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Colombia, Ecuador Clash Following Colombian Raid on FARC Camp

by LADB Staff
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Diplomatic relations between the governments of Ecuador and Colombia have continued to be tense in the two months since the Colombian military, with assistance from the US, launched an attack into Ecuadoran territory (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07). The attack killed Raul Reyes, a top commander of the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and two dozen other alleged FARC members in an encampment.

Since the attack, Ecuador has cut off diplomatic relations with Bogota, and the Organization of American States (OAS) has been attempting to mediate. On March 6, Ecuador released autopsy results alleging that four of the dead were executed, but Colombia's military has denied the allegations.

Political fallout throughout region

The March 1 attack set off an international crisis, with Ecuador and Venezuela moving troops to their borders with Colombia and saying another cross-border attack by Colombia would lead to retaliation. While the potential for military escalation defused relatively quickly (see NotiCen, 2008-03-07), Ecuador has continued to press its case before the OAS and other international forums that Colombia violated Ecuadoran sovereignty.

Colombia has sought to influence international opinion and politics by releasing alleged evidence of links between regional and domestic politicians and the FARC. The Bogota government claims that evidence in documents and emails found on a laptop that belonged to FARC second-in-command Reyes shows Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez had supported the rebels with US$300 million.

The administration of Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe has turned over the documents it said it took from the FARC encampment to Interpol for authentication. It also handed a selection of the documents to the government of Venezuela. The Uribe government also purports that the Reyes laptop implicates politicians throughout South and Central America, with one political casualty of the allegations being Costa Rica's resigned security minister Fernando Berrocal Soto (see NotiCen, 2008-04-03).

Ironically, Berrocal lost his post after making allegations that Costa Rican politicians were tied to the FARC and then failing to elaborate. With four Mexican citizens killed in the attack and one Mexican student injured, Mexico's government also found itself in the midst of the diplomatic fracas with Colombia (see SourceMex, 2008-04-02).

Correa calls on OAS to act regarding killed Ecuadoran

Ecuador has long complained about alleged Colombian military incursions into the smaller country's territory and has gone to international courts in a case regarding alleged environmental
damages caused by Colombia's aerial herbicidal anti-coca fumigations (see NotiSur, 2007-02-16). Colombia and the US, close allies in the military effort against "narcoterrorism," accuse Ecuador of failing to prevent FARC incursions along its northern border.

The Bogota government says the guerrilla force uses the jungle region of northern Ecuador as a place to rest, regroup, and resupply its insurgency. The governments of Ecuador and Venezuela are equally critical of the US and Colombia, calling on the two right-wing governments to recognize the FARC as a "belligerent force" and use negotiations to end the decades-old conflict (see NotiSur, 2008-02-08).

The Uribe government, backed by billions of dollars in US military aid, has stood by the policy of military obliteration of the FARC as the only path to end the conflict, although it has offered to allow FARC fighters to "demobilize" if they hand in all weapons and confess to their crimes, a program that has ostensibly reduced the power of paramilitary death squads in Colombia (see NotiSur, 2006-06-16).

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa said on March 22 he would seek international condemnation of Colombia if DNA tests confirmed that Colombia's military had killed an Ecuadoran citizen during its raid on the rebel camp. Parents of missing Ecuadoran Franklin Aisalla said they had seen news photos that indicated a body that Colombia removed from the camp was that of their son.

After traveling to Colombia on March 24, they confirmed the body's identity. Colombia's Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said on March 23 that Aisalla was killed during Colombia's raid on the rebel camp. Santos said one of two bodies brought to Colombia after the attack belonged to the Ecuadoran he identified only by the nom de guerre Lucho. Correa urged the OAS to "act forcefully" if Colombia killed an Ecuadoran citizen, saying he did not want a precedent set in the region.

Correa vowed "to start an extremely strong diplomatic fight, because we will not leave this killing unpunished. " "How can we renew relations if they keep trying to link us to the FARC to justify their aggression?" Correa asked. In prior weeks, Correa had said that, if Ecuadorans had been killed in the March 1 attack, "we might already be at war."

Santos urged Ecuadoran authorities not to act rashly after confirming Aisalla's identity. "President Correa and the Ecuadoran authorities, be careful about letting yourselves act impetuously on behalf of criminals," the defense minister said to reporters while attending an unrelated military funeral. "Take care and corroborate with your own authorities the identities of people." Aisalla, a locksmith, had been reported missing for more than three weeks. His family's lawyer said that, for unknown reasons, he had been in the FARC camp for more than a week before the raid. A body, initially identified as that of rebel Guillermo Enrique Torres, alias Julian Conrado, was brought back to Colombia's capital, Bogota, with Reyes' body.

The body turned out to be that of Aisalla. Santos said Colombian military investigations suggest the Ecuadoran was romantically involved with Nubia Calderon, alias Esperanza, who allegedly served as a public ambassador in Ecuador for the FARC. Colombia's government claims that data in Reyes' laptop shows the FARC gave money to Correa's presidential campaign in 2006. Correa said in March
that he had requested those documents, which he said lacked "technical and legal" validity, from Uribe's government through the Argentine Embassy in Colombia.

'Ecuadoran government too permissive with FARC'

The Uribe government has repeatedly accused Correa of politicizing the attack, making re-establishment of diplomatic relations unlikely. An April 13 press release from the Uribe administration said, "President Rafael Correa, because of internal political problems, wants to confuse the Ecuadoran public by inculcating nationalism against Colombia, when the real problem has been the [Correa administration's] permissiveness with the FARC terrorist group, which is a threat to the peoples of Colombia and Ecuador."

The press release complained that its military forces were not permitted to pursue the FARC into Ecuadoran territory. The Ecuadoran government made counteraccusations, saying the claims were lies and giving Uribe 48 hours to present evidence backing his public accusations. The accusations and counteraccusations have marked the OAS' so-far fruitless effort to mediate between the two Andean states.

Ecuador's Foreign Relations Ministry said in the first week of May that it would seek economic reparations worth about US$1.2 million for damages from Colombia. Ecuadoran autopsy: four "executions" at attack site

In May, more than a month after the identity of Franklin Aisalla had been confirmed, how he died became a controversial issue after Ecuador conducted an autopsy on his corpse and on the bodies of a number of other people killed in the raid. Ecuador alleged that there were four "summary executions" at the site with victims having been killed through beatings or in execution-style shootings.

The autopsy, by a team of Ecuadoran and French examiners, showed Aisalla was not killed by a shock wave from a bomb or a bullet wound, as Colombian authorities had reported, but from a cranial fracture. The team said it was not sure if he died on Ecuadoran soil or while in Colombian custody. Aisalla's uncle, Marco Molina, alleged that he was "killed in cold blood and that is what causes us the greatest indignation."

The Asociacion Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos (ALDHU) said it was necessary to take the case to court both "nationally and internationally [to try] the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Colombian civil and military authorities responsible for the massacre of March 1." The group also said three survivors of the attack, one Colombian woman and two Mexican women, "said they saw and heard Colombian soldiers when they proceeded to execute wounded and surrendered persons in the place of the attack." Colombian armed forces commander Gen. Freddy Padilla de Leon denied the Ecuadoran claims. "The death [of Aisalla] was produced as a consequence of a metallic artifact, and included two wounds, we might say that both were mortal, but neither of them, as was said yesterday, corresponds to a coup de grace."

-- End --