3-7-2008

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Recommended Citation
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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2008-03-07

Colombia's military launched an attack into Ecuador on March 1, killing top leaders of the rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The governments of Colombia's neighbors Ecuador and Venezuela condemned the attack and sent armed forces to the Colombian border, warning that further hostile action from Colombia would result in war.

Both countries broke diplomatic ties with Colombia, sending Colombia's ambassadors home and recalling their ambassadors from Bogota. The Organization of American States (OAS) censured Colombia on March 5 for the incursion into Ecuador, while the US government said it backed Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe.

Uribe's government claimed to have captured FARC files showing Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez had received help from and given funding to the FARC. The attack on the FARC came very shortly after the rebel group had released four ex-congressmembers it had been holding captive (see other story in this issue of NotiSur).

Critics of the Uribe administration allege that the progress President Chavez and his allies in the Colombian Congress were making in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict with the FARC threatened Uribe's hard-line policy.

FARC second-in-command Raul Reyes reported dead

The New York Times, along with the rest of the world media, reported that Colombia's Defense Ministry announced on March 1 that security forces had killed Raul Reyes, a senior commander of the country's largest guerrilla group, in combat along the southern border with Ecuador.

The death of Reyes, generally regarded as the rebels' second-in-command and public ambassador, was a severe blow for the FARC, which has been waging an insurgency against the government for the last four decades. "This is the most important strike yet delivered against this terrorist group," Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said to reporters at a news conference in Bogota.

Reyes, the nom de guerre of Luis Edgar Devia, was the fourth senior member of the FARC killed in the past year. Last September, Colombia's government celebrated the killing of Tomas Medina Caracas, a commander believed to control a large part of the FARC's smuggling operations in eastern Colombia. Reyes often served as a de facto spokesman for the FARC, receiving emissaries and journalists in the group's jungle camps. He was believed to be more moderate than other members of the seven-member secretariat, the group's ruling body, but still defended the group's use of abductions and extortion to finance its activities.
The US, which provides Colombia with more than US$600 million a year in military aid, was offering a US$5 million reward for the capture of Reyes, 59, believed to be a contender to succeed the group's aging top commander, 77-year-old Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda. The death of Reyes marked the first time a member of the FARC's secretariat had been killed in combat during four decades of fighting.

Also among the dead was Guillermo Enrique Torres, alias Julian Conrado, a FARC commander known for his music, who had released several compilations of revolutionary ballads that he wrote and sang. Intelligence operations led security forces to an area in southern Putamayo province of Colombia where members of the FARC unit, the 48th Front, were camped the night of Feb. 29, the Defense Ministry said in a statement.

Shortly after midnight on March 1, Colombia's Air Force attacked the camp in a bombing raid. FARC forces responded with fire from a camp on the Ecuadoran side of the border, the ministry said, killing one Colombian soldier. Colombia's air attack killed 17 guerrillas, including Reyes and Torres, a chief theoretician with the FARC, the military said.

The government has set up a network of informants, runs reinsertion packages for deserting rebels, and offers handsome rewards for information. This was combined with technology and communication intercepts provided by Washington, DC. In late February, the Colombian press reported that the FBI and other US spy agencies were successfully pinpointing satellite phone calls made by FARC members.

Colombia's government said the bodies of Reyes and Torres were recovered in Ecuadoran territory and brought to Colombia. Uribe informed Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa of the operation, Colombia's Defense Ministry said.

The military said it conducted its air strike from the Colombian side of the border. Ecuador and Venezuela disputed this and rejected claims by Colombia that it was "in hot pursuit" when it launched the attack. They claimed the discovery of corpses in their underwear and individuals who had been shot in the back showed that Colombia had aerially ambushed a camp of sleeping people kilometers inside Ecuadoran territory.

For years the Ecuadoran government and civilian activists have complained about Colombian military incursions into northern Ecuador. They have also alleged that herbicidal fumigations along the border region have caused significant environmental and health damage. Ecuador has sought to bring Colombia before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague for alleged damages caused by the fumigations (see NotiSur, 2007-02-16).

The attack into Ecuador also occurred days before a protest planned for March 6 against the Uribe administration and against paramilitary groups' alleged infiltration into the government (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02 and 2007-05-04). The protest march, backed by leftist groups, sought in part to respond to worldwide protests against the FARC on Feb. 4 (see NotiSur, 2008-02-08).
US-based journalist Mario Murillo anticipated on March 4 that the high popularity of Uribe's actions within Colombia would undercut the upcoming protest. "Nobody's going to be paying attention because of the level of the propaganda success of this operation against Raul Reyes," said Murillo. He said the overwhelming majority of Colombians viewed the attack in Ecuador as justifiable self-defense.

**The beginning of the FARC's end?**

In the Colombian press, writers asked whether Reyes' death was "the beginning of the end" of the conflict with the FARC, the country's and the continent's strongest rebel group. The BBC in Britain and the Associated Press noted a decline in troop strength among the FARC, with estimates of the number of active FARC members declining to an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 today. The FARC, which also finances itself through cocaine trafficking, had about 16,000 rebels at the time of intense fighting in Colombia in 2001.

Still, the FARC remains a major presence in some rural parts of the country. The decapitation of the FARC, if that is what occurred on March 1, brought to analysts' minds the 1992 capture of Peruvian rebel Abimael Guzman, leader of Sendero Luminoso, in Peru. The years after his capture saw a severe decline in the strength of the Maoist rebel group that had held sway in the Peruvian countryside for years before (see NotiSur, 1992-09-15, 1992-10-06 and 1993-07-16). Harold Bedoya, former head of Colombia's armed forces, said, "This heralds the final phase of the war."

Roman Ortiz, an analyst with the Bogota think tank Ideas for Peace Foundation, believed this was a blow FARC would have difficulty recovering from. "This is a definitive blow to the guerrillas and one that will seriously affect their cohesion as an organization," he said.

During the failed peace process during the administration of former President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002), which ran from 1998-2002, Reyes headed FARC’s negotiating team, based in Los Pozos, a dusty hamlet in the 42,000 sq km safe haven that the government granted to the guerrillas as the venue for talks. Ecuador and Venezuela troops sent to Colombian border Correa and Chavez condemned the attack in northern Ecuador and responded by ordering their respective militaries to the Colombian border.

Chavez warned Colombia never to carry out such a raid in Venezuela, saying, "This could be the start of a war in South America, because, for example, if they ever think of doing something like that in Venezuela, President Uribe, I will send my jet fighters. We are not going to accept that Colombia become the next Israel in our land."

"Mr. Defense Minister, move 10 battalions to the border with Colombia for me, immediately tank battalions. Deploy the Air Force," Chavez said during his weekly TV and radio program on March 2. "We don't want war, but we aren't going to permit the US empire, which is the master [of Colombia]...to come divide us."

Chavez called Uribe "a criminal" and branded his government a "terrorist state," likening it to Israel, also a top recipient of US military and political aid, for its US-backed attacks on militants. Correa said Colombia deliberately carried out the strike beyond its borders. "There is no
justification," Correa said March 2, snubbing an earlier announcement from Colombia that it would apologize for the incursion.

Colombian officials have long complained that Ecuador's military does not control its sparsely populated border, allowing rebels to take refuge. The same holds true for Venezuela, where rebel deserters say the guerrillas routinely rest, train, obtain medical care, and smuggle drugs. Chavez denies that his country provides refuge to the FARC.

Reports in the Associated Press and Miami-based newspaper El Nuevo Herald have also alleged that rebels get weapons, support, and refuge in Venezuela. In a statement, Colombia said FARC "terrorists" including Reyes "have had the custom of killing in Colombia and taking refuge in the territory of neighboring countries."

Correa said the rebels were "bombed and massacred as they slept, using precision technology." He said Colombia violated Ecuador's airspace when it bombed the rebel camp, which the Colombian military said was located 1.8 km inside the Ecuadoran border.

Ecuadoran soldiers recovered the partially clothed bodies of 15 rebels in their jungle camp. Soldiers stood guard at the site, saying they also found three wounded women, who were evacuated by helicopter to be treated. One was a Mexican philosophy student injured by shrapnel, while the other two wounded guerrillas were Colombians, an Ecuadoran Army officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to journalists.

Ecuadoran officials found that there were two bomb attacks on the camp early March 1, Lt. Col. Jose Nunez told reporters in the remote village of Angostura, where the bodies were found. Colombian commandos had already removed the cadavers of Reyes and one other rebel. Chavez called the raid "cowardly murder, all of it coldly calculated."

"Undoubtedly the recent actions on the part of Colombia and Venezuela's response raise the risk for armed conflict," said Miguel Tinker Salas, a Latin American studies professor at Pomona College in Claremont, California. "Although it is unlikely we will see military confrontations, what is clear is that Colombia has been pursuing a military solution to its own internal problem...drawing in Ecuador and Venezuela."

Colombia said it would not reinforce its troops along either border. Ecuador and Venezuela break diplomatic ties with Colombia Both Ecuador and Venezuela shut down their embassies in Bogota to protest Colombia's incursion. They also ordered Colombia's top diplomats expelled. Venezuela-Colombia relations have been steadily worsening since late 2007, when Uribe ordered Chavez to stop participating in negotiations to release hostages the FARC holds (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). Market analysts tended to downplay the possibility of open hostilities. "Trade links between Colombia and Venezuela are strong, which mitigates the risk of military action," said Shelly Shetty, a sovereign ratings director at Fitch Ratings. "Heightened diplomatic tensions between Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador are unlikely to put downward pressure on Colombia's sovereign ratings in the near term."
But as the border further militarized during the week, the business press reported downturns in cross-border trade. Border trade worth US$5 billion a year, most of it Colombian exports sorely needed by Venezuelans already suffering milk and meat shortages, may suffer during the crisis. Ecuador also depends on some US$1.8 billion in trade with Colombia. Venezuela said it would stop new exports and imports.

At one closed border crossing, in Paraguachon, Venezuela, authorities stopped trucks lined up for about a half a mile the morning of March 4. But traffic was flowing normally at another crossing, in El Amparo, where a handful of Venezuelan troops stood watch as usual, the customs office was open, and traffic passed freely.

"There's no question of the enormous political tension now, and any miscue could set off a conflict," said Michael Shifter, a vice president of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, DC. "It's impossible to rule it out." President George W. Bush telephoned Uribe to applaud his efforts against the rebels. He urged the US Congress to approve a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Colombia, saying it is vital to the South American country's security.

Bush told reporters, "I told the president that America fully supports Colombia's democracy and that we firmly oppose any acts of aggression that could destabilize the region. I told him that America will continue to stand with Colombia as it confronts violence and terror and fights drug traffickers."

Several Latin American leftist leaders have suggested the US was intimately involved in executing the raid that killed Reyes. Colombian military officials have said US satellite intelligence and communications intercepts have been key to putting the FARC on the defensive.

On March 4, a spokesman for the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) would neither confirm nor deny US military participation. "We do provide intelligence support to partner nations, but I can't get into details on operations," Jose Ruiz told the Associated Press from Miami.

Other regional leaders criticized the Colombian action. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega criticized Colombia, saying, "This attitude taken by the Colombian government of bombing Ecuadorian territory, 3 km inside, President Rafael Correa said that it was a prepared operation to assassinate the man who had worked in favor of negotiation and peace....Colombia is becoming a factor of destabilization and uncertainty for Latin America."

Chile's President Michelle Bachelet also condemned the incursion across Ecuador's border. Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva offered to mediate in the conflict, calling for calm in the Andean region. Colombia: files show Chavez aided FARC Colombia released files to reporters it said it took from Reyes' laptop captured at the FARC camp.

Colombia's police chief Oscar Naranjo said Chavez helped fund the FARC's war in Colombia and has ties to the rebels going back more than 15 years. Documents from the computer showed Venezuela provided the guerrillas with at least US$300 million, Naranjo said.
Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez denied the allegations. "These documents not only imply a closeness but an armed alliance between the FARC and the government of Venezuela," Naranjo said in a televised press briefing in Bogota.

Naranjo said the files, which would be subjected to outside analysis, also provided details on the group's plans to obtain 50 kg of uranium to make bombs as part of a bid to branch into international terrorism. He didn't provide details about the alleged plot. The documents allegedly show the FARC had ties to Chavez going back as far as 1992 when he was jailed for spearheading a failed coup as an army lieutenant colonel.

Uribe said his government would ask the International Criminal Court (ICC) to try Chavez for "genocide" for allegedly financing the FARC. "I'll present charges to the International Criminal Court against Hugo Chavez for financing and sponsoring genocide," Uribe said on Caracol Radio March 4.

Uribe was seeking to regain the moral upper hand by taking accusations against Chavez to an international forum and revealing the alleged contents of Reyes' computer to show Colombia is the victim of aggression from across its border. The ICC tries individuals accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Colombia and Venezuela signed the treaty that set up the court in 2002. However, Colombia's military-economic patron and political backer the US has resisted the jurisdiction of the court, refusing military aid to governments that do not exempt US citizens from possible prosecution (see NotiSur, 2003-07-11).

Chavez urges war-crimes trial against Uribe

Chavez, in turn, accused Uribe of war crimes as Venezuela and Ecuador turned up the heat on Bogota for its military strike. "A war crime occurred there," Chavez charged March 5 at a joint press conference with Correa in Caracas, where the two men discussed the crisis.

Chavez's government dismissed Colombia's accusations as fabrications and smears. Correa urged the international community to issue a "clear condemnation" of Colombia for its cross-border incursion, as both countries boosted their military presence on their respective borders with Colombia. Correa welcomed a statement that day by the 34-member OAS saying Colombia had violated Ecuador's sovereignty as an "important first step" but he demanded more. "If Ecuador doesn't get satisfaction, we'll know how to exact it with our own methods, and the OAS and the international community, by their silence and omissions, will be the guilty ones," Correa said. Chavez said the threat of an ICC trial made him laugh. "I challenge Uribe to see who comes out condemned for supporting genocide, violence, paramilitaries, invasions of other countries, I've lost count," he said.

But Chavez said that, despite the row with Colombia, he would continue working for the release of more FARC hostages. The biggest losers from the killing of Reyes appeared to be the hostages that FARC rebels have held for years.
Ecuador and France said they had been communicating with Reyes, trying to secure a hostage release, when Colombia's Air Force crossed the border to bomb his jungle camp. "I'm sorry to tell you that the conversations were pretty advanced to free 12 hostages," Correa said in a nationally televised address immediately after the attack. "All of this was frustrated by the war-mongering, authoritarian hands" of the Colombian government.

French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Pascale Andreani confirmed that France was in contact with Reyes as well and that "the Colombians were aware of it." Colombia said documents in Reyes' laptop indicate that Correa's internal security minister met recently with a FARC envoy to discuss deepening relations with Ecuador and even replacing military officers who might oppose that. Ecuador has rejected allegations of ties with the FARC.

Publicly, there had been no indication of even preliminary progress in securing the release of any of the 40 hostages the FARC wants to swap for hundreds of jailed guerrillas. Venezuela's Justice Minister Ramon Rodriguez Chacin said the raid proved the "intent of the fascist Colombian government is to hamper the handover of hostages, because that is the path of peace."

-- End --