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Andrés Gaudán

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Reorganizing South American Intelligence Services

by Andrés Gaudín

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A series of events all intruding into the democratic life of several South American countries began at the beginning of this year when it was learned that some costly intelligence services were not anything other than a dangerous operating platform for internal spies or mere informants who would offer themselves to the highest bidder and for any task. This could mean passing confidential information to a foreign country or being at the service of drug traffickers.

Since the revelations, a review process began in which, although not responding to the central questions of why and what for, and with varying degrees of depth, the task of restructuring, professionalizing, and strengthening intelligence agencies in Peru and Argentina has begun (NotiSur, April 30, 2004). Forced by a reality where there’s more talk than action, both countries followed the path that Colombia embarked on in 2011 and that had already occurred in Chile in 2004 with the dubious reorganization of the intelligence services of that country’s dictatorship, nearly a quarter century after the end of the civil-military regime led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).

Peru’s DINI spies on politicians; CIA connections in Argentina

Beginning Jan. 15, a series of reports in the Peruvian press showed that, far from its institutional goals, the Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia (DINI) has been spying on important people in different fields (NotiSur, Feb. 27, 2015), in particular political leaders including Vice President Marisol Espinoza and two-term former President Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011).

In Argentina three days later, Alberto Nisman—the special prosecutor investigating the 1994 terrorist attack that killed 85 people at the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires (NotiSur, July 29, 1994, and Nov. 16, 2007)—turned up dead (NotiSur, Feb. 6, 2015). Confidential cables unveiled by WikiLeaks showed that Nisman was manipulated by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spies operating out of their "mission" in the US Embassy in Buenos Aires. Now, according to local press reports, people have learned that Nisman was also manipulated by the chief of intelligence Antonio Stiusso, the oldest of the agents at the Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado (SIDE). For reasons not yet known, Stiusso and his colleagues at the CIA used Nisman to hinder development of the AMIA case and protect the brains behind the greatest terrorist attack in Argentina’s history.

No less murky was the role of Peruvian spies dedicated to prying into the private lives of their compatriots. Through reports in the Correo Semanal magazine, it was learned that, for a period of at least four years, three agents from naval intelligence provided a great deal of secret information to a group of supposed Italian fisheries businessmen, who, in fact, were Chilean spies. Until January of last year, Peru and Chile litigated at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague the problem of setting maritime boundaries (NotiSur, Feb. 28, 2014).

"Our salaries were very low, and the Italians [Chileans] gave us US$200 for each report," one of the accused said. The daily La República reported that another agent asked, "Why, if many of our colleagues or bosses work for multinational companies, can’t we increase our income by giving a bit of information to the Italians [Chileans]?"
In light of this picture, Peruvian President Ollanta Humala had to announce the "closing of the DINI for 180 days, to restructure, professionalize, and strengthen it." The announcement was made on Feb. 9, and, just three days later, on Feb. 12, Correo Semanal denounced the official put in charge of this delicate task. He is José Martín Sal y Rosas, a member of Humala's Army graduating class and a classmate at the controversial School of the Americas when it was based in Panama. The school, now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), has since moved to Fort Benning, GA (NotiSur, Aug. 6, 2010).

Sal y Rosas—a seasoned pilot of Antonov planes—was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2007 for collaborating with Mexican Tijuana cartel drug dealers, although he did not complete his full sentence. It's never been explained why, but he was released in 2011, and, in 2013, he entered DINI as a commander of the Dirección de Contrainteligencia, the "unit in charge of detecting informational leaks in calls between government officials, including ministers, legislators, and others," Correo Semanal explained in its Feb. 12 issue. In his position, Sal y Rosas managed US$7.6 million in funds reserved for the department, secret allotments that don't need to be reported.

Sal y Rosas had been sent to jail after it was proven he had used the Army's MI-17 helicopters to transport cocaine from Ayacucho in Peru's southern Andes to Pisco and Chimbote (costal south and north) where the Tijuana cartel picked up drugs to send to Mexico. For each trip made with military protection, Sal y Rosas would receive an US$80,000 payment. Despite his record, he continues in charge of reorganizing the DINI.

Argentine opposition rejects intelligence reorganization

In Argentina, the process is more transparent. The government sent Congress a bill that would dissolve SIDE and create the Agencia Federal de Inteligencia (AFI). In addition, it opened public hearings so civil society could participate with objections and suggestions. The only ones who refused to participate in the discussion were opposition legislators who, without offering their reasons, refuse to be part of any official act and say that, if they ever regain power, they will repeal more than 150 laws passed democratically since May 2003 when the late President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) took power. Kirchner was the husband and predecessor of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Despite this increased transparency, however, the entire staff of the former SIDE—with their seniority and their vices that allowed them to survive all regimes and all presidents—will become part of the personnel of the future AFI.

The Argentine government’s proposed model for restructuring and professionalizing the intelligence agency has enormous differences from the current model that the US proposed for, and imposed on, all of the Americas following World War II in the context of the Cold War as part of a system of defense and intelligence related to its own interests.

"In the case of the secret agencies, the US told us that we had to create something like some mini-CIAs, with its objectives and its corruption," Sen. Miguel Ángel Pichetto, president of the ruling bloc in the Senate, said during parliamentary debate. As defined by Pichetto, that was the structure of Colombia’s secret service, the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), dissolved in 2011 by President Juan Manuel Santos. Criminal behavior, including participation in derailing the investigation of several assassinations, spying on politicians, magistrates, journalists, and human rights activists, and delivering intelligence to paramilitary gangs and drug cartels had been proven. The slow task of restructuring should culminate with the creation of a civilian agency—to be called the Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia (DINI)—that would not have judicial police powers.
Chile and Uruguay also reviewing agencies

Timidly, still, in Chile—where the opposition claims the 2004 reform was just "cosmetic"—and in Uruguay—where there is a major dispersal of efforts and objectives because the three branches of the armed forces and the Ministerio del Interior each have its own service—people are beginning to talk about this issue, taking the Argentine model that has preliminary approval as a starting point in the discussion. Several aspects excite progressive sectors in both countries. Dissolving SIDE is combined with a ban on participation in any activity related to internal repression or the use of spies as a police force for the future intelligence service. It would only allow application of criminal intelligence when it follows a specific and justified judicial request tied to a specific cause. Money budgeted to the intelligence agency would be public knowledge and limited to actions related to pure intelligence. The project establishes a 15-year period to declassify archives, but, in what is considered a major advance for civil rights, anyone with a legitimate interest could request immediate declassification of information that affects them.

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