Peruvian President's Plan to Create Single Defense Ministry Widely Opposed

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On March 4, President Alan Garcia called the second extraordinary legislative session of the year to debate and approve a bill which would merge the country's three armed forces ministries into a single Ministry of Defense. The measure was introduced in Congress on March 6. Garcia's initiative, which took even Aprista legislators by surprise, has inspired considerable controversy, highlighted by rumors of a military coup and the resignation of his entire cabinet. According to local press reports, the public disapproval of the new measure by numerous retired military commanders and alleged disagreement by present armed forces ministers has only exacerbated a tense political situation created by recent economic deterioration.

The three-page legislative bill presented to Congress last Friday was described by the executive as an attempt to conclude a 10-year debate on the defense ministry issue. In contrast to other Latin American countries, armed forces administration in Peru and Brazil is organized into three separate ministries for the army, navy and the air force. Garcia has stated that the maintenance of a three-tiered defense establishment is an historical anachronism: merging the three ministries would above all lead to greater administrative efficiency and cost reductions.

On March 8, in response to questions by reporters at the Government Palace in Lima, President Garcia discarded rumors of a military coup, and the resignation of all military cabinet ministers. He said, "Those who see phantasms believe in them. Fortunately, I do not believe in phantasms." For the president, such threats are "vestiges of the past." He insisted that Peru must be capable of making bold decisions without invoking "fear and emotionalisms." In a joint statement published by several daily newspapers in the Peruvian capital, eleven former air force commanders, including five ex-ministers, declared that the current organization of the armed forces provided adequate flexibility, discipline and personnel training. The statement said, "The fact that in other countries this [defense] ministry exists, does not oblige [Peru] to install it as well."

On March 8, eight retired navy commanders announced publicly that respective armed forces ministries had previously conducted studies of the advantages and disadvantages of the new administrative arrangement. According to the commanders, in all cases, the disadvantages outweighed positive results. On March 9, spokespersons for the Chamber of Deputies told reporters legislators planned to request testimonies from numerous civilians and military officers on the proposed creation of a ministry of defense. Benjamin Madueno, head of the Defense Commission in the House of Deputies, said the creation of a new ministry was not considered a "vital priority" by legislators.

Among those requested to testify are Prime Minister Luis Alva Castro, and present armed forces ministers, i.e., War Minister (Army) Division General Jorge Flores, Navy Minister Admiral Willy Harm, and Air Force Minister General Luis Abram. Several retired generals have also been
requested to testify. The commission has also invited three historians to testify on historical precedents in Latin America and elsewhere regarding armed forces administration. According to PRENSA LATINA, Prime Minister and Economy Minister Luis Alva Castro was reportedly considering resignation late last week.

The minister's resignation, said local observers, would be the outcome of political tensions arising from the country's economic problems. Foreign reserves have dropped precipitously in the last two months, while monthly inflation in 1987 is 6% over 1986 monthly averages. In response to negative economic indicators, the government has adopted unpopular measures, such as requesting employers to avoid granting non-unionized "excessive" wage increases, and to establish limits in negotiations with labor unions. Last week three major labor unions went on strike, while five others declared intentions to strike in the near future. (Basic data from PRENSA LATINA, 03/07/87; AP, 03/08/87; UPI, 03/09/87)

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