3-11-2011

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Plane Incident Strains Argentine-U.S. Relations

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: Friday, March 11, 2011

The arrival in Buenos Aires of a US military transport plane whose cargo included items not listed on the manifest caused a minor diplomatic rift between Argentina and the US. The rightest press, however, presented the matter to the public as a serious issue that President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner had "specifically provoked for electoral purposes." All because the Argentine government did not allow the material, which it defined as "sensitive," into the country. Such "irresponsible action"—as the head of the Cabinet called it—by some of the press, which for three years has been trying in any way possible to destabilize the democratically elected and constitutional government whose term ends in December 2011, provoked an escalation in tensions. As a result, by week's end, the Argentine government made an extreme decision: to suspend all training courses for Argentine security forces taught by US military instructors and to review all bilateral or joint military exercises with Argentine military and troops from the Pentagon.

As the situation heated up, the political opposition—a group of parties and factions without leaders, platforms, or proposals—which generally adopts the philosophy of the rightest press led by dailies and —flagship enterprises of powerful multimedia conglomerates that appear to operate at the behest of their economic interests—this time had the wisdom to not follow the press dictates.

A year ago, Argentina and the US had agreed that 12 Pentagon instructors would give a three-week course beginning Feb. 15, 2011, on "crisis management and hostage taking" to a special unit of the Argentine Policía Federal. The Pentagon would provide, along with instructors, essential material for the course.

**Much missing from cargo manifest**

In late 2010, the US Embassy in Buenos Aires communicated to customs officials and to the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores and Ministerio de Seguridad, which oversees the Policía Federal, what the "essential material" would be and attached the cargo manifest so that the material could be brought into the country. On Feb. 10, the C17 Boeing Globemaster III military transport plane arrived in Buenos Aires.

When airport security and customs officials tried to carry out the cargo inspection, a simple routine operation, the crew refused, arousing suspicions. Informed of what had happened, the president instructed Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman to go to the international airport the next day, demand that the containers be opened, and not allow anything to enter the country that was not previously declared. "In Argentina, laws are to be obeyed," said President Fernández.

The foreign minister invited officials from the US Embassy in Buenos Aires to accompany him when the cargo was inspected. On Feb. 12, Clarín said that Timerman had humiliated the personnel who had arrived on the plane. La Nación also provided its take, calling it "shameful treatment." The US Embassy refuted their assessments.
The Argentine and US diplomats were very surprised by what they found. "Almost one-third of the plane's cargo was not on the manifest," said Timerman. "It was some 1,000 cubic feet, something on the order of a 3 meter by 3 meter by 3 meter room."

The material was confiscated. It included "arms, psychotropic and narcotic drugs, along with software, data-storage devices marked secret, communications-intercepting equipment, sophisticated GPS equipment and operation manuals, as well as an enormous trunk full of expired medicines," said the minister at a press conference. In all, cargo with difficult-to-explain characteristics.

"Absolutely everything on the list was authorized to enter, including an important quantity of weapons munitions," said Timerman. "Not allowed in was anything not on the list, and, despite the Pentagon's demands, it will not be returned to the US until the Argentine judicial authorities investigating this case no longer need it."

In Washington, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela told CNN that it was regrettable that the situation had escalated with unwarranted accusations. "It's absolutely necessary that those materials be returned immediately," he added.

More diplomatically, his counterpart at the Pentagon, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs Frank Mora, said, "We are working harmoniously to overcome this difficulty."

The daily, which broke the story, emphasized the way in which the US personnel attempted to bring the material into the country. "The seriousness of bringing that type of arms and IT and communications materials into the country clandestinely can be debated, since they could remain in the country for equally clandestine, illegal purposes. It is also admissible to argue about the quantity and type of narcotics and mind-altering drugs found and speculate regarding the reason for bringing in outdated medicines. But there is no denying that they tried to break Argentine laws and that the authorities prevented them in a correct procedure adjusted for international uses. Something serious must be happening with certain journalistic media if, in an effort to put the government in a bad light, they lose sight of the basic facts of the incident and align themselves with those who tried to, but could not, flout national sovereignty," concluded the Buenos Aires daily.

and —the newspapers referred to—erred in their strategy because anti-US sentiment is very strong in Argentina. International consulting firm Latinobarómetro found that 68% of Argentines have an unfavorable image of the US, the highest in Latin America. On Feb. 19, a week after the incident became known, a poll by the firm Opinión Pública, Servicios y Mercados (OPSM) found that 79% of respondents agreed with the government's actions and disagreed with newspaper coverage of the incident.

Re-examination of guidelines for training programs

"The escalation no one wanted," as Timerman called it, resulted in the government deciding on Feb. 18 to revise the schedule, and especially the topics, of joint, bilateral, and multilateral operations programmed by the armed forces and to cancel activities in which the security forces would have participated.

Courses that were agreed upon for the military and that already had legislative approval could not be cancelled and will take place, although under the watchful eye of the Ministerio de Defensa.
What will be reviewed are three operations that were scheduled beginning in April: the sixth round of the naval-aviation maneuvers Gringo-Gaucho 2011, Operativo Unitas LII, and the fourth round of Operativo Panamax.

However, security-forces units will not participate in any training or updating course—already scheduled or under consideration—until a review is made of course content, participating countries, and agencies giving the course, as well as details regarding financing.

Thus, the most important outcome of the plane incident is that it "definitively suspended Argentine participation in any security training taught by military personnel," said Minister of Security Nilda Garré.

That is a far-reaching decision. In 2010, the four security forces under the Ministerio de Seguridad—the Policía Federal, Prefectura Marítima, Gendarmería, and Policía Aeroportuaria—participated in 587 courses, seminars, and congresses carried out abroad.

To date, neither the US government nor the rightest Argentine press has paid attention to a fundamental fact: the government's emphasis on rejecting interrelating military and police functions, a constant in the discourse in Washington, which stresses, for example, the convenience of giving police functions to the military, especially in the drug war.

It is clear that the Fernández administration will not accept military instructors for its police and that it will insist that the organizers of any seminar—the sponsoring organization and the instructors—demonstrate a record of solid commitment to democratization and transparency of security forces, as well as, fundamentally, full respect for human rights.

The government's aim is not to limit attendance at courses and meetings but to emphasize professionalization. Thus, it is essential to know who will give courses and what the content will be. The instruction model that led to the plane incident—military personnel transmitting ideas, concepts, and knowledge to police—almost automatically reinforces the concept of militarizing internal security. The C17 Boeing Globemaster II's suspicious cargo allowed the Argentine government to see that, with the course on kidnapping and hostage taking, it was contradicting its discourse by allowing Pentagon experts to instruct the police.

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