same as white-slave trading."

On Aug. 11, the Colombian newspaper El Tiempo reported that Shippy was advertising his ability to provide "combat-experienced" ex-military people who would cost much less than the average

Shippy reportedly worked for the latter company for a period of time. Larrea said, "We cannot allow business with mercenaries to be done here." At the time of the reports and controversy, Shippy was not in Ecuador to defend himself, although reporters could not determine whether he was in Iraq or Colombia. His wife, Ecuadoran Martha Canarte, said that he was in Iraq and was scheduled to return to his home in Manta in late September. She said that his income as a firefighter on the Forward Operating Location (FOL) at the base in Manta was not adequate, so he got into the more lucrative private military-contracting business.

The US has been launching anti-drug operations out of the Eloy Alfaro military base in Manta from the FOL since signing a 10-year agreement with Ecuador in 1999. The Ecuadoran public is particularly anxious not to get drawn into Colombia's ongoing human disaster, and the revelation of Shippy's undertaking appeared to touch quite a few nerves, although some government ministers were more reserved in their criticisms than Parra.

Potentially more offensive was Shippy's advertisements of the cheapness of his Latin American private warriors. His self-promotion on www.iraqjobcenter.com read, in part (spelling as in text), "These troops have been trained by the US Navy Seals and the US DEA to conduct counter-drug/counter-terror ops in the jungles and rivers of Colombia, and with thier experiance I noticed a match-up in your current missions. I believe our Forces would be considerably cheaper....Our ultra-strong ties with the Colombian Military and Colombian Govt. support our operations, and a firm investor backing ensures a large line of credit. American owned, managed and operated assures smooth transition and superior management skills, not third world run-arounds." The prices he named are apparently half what private military contractors from other countries would demand.

Earlier portions of Shippy's Web posting read, "We currently have over one thousand well trained and combat experienced Colombian x-Military Soldiers and Police available for Force Protection/Provider/Mulitplier status ready and able to to to work. These forces have been fighting terrorists the last 41 years and are experts in thier prospective fields."

On Aug. 15, Shippy sent a communique to an Ecuadoran television channel saying, "We are receiving resumes for contract security, these people will be used for giving security in private or governmental installations as convoy guardians or VIP guardians (bodyguards). This is nothing strange or extraordinary for the Colombians, who have the same problems in Colombia." The communique went on to say, "At this moment I do not have any contract in Iraq, that is pure speculation."

His wife affirmed that "not even one soldier has been sent." She insisted that Shippy had not sent Colombians to Iraq, "let alone Ecuadorans." She said recruitment was done in Medellin, Colombia. "Here only the contacts are made....My spouse refused to send Ecuadorans because he doesn't want
to involve them in the conflict," said Canarte. These assurances were not enough to prevent an arrest order for the couple on Aug. 18, though neither could be found at that point.

Reporters had found Canarte in Manta on Aug. 12. Under orders from prosecutor Sonia Barcia, police searched the Shippy-Canarte home, seizing a computer, documents, and CDs for further investigation. The only person held in the search was a family domestic employee, Ivis Marichal Clark, who, after making a statement to the authorities, was released for having no involvement in the case.

According to author Peter Singer's 2003 book Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry, one benefit private military firms can provide to the nations that employ them is that they will not embroil the country in international disagreements, since the government can disassociate itself from the contractor. This appeared to be the case in Ecuador this August, with Foreign Minister Parra stating that the government did not have "to talk with the US nor with Colombia, simply with this foreign company that is in Ecuador." Parra said that they simply had to "sanction it, close it, and remove it" from the country.

Honduras seeks to expel 105 Chilean trainees

The discovery of more than 100 former Chilean military training in Honduras with the company Your Solutions also did not cause an international incident, though it did cause some scandal within Honduras in late September. The Chileans were apparently in the country training to work as guards in Iraq, though they only had tourist visas. Chile's government said it regarded the affair as a "private issue" between Honduras and Your Solutions. Honduras' labor and security ministers both said the company was not registered and had violated the law.

On Sept. 20, Tegucigalpa gave the company 72 hours to expel the trainees from the country. The company had trouble following government orders to remove the Chileans when Nicaraguan authorities stopped them at the border and would not permit them into their territory. An appeal by Your Solutions to the Honduran government bought them more time, although the government did impose light fines on the company. The mercenaries were ordered to leave by Oct. 7 and the company was ordered to pay US$430 plus US$75 for each of the ex-militaries it had brought into Honduras. The government had asked Chile for an airplane to repatriate the group because the total ticket cost was, according to vice minister for government and justice Luis Fernando Suazo, more than the Honduran government could afford.

As of Oct. 5, the Chilean government had not responded to the request. The Chileans had arrived in Tegucigalpa Sept. 8 with 30-day tourist visas. They went on to train with Your Solutions in Lepaterique, some 30 km north of the capital. The training was with light arms used for attack and personal defense.

On Sept. 23, the government demanded their expulsion, but they could not get past the Nicaraguan border post and they have since been staying in a hotel in Choluteca, 100 km south of Tegucigalpa. Private contractor Blackwater has been criticized for sending ex-collaborators of Chilean dictator
Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) to Iraq, and the Chileans in Honduras likely have a similar taint, although press reports had not yet directly connected them with the regime.

Ex-military and police recruited in Lima, Peru Peruvian daily newspaper La Republica published a Sept. 23 report on the presence of a company, Gesegur SAC, dedicated to gathering "security guards" and "security supervisors" for work in Iraq. The Peruvian company opened shop in Lima, advertising in August and September, apparently receiving and evaluating candidates' documentation on behalf of the US company 3D Global Solutions Inc., based in Indiana. Individuals who passed the application process, having either military or police experience, would enjoy a high income paid in US dollars with renewable one-year contracts.

La Republica reported that Gesegur was filtering private contractors to the largest security corporations that had deals with the Pentagon and US Department of Defense. The candidates were to be less than 50 years old and retired, with English-speaking ability, and Gesegur especially sought people with experience in combat, telecommunications, and intelligence work. They were supposed to protect private businesses hired to reconstruct Iraq, although, the report pointed out, they would in practice be doing the same work as regular army forces. Nonetheless, they would neither be considered "combatant" nor "noncombatant," and therefore would go unprotected by the Geneva Conventions.

Costa Rica denies giving land for mercenary training

Costa Rican Security Minister Rogelio Ramos denied that similar mercenary-training operations were going on in that country. "There is no business here that is preparing people in military techniques. That would be serious," said Ramos, adding that he would never accept proposals of that type. The controversy arose when the Chileans were found training in Honduras and the government of Tegucigalpa asked Costa Rican officials to keep a group of 48 more Chileans from entering Honduras.

Chilean newspaper La Tercera reported that the group that was being held in Costa Rica was the second of an operation that sought to train 1,000 retired military personnel to send them off to security work in Iraq. The foreign fighters received temporary permission to spend the night in San Jose on Sept. 21, after which they left, headed for El Salvador and Guatemala.

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